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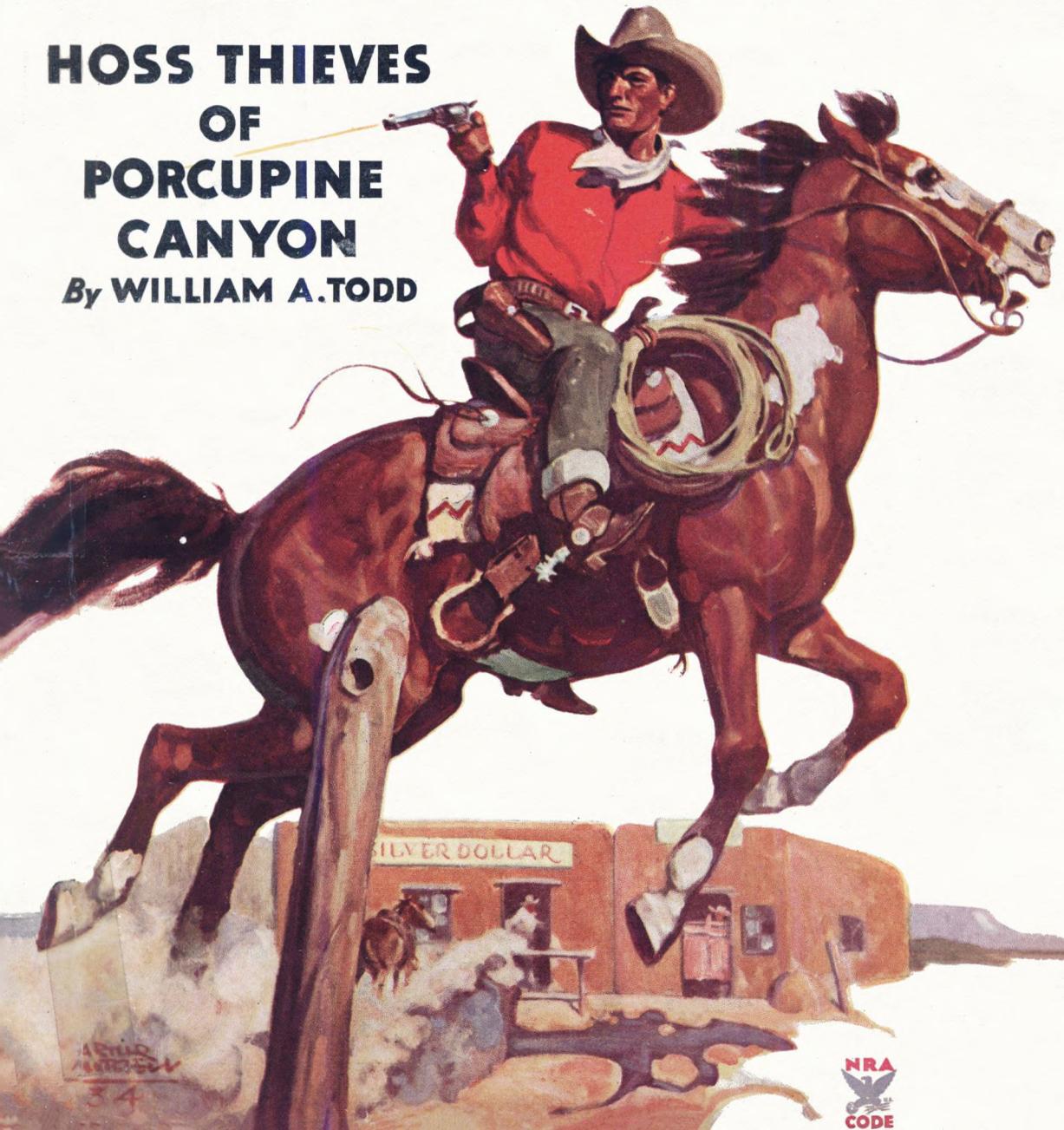
WEEKLY

NOV. 10

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

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By WILLIAM A. TODD



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Cover Picture—Scene from

"Hoss Thieves Of Porcupine Canyon" *Arthur Mitchell*

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Publication issued every week by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. George C. Smith, Jr., President; Ormond V. Gould, Vice President and Treasurer; Artemus Holmes, Vice President and Secretary; Clarence C. Verner, Vice President. Copyright, 1934, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., New York. Copyright, 1934, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter, December 8, 1931, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions to Cuba, Dom. Republic, Haiti, Spain, Central and South American Countries, except The Guianas and British Honduras, \$7.00 per year. To all other Foreign Countries, including The Guianas and British Honduras, \$9.00 per year.

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20x4-20	\$2.35	21x6	\$2.35	21x6	\$2.35	24x6	\$2.45	1.15
20x4-20	\$2.35	21x7	\$2.35	21x7	\$2.35	24x7	\$2.45	1.15
20x4-20	\$2.35	21x8	\$2.35	21x8	\$2.35	24x8	\$2.45	1.15
20x4-20	\$2.35	22x6	\$2.35	22x6	\$2.35	25x6	\$2.55	1.25
20x4-20	\$2.35	22x7	\$2.35	22x7	\$2.35	25x7	\$2.55	1.25
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20x5-19	\$2.45	53x7	\$2.45	53x7	\$2.45	56x7	\$5.65	4.35
20x5-19	\$2.45	53x8	\$2.45	53x8	\$2.45	56x8	\$5.65	4.35
20x5-19	\$2.45	54x6	\$2.45	54x6	\$2.45	57x6	\$5.75	4.45
20x5-19	\$2.45	54x7	\$2.45	54x7	\$2.45	57x7	\$5.75	4.45
20x5-19	\$2.45	54x8	\$2.45	54x8	\$2.45	57x8	\$5.75	4.45
20x5-19	\$2.45	55x6	\$2.45	55x6	\$2.45	58x6	\$5.85	4.55
20x5-19	\$2.45	55x7	\$2.45	55x7	\$2.45	58x7	\$5.85	4.55
20x5-19	\$2.45	55x8	\$2.45	55x8	\$2.45	58x8	\$5.85	4.55
20x5-19	\$2.45	56x6	\$2.45	56x6	\$2.45	59x6	\$5.95	4.65
20x5-19	\$2.45	56x7	\$2.45	56x7	\$2.45	59x7	\$5.95	4.65
20x5-19	\$2.45	56x8	\$2.45	56x8	\$2.45	59x8	\$5.95	4.65
20x5-19	\$2.45	57x6	\$2.45	57x6	\$2.45	60x6	\$6.05	4.75
20x5-19	\$2.45	57x7	\$2.45	57x7	\$2.45	60x7	\$6.05	4.75
20x5-19	\$2.45	57x8	\$2.45	57x8	\$2.45	60x8	\$6.05	4.75
20x5-19	\$2.45	58x6	\$2.45	58x6	\$2.45	61x6	\$6.15	4.85
20x5-19	\$2.45	58x7	\$2.45	58x7	\$2.45	61x7	\$6.15	4.85
20x5-19	\$2.45	58x8	\$2.45	58x8	\$2.45	61x8	\$6.15	4.85
20x5-19	\$2.45	59x6	\$2.45	59x6	\$2.45	62x6	\$6.25	4.95
20x5-19	\$2.45	59x7	\$2.45	59x7	\$2.45	62x7	\$6.25	4.95
20x5-19	\$2.45	59x8	\$2.45	59x8	\$2.45	62x8	\$6.25	4.95
20x5-19	\$2.45	60x6	\$2.45	60x6	\$2.45	63x6	\$6.35	5.05
20x5-19	\$2.45	60x7	\$2.45	60x7	\$2.45	63x7	\$6.35	5.05
20x5-19	\$2.45	60x8	\$2.45	60x8	\$2.45	63x8	\$6.35	5.05
20x5-19	\$2.45	61x6	\$2.45	61x6	\$2.45	64x6	\$6.45	5.15
20x5-19	\$2.45	61x7	\$2.45	61x7	\$2.45	64x7	\$6.45	5.15
20x5-19	\$2.45	61x8	\$2.45	61x8	\$2.45	64x8	\$6.45	5.15
20x5-19	\$2.45	62x6	\$2.45	62x6	\$2.45	65x6	\$6.55	5.25
20x5-19	\$2.45	62x7	\$2.45	62x7	\$2.45	65x7	\$6.55	5.25
20x5-19	\$2.45	62x8	\$2.45	62x8	\$2.45	65x8	\$6.55	5.25
20x5-19	\$2.45	63x6	\$2.45	63x6	\$2.45	66x6	\$6.65	5.35
20x5-19	\$2.45	63x7	\$2.45	63x7	\$2.45	66x7	\$6.65	5.35
20x5-19	\$2.45	63x8	\$2.45	63x8	\$2.45	66x8	\$6.65	5.35
20x5-19	\$2.45	64x6	\$2.45	64x6	\$2.45	67x6	\$6.75	5.45
20x5-19	\$2.45	64x7	\$2.45	64x7	\$2.45	67x7	\$6.75	5.45
20x5-19	\$2.45	64x8	\$2.45	64x8	\$2.45	67x8	\$6.75	5.45
2								

The Ugly Little Hombre is ridin' ag'in, headin' toward the 3W spread aboard his Shorty hoss, with Deputy Ed Sparks foggin' along behind him, double-barreled scattergun cocked an' ready ter let him have it. Don't miss readin' about what happens when they hit the spread. Yuh'll find all the excitin' details in

# The Oklahoma Kid Trails Trouble

A Novelette

By LEE BOND

which same will appear in next week's issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

Most o' yuh readin' hombres know thet ugly-faced young hombre thet folks call the "Oklahoma Kid." Yuh know how he's always up ter his big bat ears in two kinds o' trouble—trouble with the law, an' trouble with ornery sidewinders thet need hangin' a hull lot worse'n he does.

Waal, in this new adventure o' his, he gits his fill o' both kinds o' trouble. Beginnin' by ridin' smack inter the middle of a red-hot range war, he keeps his smoke wagons talkin' right up ter the time when he scares thet rattle-headed deputy inter takin' a snap shot at the moon with his favorite twelve-gauge.

So don't miss next week's 3W. Order it from yore dealer to-day.



# Hoss Thieves Of Porcupine Canyon

By William A. Todd

Author of "The Shooting Of Trigger Kane," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

A SCAR FOR LIFE.

AT first sight of the two riders, "Sunset" Settle suspected trouble. He was alone at the Red Target Ranch, replacing cracked corral rails with new pine, when the pair appeared on the rim of the blue-grass valley. From the way they halted to study his pas-

turage, he could tell they were strangers.

"Mighty wary strangers who don't trust this peaceful country," Sunset said aloud.

Laying aside a hand ax, he stood watching the pair come jogging down the slope behind the bull pen. His blue eyes noticed facts about them that would have escaped an hombre not so interested in details.



First, the sunlight failed to sparkle on their bridle rings. Sunset figured that the horsemen had dulled their shiny equipment to avoid detection from afar by a tell-tale flash.

Second, they carried carbines across their pommels, a tiresome way of packing a short rifle, according to Sunset's experience. Inexpensive saddle scabbards would have taken care of the weapons on a long journey, although the riders would not have had them handy for quick shooting.

What was more, Sunset saw that the pair were dusty from a long trip through alkali. Yet they had saved their mounts by the expert way they rode—bent slightly forward to keep their weight off the horses' hind quarters, and guiding with knee pressure to prevent wear on the broncs' mouths.

"They might be owl-hooters on

the dodge," Sunset allowed. "They don't know when they'll have to make a fast get-away."

He strolled down the ranch yard, past the log barn and the cabin, to await their arrival at the swing gate. There was no fear in him. Yet he had every reason to fear a visit from two gun-wise trail wolves. He was the son of a man who had put many an outlaw behind penitentiary bars.

At the gate, Sunset rested his muscular arms on the top of a thick post. He gave the appearance of an ordinary thirty-per-month cowhand, waiting to kill time in a jawing match.

His ten-gallon hat was old and cracked. The hot sun had faded his purple jersey. His high-heeled boots were scuffed. Although he was still in his teens, the coppery hue of his bony face made him look older.

On his right thigh, he packed a single-action .45 with the ease of

one long used to a heavy gun belt and tied-down holster.

Hoping to avoid trouble, he waited calmly for the visitors' broncs to drift to a halt outside the gate.

"Howdy, amigo!" the taller of the two riders called. "Is Round-up Settle at home?"

"No, the boss ain't home," Sunset replied easily, and he was wondering where he had seen the lanky, black-eyed, lean-jawed speaker before.

There was something familiar about the crooked line of that hombre's long nose and also about the downward droop of his lips at the corners.

"But he's comin' home soon," the second rider, a squat little gent with an ugly bulldog face, said gruffly. "We'll wait fer him."

Sunset was certain that he had never seen the latter horseman, but he recognized the type. The squat hombre was the kind who bluffed and bullied when given a chance. To cross him meant to open hostilities. But Sunset couldn't let either of them scare him on his own ranch.

Frowning at the carbines which they balanced on their pommels, Sunset said: "You seem to know more about the boss than I do."

"I reckon we do," chuckled the squat rider, and he swung down from his saddle in such a manner as to put his horse between himself and Sunset.

"We got an appointment with him here," said the lanky hombre in a slow tone that seemed to give the squat fellow time to get behind the cover of the bronc. "Do yuh mind if we wait?" And he dismounted.

Sunset hesitated. His body was behind the post and protected. If they swung their carbines into aim at him, he need only duck his head

and draw. Then it would be a matter of potting them behind their horses as they tried to smoke him out from behind the post.

But they were two to his one. It was a bad set-up. Sunset disliked to call their hand before they opened the duel. For all he knew, these two hombres might have an appointment with his father, "Round-up" Settle.

"Open the gate," Sunset said, "an' put yore broncs in the corral." He stood his ground behind the post, knowing that if they came through the gate, he'd get behind their backs.

But the lanky hombre apparently didn't want to lose his advantage.

"Cowboy," he spoke over the neck of his bronc, "we don't mean yuh no harm. If we did, yuh'd be buzzard bait right now. Thar's an Apache brave coverin' yuh from up by the ranch house. He's got a mighty straight .30-30 in his fingers. Yuh better open the gate an' let us wait peaceable fer Round-up Settle. We ain't goin' ter shoot him. We're goin' ter talk with him about a deal."

Sunset felt a cold chill slip down his spine. Then, suddenly, he was suspicious.

"I don't fall for that old trick about a skunk coverin' my backbone," he growled, dropping a hand to a gun butt. "Clear out, an' clear fast."

He saw the two outlaws stab their carbine muzzles into aim from over the shoulders of their broncs. He ducked to avoid being killed, as he whipped his .45 from its holster.

At the same time something hit him alongside of the head, just above the ear. It was not a bullet from their carbines. It was a terrific wallop from behind, and it seemed to be accompanied by the crack of a rifle from up by the ranch house.

But Sunset was not sure. His

brain was exploding. The post before him turned fiery red and swayed like a sapling in a rushing wind. He felt himself falling into a bottomless pit of unconsciousness. He couldn't save himself.

Down, down, down, he went into a black gulf, filled with horrible yells that faded off into cold, empty silence.

It was hours before Sunset snapped out of it. His first realization was that the bottomless pit was gone. He lay on something soft but stable. A stupefying pain gripped his brain, and gentle fingers brushed his forehead and eased a cooling salve against the fiery wound above his ear. Sunset's eyes blinked open.

He looked into the face of his father, Round-up Settle.

"Hello, son," Round-up said, forcing a grin to his tight lips and trying to appear amused. "Do yuh know me?"

"Know you?" Sunset muttered. "I'd know you anywhere. Are we both riding on the last round-up, or is this the Red Target?"

"This is the Red Target, all right, all right," Round-up replied. "Yore stabled in yore own bunk. Take it easy. Yuh only got creased by the bullet, but it was close."

Sunset remembered then. He remembered telling the two riders that he didn't fall for the old trick of a skunk covering him from behind. Well, there apparently had been an Apache brave behind him.

He stirred, only to find himself roped down to the bunk. He watched his father putting silver instruments into a surgeon's case. It was the case which Round-up Settle always took with him when he left the Red Target Ranch at the call of the Cattlemen's Association.

Round-up was an expert on solv-

ing blotted brands. Sunset had seen him perform amazing operations on the flanks of cows and horses. His father had missed his true calling. Round-up should have been a famous surgeon, instead of a veterinary.

"Did you peel my brand, dad, an' then sew me up ag'in?" Sunset asked, slowly turning his head to see who else was in the cabin.

"I fixed yuh fine, son," the C. A. man replied huskily. "When the wound heals, yuh kin call the scar the Red Target brand for life." He paused, watching Sunset blinking at the cabin room. Then: "Trapper Sam is comin' past here to-morrow. He'll take care of yuh."

Sunset's eyes were narrowing upon a tall, lean-jawed hombre who sat in a corner with a carbine on his knees. In an opposite corner sat the squat rider, also with a short rifle on his knees.

Sunset knew they were guarding his father. How they had trapped him alive, he did not know, but there was no doubt that Round-up Settle was a prisoner.

Rage swept through the young Red Target waddy. "Yaller snakes!" he exclaimed, straining at his bonds.

Round-up pressed a hand against his chest. "Take it easy, son," he warned. "Yuh don't want to lose strength an' kick the bucket. I've got to leave yuh now."

"Where are you goin'?" Sunset demanded. "Are those owl-hooters takin' yuh away?"

"I'm goin' with them on my own free will, boy," Round-up answered guardedly. "I'll never be comin' back. Listen carefully, Sunset. Don't ever tell nobody about this. I'm writing my resignation to the C. A. Don't yuh try to find me. The Red Target Ranch is yores.

Keep it. No harm is comin' to me. I've made a deal with these two men, an' I've got to keep it."

Quick to suspect, Sunset cried out, "I know the deal, dad. Yuh've traded yore own life for mine. I kin see it in their sneaky eyes. They bargained with yuh ter let me live if yuh'd play some crooked game with them. It's no go, Round-up. I won't make any deal. If those skunks take yuh away, I'll hunt 'em down an' kill 'em, if it's the last thing I ever do."

At that, the two outlaws swung their carbines into aim at Round-up Settle and Sunset.

"Wait a minute!" Round-up exclaimed fearfully. "The boy is jest feverish, an' he don't mean what he says. I'm goin' with yuh two. Rest easy on yore triggers."

The tall rider sneered at Sunset. "Kid," he said, "we figured yuh might feel that way about it all. Yore old man told yuh ter stay at the Red Target. I'd do it if I was yuh."

"Or git yore fingers burned," growled the squat rider.

Round-up bent down, pressed his hands over Sunset's bound wrists, and said, "*Hasta luego, pard*, until we meet ag'in. I'm askin' yuh for once an' all ter forgit me. I've got some work ter do, an' yuh won't help me none by driftin' about the ranges while the Red Target goes to pot."

He turned away, picking up his surgeon's case, and Sunset was sure that tears were welling to his father's eyes.

"So-long," Round-up said, and stumbled across the cabin and out of the front door.

Teeth shut, lips curled back, Sunset held himself from yelling his hatred for the two riders. He watched them follow his father.

A moment later, the beat of horses' hoofs lifted, and the two outlaws and Round-up Settle were gone from the Red Target.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE VENGEANCE TRAIL.

THE next morning, "Trapper Sam" and his liver-colored hound arrived at the Red Target. The bald-headed fellow always stopped by the Settle ranch every spring when he came out of the mountains with his furs, and when he went back again in the autumn. He merely opened the door and stepped inside to make himself at home, plainly thinking that Sunset and Round-up were on the range.

"Huh!" Trapper Sam grunted, spying the puncher roped to the bed.

"Howdy," Sunset said. "Round-up said you would be by."

"I reckon somebody must have tied yuh down so yuh wouldn't roll off," was all the remark Trapper Sam made about the situation.

Sunset rather liked the queer, toothless, solemn-eyed old codger. Trapper Sam asked favors of no man, and gave none. He would sit in a room for hours without speaking. There was a mystery about him which no man could solve.

His hound had once got in a fight with a cougar, and Sunset's father had saved its life by stitching it up. Trapper Sam would never forget the kindness.

When Trapper Sam untied the ropes, Sunset swung his legs over the edge of the bunk. Not until then did the puncher realize how weak he was. The rage that had burned through him all night long had sapped his strength.

He had to support himself with his hands in order to sit up. He

lifted a pair of blood-shot eyes to the old fellow.

"Make yoreself at home," Sunset invited. "There's coffee on the shelf."

"I reckon I better kill one o' yore beefs," Trapper Sam said, and he began to arrange his pack in a corner.

He opened it and took out a new tin of tobacco and a new corncob pipe, a change of socks, and a cake of flea soap.

Sunset recognized this act as a decision upon the trapper's part to spend a few days. There was no need to tell him what had happened. Trapper Sam seemed to read the truth in Sunset's bandaged head and the absence of Round-up.

Sunset didn't mean to tell the old fellow any more. The cowboy had done a powerful lot of thinking during the night. He had no intention of staying on at the Red Target, according to Round-up's wishes. Sunset meant to take his vengeance against those two outlaws.

"You better go on up-country, Sam," he advised. "I kin get along."

Trapper Sam shook his bald head and went out the door with a long deer knife in his hand. The hound blinked mournfully at Sunset, then followed its master.

Sunset lay back on the bunk, closing his eyes, helpless because of his weakness. How long would it be before he could hit the trail of the outlaws?

A week wore away. Sunset recovered with the astonishing speed of a healthy youth. He absorbed strength from the broth which Trapper Sam squeezed out of choice beef. Soon he was devouring stews and steaks broiled over the hearth. He dressed his own wound with the knowledge that his father had given him.

There had been a close bond between him and Round-up. Ever since the death of his mother, Sunset had been pards with his father. They had established the Red Target as a homestead, and built it gradually into a small, sturdy outfit.

But without Round-up, the ranch was meaningless. The pain of Sunset's wound passed away, but the ache in his heart continued.

He sat sunning himself in the doorway, watching Trapper Sam ride off down the valley to hunt for newborn calves in the draws and meadows. He would hear the liver-colored hound baying at some ranicky bull.

And one evening, when the trapper came driving back with a parcel of spooky range broncs, Sunset made him a proposition.

"Sam," he said across the supper table, "how would you like to run the Red Target all by your lonesome? It's more money than trapping."

The toothless hermit stared long at his empty coffee cup.

"I reckon it don't git so cold down hyar as up in the Buckhorns," he remarked.

Sunset recognized this as an answer.

"It might freeze up once or twice," he explained. "Then you ought to bring the young ones into the barn. I usually scatter a load of hay once a week beginning February when the grass gets scarce. The hound will keep the wolves off."

"The hound ain't hardly got no scars from that mountain cat," Trapper Sam said.

"If I don't ever come back, the Red Target is yours, Sam," Sunset continued. "If Round-up an' me do come back, we'll settle with you for your price. An' I'll put a thousand

dollars to your name in the Coffeeville Bank as I ride out. It's the Red Target reserve cash for feeders next spring."

Trapper Sam, who couldn't read or write, looked alarmed over the prospect of a bank account. "I got all the reserve cash I needs in my sock," he grunted.

"Then I'll give the thousand to the postmaster to hand over," Sunset chuckled. "I'm leaving in the morning."

Trapper Sam frowned and started to gather up the plates. "I hopes yuh find Round-up," he muttered, as if he knew what Sunset was going to do. "But change yore name, an' don't look at no brand twice."

"What do you mean, Sam?"

But Sunset couldn't get another word out of Trapper Sam all evening.

At the crack of dawn, Sunset was up and out at the corral. He saddled a long-legged pinto, an animal that had been a Christmas present from Round-up.

It was the fastest cayuse in the Buckhorn hills. Sunset had trained it from a colt, knew its speed and habits, and trusted it as no horse he had ever ridden before.

"Good luck, Sam!" Sunset called to the toothless trapper who stood in the doorway of the cabin.

"Better change the brand on that hoss," Trapper Sam called back, and then disappeared within the cabin.

Sunset gave his pinto its head and loped out of the ranch yard, through the open swing gate, and up the slope behind the bull pen. It felt good to be in the saddle again, but the puncher knew he mustn't overdo himself. He must take the best of care, not for his own sake, but to save Round-up from he knew not what kind of fate.

Perhaps Trapper Sam suspected what the outlaws wanted with the C. A. veterinary. Sunset had many suspicions himself, but none seemed to hit the nail on the head.

On his way to Coffeeville, he passed out of the hills and took to the low alkali country. He was surprised to find the dust two inches thick on the road and literally bending down the sage brush. Rain hadn't fallen all summer.

He rode across several ranges and found them empty. Cattle had been moved out. Back in the Buckhorns, there had been little rainfall in the past months, but enough to save the grass.

"Hard times for the prairie men," Sunset said aloud, pressing on through the heat of the day.

Coffeeville was almost deserted. The long wide main street usually was bustling with buckboards and saddle ponies, but now several of the big stores had closed. The saloons still did a small business, but the loafers no longer hung about the front doors.

Sunset stopped at the bank and withdrew the Red Target's reserve cash.

"That's the fifth withdrawal ter-day," the worried teller told him. "You cow folks don't seem ter trust us bankers no more."

"I've got use for the money," Sunset replied.

"Business is bad," the teller sighed. "All the herds are bein' moved away ter the rivers fer water."

At the post office, Sunset left the thousand dollars in a manila envelope in Trapper Sam's name. The postmaster put it in a safe.

There was no mail for Sunset. Having hoped to get a letter from Round-up, he left the log building with a heavy heart, and turned

down a side street toward a small shack on the door of which was lettered:

Cattlemen's Association  
Branch Office

Inspector Jack Tweed was reading a letter at a rickety desk as Sunset trailed his spurs into the office.

"Waal, waal, if it ain't the son o' Settle," the pink-faced inspector greeted him. "Long time no see yuh, Sonny Settle." He caught himself, hiding a grin. "Don't look so mean. I remember how yuh once called me for that coltish name. Didn't I shorten it ter Sunset ter suit yuh?"

Sunset removed his hat, and the white tape covering his wound was revealed. "No time for kiddin', Jack," he said. "I want to see all your 'Wanted' posters. Then I might talk."

Inspector Jack Tweed's brows knit in a frown. "I shore want to talk with yuh about this letter of resignation from Round-up that I got with the mail." He turned to a filing cabinet. "If it's 'Wanted' posters yuh want, I'll give yuh enough ter paper a barn."

For a half hour, Sunset looked through the stack of posters, while wise old Jack Tweed watched him silently. At last, the Red Target puncher found the photograph of a tall, lean-jawed, crooked-nosed man. It was the leader of the two riders who had taken Round-up Settle away.

No wonder Sunset had thought the outlaw familiar. Sunset now recalled that he had seen this poster once before.

"The name is Jag Jennings," the cowboy said aloud, reading the fugitive's history. "Suspected leader of the Porcupine Gang. Deadly with guns. Fond of gambling and rodeos.

Wanted for breaking out of the Arizona penitentiary, where he was serving a term of ten years for rustling."

Inspector Tweed stared at the waddy. "It was Round-up who caught him last year on that rustling charge," he said. "Jag tried to sell some steers with brands changed from Bar 11 to Long H. Jag swore he'd get even."

Sunset's fists clenched. "Do you know anything about a squat little hombre with a face like a bulldog? He's a friend o' this Jag Jennings. He's an expert horseman, with a sharp voice that sounds like it came from the Northeast ranges. I'd say he's hung around railroad towns a bit, judging from the fact he thinks all hill men are rubes, and he likes to wisecrack them."

"Huh!" the inspector grunted. "Yuh miss nothin', Sunset. That comes from Round-up's trainin'." He scratched his head. "I couldn't place that squat hombre right off. He might be a lot o' fellars. But he sounds like Pooch Brown ter me. We ain't got no charge agin' Pooch Brown. I heard he tried ter dope a race hoss once an' was banned from all the rodeo tracks. Pooch is the kind o' gent that Jag would pal with."

Sunset walked to the window and stood there, thinking, jaws hard. "This all helps some," he muttered. "The only two things those owl-hooters click on is rodeos. They both like the excitement of gambling crowds and fast horses. I'll work on that."

Inspector Tweed coughed. "What's that got ter do with Round-up's resignation?" he asked.

Sunset turned. "If you can keep this between the two of us, Jack," he said, "I'll tell you. Some day soon I might need you. Mebbe I

won't. We'll figure out a way for you to know where I am all the time. I'm going down the cattle trails, to every rodeo this fall. I might pick up some clew."

Then Sunset told the inspector the story of Round-up's disappearance, and thirty minutes later, the Red Target cowboy was headed out of Coffeeville on his pinto. Pinned inside his shirt, he carried a special deputy's badge.

### CHAPTER III.

#### A BULLET FROM BEHIND.

THREE hundred miles south of Coffeeville, Sunset found a half dozen trail herds resting outside of the town of Wolf Jaw. There was a rodeo in progress, but that was not the reason that ranchers and punchers had called a halt on the drive to market.

Sunset's experienced eyes took in the gaunt appearance of the stock grubbing along the banks of the almost dry river, and he knew that the drovers were afraid to go on up the trail to the railroad junctions. There was no water or grass. They were waiting for rain.

As he trotted his bronc into the dusty main street of Wolf Jew, he sensed the artificial spirit of the crowds on the plank sidewalks. The saloons, pool rooms, and gambling joints were packed with cattlemen trying to forget their worries for a few days. There was little money in circulation, but prices were dirt cheap.

Sunset stabled his pinto at the main livery for two bits, cash in advance.

"Yore bronc looks well fed, cowboy," the stable man remarked. "If yuh've come from wet country, yuh ought ter hit right back. Things is awful down hyar. Steers is sellin'

fer three bucks a head, an' nobody ter buy 'em. Why, all them ranchers would be glad if some rustler would come along an' swipe the stock off their hands. It would save 'em the sight of seein' 'em die on the trail."

Sunset shot the hombre a glance. "What would the rustlers do with the herds?" he asked. "Have they got water an' grass?"

"There ain't no more rustlers," the stableman chuckled. "It don't pay, not at three bucks a head. Now I'm jest askin' yuh whar would the owl-hoot tribe git water an' grass if honest cow folks can't git it?"

"I dunno," Sunset replied, and he strode out of the livery to turn his steps toward the rodeo ground.

What could "Jag" Jennings and "Pooch" Brown want with his father? If it was something to do with brands, there could be no profit for them now. Sunset had suspected that the outlaws kidnaped his father in order to use his amazing knowledge of brand surgery. With that knowledge, they could rebrand stolen stock and sell it without ever being caught.

Now, with no profit in rustling, Sunset could only figure that Jag and Pooch had taken his father away in order to doctor some wounded owl-hooters.

When Round-up finished the job, the Red Target waddy was certain that his enemies would kill Round-up out of revenge for sending Jag to the pen.

"I've got to work fast," Sunset said, eying the crowds drifting toward the rodeo grounds. "Mebbe Jag or Pooch will turn up somewhere."

All afternoon, Sunset searched for the faces of the two outlaws in the roaring stands. His hand never strayed far from his gun butt. He

investigated the loading chutes and the stables, where the rodeo contestants waited their turns to perform.

He finally ambled to the rail of the race track, and watched the gamblers taking bets. There were a good many gun-hung toughs at the edge of the track, and they stared hard at him.

The yelling of the spectators in the stand told Sunset that the horses were lining up at the starting post. The excitement stirred him. He turned to the rail to watch the race. His ears went deaf from the roaring crowds as the starting tape broke across the chests of the race horses.

Sunset watched the animals come thundering up the track. A big black was out in front, holding an even gait that made its rivals look like feeble range broncs.

"What a hoss!" Sunset enthused, forgetting his troubles for a brief moment.

His sharp eyes took in every detail of the big black racer streaking past him. The animal's stride, its long body and muscular chest, the white star on its forehead, the Circle 8 brand on its flank—all these became indelibly stamped on his memory.

And then he was suddenly aware that a crowd of men were pressing close behind him, as if they were eager to see the racers go around the bend in the track.

Sunset's wound was not completely healed. If his hat got brushed, the sweat band might shift his head bandage and cause the wound to open. He quickly moved aside to force his way out of the crowd, and just as he moved—

*Crack!* A small-caliber weapon spoke behind Sunset.

He knew it was a derringer de-

spite the fact that the thunder of horses' hoofs and the shouts of the stands almost drowned out the sound of the explosion. A stabbing pain tore through Sunset's side. He realized that an enemy had tried to hit him in the spine, but the coyote's aim had been spoiled by Sunset's sudden move.

With a cry of rage, the puncher whirled. His eyes focused upon a squat little hombre with a bulldog face. It was Pooch Brown, who was trying to hide a smoking derringer as he backed away.

Sunset's fist whipped up, struck Pooch flush in the nose, and knocked him sprawling under the feet of several crowding race track enthusiasts.

"Look out for a gun fight!" somebody yelled, as Sunset leaped to grab the outlaw rolling in the dirt.

Before the Red Target waddy reached Pooch, two toughs threw themselves on him, holding him to allow Pooch to scuttle away between the legs of the crowd.

Sunset went wild. His fists swung madly, smashing down men like tenpins. He tried to wade through the heap of men, and they tackled him and dragged him down.

Bucking like a colt, he got to his feet as hombres smashed him in the face, kicked him in the ribs, and yelled that he was drunk.

"Let go, you fools!" Sunset cried in fury.

Head down, fists whirling, he charged through them. Dust clouded the air. He couldn't see where he was going. He struggled out of the surging crowd and into the open. His blue eyes caught sight of a chunky hombre vanishing over a fence to the left of the grandstand.

Ripping his six-gun from its holster, Sunset raced for the fence. He was aware of men shouting at him.

A gun exploded from somewhere and a bullet sang over his head.

"Stop in the name o' the law!" a voice bellowed.

"Stop nothin'," Sunset ejaculated, leaping to climb the fence.

No lawman was going to stop him from nailing Pooch Brown, even if it did look as though Sunset had gone loco. He heard another shot, and a bullet smashed into the fence as he went over it.

Dropping down the opposite side of the board barrier, he found a thick patch of greasewoods and mesquite before him. There was no sign of Pooch Brown.

Sunset swung his gun into aim at the brush, expecting a bullet from hiding. Over the top of the greasewoods, he saw a cloud of dust lift up, and he heard the beat of a bronc's hoofs.

"The coyote is in an arroyo," Sunset gasped, and plunged into the brush.

In a moment, he reached the rim of a dry gully. It was empty. But Sunset spied the tracks of a horse. Pooch Brown had escaped.

"Well, that's that," Sunset growled. "It ain't no use ter follow him. He'll put plenty of distance behind him."

A thunderous shout echoed from the rodeo grounds, and Sunset knew that the horse race was over. He thought of the lawman and decided it best to slip away before being quizzed. The derringer wound in his side was slight, but it needed attention to prevent infection.

Hiking up the arroyo, he soon turned into the brush, and angled back toward the end of town. His mind was keenly alive to everything that had happened. He figured that Pooch had spotted him in the rodeo crowds and had planned to murder him during the excitement of the

horse race. The coyote might easily have done it, for few men would have heard the derringer shot.

"I was right about those owl-hooters," Sunset muttered, reaching the main street. "They can't keep away from rodeos. I only hope they don't think I'm on their trail. Something might happen to Round-up. I've got to work faster than ever."

The livery was deserted. Sunset found his bronc and got a first-aid kit out of his saddlebag. He dressed his wound carefully, then examined the healing scar above his ear.

Two blows had struck him on the side of the head during the fight. Luckily, they had not hit the scar, but his head bandage had slipped. He straightened it, and then opened the livery doors to let his pinto outside.

A tall hombre in a khaki shirt stood in the doorway. There was a silver star on his chest, a cocked six-gun in his hand. He stared hard at the surprised cowboy.

"I thought I might find yuh here," the lawman snapped. "Lift yore dew claws, hombre! Yo're under arrest."

Sunset stepped back. "What for?" he demanded. "I didn't do nothin' but try to catch a skunk that shot me with a derringer."

The lawman pressed a gun barrel into Sunset's midriff. "Reach for the roof, four-flusher!" he ordered. "That was a nice trick yuh played on me. Yuh drew me out o' the rodeo grounds an' down inter that brush so yore gang could swipe that black racer."

"Swipe what?" Sunset exclaimed. "Do yuh mean somebody stole the hoss that was winning that race?"

"I reckon yuh don't know nothin' about it, eh?" the lawman taunted. "I'll tell yuh jest how yore gang

worked. Yuh got me ter chase yuh over the fence. Jest then the race was gettin' finished. The race hosses were taken out ter the open place behind the stables ter walk off their sweat.

"One o' yore gang steps up ter the jockey what won the race an' offers ter hold the black racer while the jockey went ter git his winnings. When the jockey come back, nobody knew what had happened ter the black racer. Slick work, wasn't it?"

Sunset glanced down at the six-gun covering him, then looked up at the lawman. "So you figure I'm in with the hoss thieves," he said. "You're wrong hombre, but I reckon I can't prove you're wrong." He began to raise his hands. "How-homewer," he added, "I might know somethin' about who did steal the cayuse."

"Yuh'll shore tell me," the sheriff chuckled, drawing handcuffs from his belt with a free left hand as he kept the puncher covered with a right.

"Can't tell you to-day," Sunset snapped, and his arms came whipping down, slapping the sheriff's exploding six-gun to the ground.

Before the lawman could jump away, Sunset's fist caught him on the chin and knocked him whirling into a corner of the livery.

With a leap, the puncher was aboard his pinto, and galloping into the main street.

## CHAPTER IV.

### DOOMED.

ROUND-UP SETTLE was a prisoner, and he did not know where. Jag Jennings and Pooch Brown had brought him blindfolded through mountains and desert.

When first allowed to see, Round-up's eyes had opened upon the log

walls of the room in which he now sat. Wrists and ankles secured with padlocked chains, he had been living in that windowless room for three weeks.

Twice a day, Jag Jennings brought him food and water and reminded him that Sunset Settle would be shot down from ambush if Round-up tried to escape.

Now, Round-up heard the key turn in the lock, and Jag Jennings stepped into the room, followed by Pooch Brown. Round-up stared at them with expressionless eyes.

He made no move and said nothing. But a deadly rage burned through him. He meant to play a waiting game, to try to escape only when he could do so by killing Jag Jennings and Pooch Brown. Round-up knew he'd have to kill them to save Sunset from harm.

"How are yuh, Round-up?" Jag greeted him. "The waitin' is over."

The gray-haired C. A. man said nothing and kept a poker face.

"He don't talk much," Pooch chuckled. "Let's take him out."

Jag Jennings spat on the floor. "I don't trust this sleuth, Pooch. We better keep the leg irons on him while he works. He'll have to use his hands. But when he's out of this room, don't ever stop coverin' him with a gun. He's slick as an eel."

"I'm scared he might shoot a needleful o' dope inter me any second," the squat outlaw growled. "Yuh don't have ter worry about me coverin' him, Jag. Jest as soon as yuh give him that doctor's suitcase, I'll thumb back my gun hammer."

"Stand up, Round-up," Jag ordered harshly. "Yuh kin stumble out o' this room. Git goin'."

Round-up's impulse was to cast himself upon these two wolves and

beat them with his cuffed wrists. Only the thought of Sunset's safety prevented him.

He stood up and hobbled through the doorway into the main room of a cabin. It was a filthy place, with four bunks, an ash-strewn fireplace, and riding equipment scattered all over the floor.

"Keep goin' outside," Jag spoke behind the C. A. man. "Open the door, Pooch."

Round-up hobbled through the front door and found himself in the bottom of a deep canyon through which ran a small stream. Cliffs rose hundreds of feet before and behind him. His gray eyes lifted to study the vast heights, and he knew there was no escape up or down them.

He turned to look north through the canyon, and saw where the sheer walls pinched close, allowing the stream to come tumbling over a mass of boulders and falls.

It would have been difficult for a man to come down the defile by way of that narrow place. No hombre could ever do it without being seen.

"Nice place, eh, Round-up?" Pooch Brown sneered, as he stepped beside the C. A. man.

Round-up turned to look down the canyon, and there he saw another place where the cliffs narrowed in and the stream ran among big boulders and over falls to escape. Yes, the hide-out was perfect.

There was now a drought. With rain, the small creek would be a raging torrent, making the upper and lower entrances to this camp impossible to reach.

Round-up suspected the name of that stream. It was the Porcupine River, and this was Porcupine Canyon. He recalled that Jag Jennings was supposed to be the leader of the

Porcupine gang, hunted for years by the law.

"Head over to that corral," Jag ordered, pointing at a small rail pen in which stood a handsome black horse. "I want yuh ter look at a critter I bought the other day."

Round-up started toward the pen, studying the big horse as he went. Jag and Pooch came behind him, carrying his surgeon's case.

The C. A. man knew that the outlaws had not purchased that beautiful cayuse. It had been stolen.

Round-up could see the strain of Kentucky thoroughbred in its muscular chest and long, tapered legs. He halted at the pen, eying the Circle 8 brand on its flank—a brand which told him the name of the owner.

Jag produced a handcuff key. "All right, Round-up," he said. "This is the first piece of work I've got outlined for yuh. Change that brand from Circle 8 to a Boxed Z. Yuh kin do it. We've brought yore shiny instruments an' all the medicine yuh need. Yo're the only hombre in Arizona that kin graft hoss skin an' fool everybody."

Round-up's eyes gleamed. A tremor of rage shook his broad shoulders, and he whirled upon Jag Jennings.

"Me change that brand?" the C. A. man cried. "Do you take me for a sneakin' crook like yuh, Jennings? I'd beat the life right out of yore scaly hide the second these handcuffs are off my wrists."

Jag leaped back, hand on his gun butt, lean face painted with rage.

"Yuh dirty double-crosser!" he shrilled. "Yuh shore *will* change that brand. Yuh'll change the brand of every hoss I bring here. An' when I'm through with yuh, I'll stake yuh ter a red ant hill an' listen ter yuh holler fer mercy."

Round-up Settle straightened up, lips curling. "Yuh couldn't git one squeak out o' me, yuh skunk! Yo're yaller clean through, Jennings. Yo're a joke. So yuh thought I'd come hyar an' do yore dirty work, eh?"

Pooch Brown stabbed a six-gun into aim. "Shall I cut him up a bit with lead, Jag?" he asked. "His talk makes my trigger finger itch."

Jag Jennings was breathing hard. "Don't shoot him, Pooch," he said. "Git the boys an' light out for the Red Target ranch. Save yore lead for Round-up's kid. But bring the body back here. I want Round-up ter see it."

A great change came over Round-up Settle. His eyes went wide with horror, and his tanned face turned white as death. He shook like a leaf. His mouth opened, and he tried to speak, but he couldn't.

Pooch grinned at him, then started toward a saddle bronc picketed behind the cabin.

"Wait!" Round-up called huskily. "Oho-o-o!" Jag Jennings ejaculated. "Yuh've changed yore tune, eh, Round-up? Yuh figure it would be plenty easy fer us ter dry-gulch yore kid on the Red Target range. Shore it would. It would be pretty tough ter murder a young feller that might go far in this world. An' his death would be on yore head, Round-up. Yuh gave me a terrible year in the State pen. I ain't forgettin' that. I finally got out o' the place, with the aid of Pooch. Yuh might have a chance ter escape from here. Yuh better change that Circle 8 brand. It will give yuh time ter figure a way ter beat our game."

Round-up Settle swallowed hard. "If I ever git a gun in my hand——"

"Shut up," Jag snarled. "Pooch an' the Apache will throw the black

an' tie it down. Then yuh go ter work."

Something inside of Round-up seemed to crumble. His face was miserable. He stood there a broken man. The outlaws had hit him in the only weak spot in his character. That was Round-up's love for his son.

The C. A. man would gladly have suffered any tortures before touching the black racer's brand. He knew precisely what Jag and Pooch would do with the cayuse. They were playing for big money, not small rustling stakes.

They needed his skill, and Round-up had to give it to them, in spite of his fine record with the Cattlemen's Association, his friendship for the man who owned the Circle 8 brand, and his honor.

With legs still chained, and with Jag and Pooch covering him with drawn guns, Round-up went to work on the thrown horse. Surgeon kit beside him, he operated on the branded hide.

It was a job of surgery, cutting skin here and there, drawing it closely together, grafting hide peeled off the bronc's back where a saddle blanket would cover the scar.

Round-up Settle had earned his reputation well. When he was done with the black, the Circle 8 brand had completely vanished. Now it remained for the cayuse to heal up, and then Jag and Pooch could burn the Boxed Z sign on its hide.

Helpless, stumbling, weak with rage, Round-up went back to his prison room in the cabin. Jag and Pooch locked him in, chuckled, and got a bottle of whisky. They walked out to the corral to view the job on the black's flank. They spoke in whispers.

"So yuh say the kid was huntin' fer us in Wolf Jaw?" Jag asked.

"I told yuh how I tried ter plug him in the crowd," Pooch growled. "The whelp chased me over a fence. The Apache an' two of our gang swiped the black while the constable was chasin' the kid. They simply walked out o' the rodeo grounds with the hoss. Nobody stopped them. The Apache climbed into the saddle an' rode off, as easy as takin' this drink o' whisky."

"We'll make plenty o' mazuma out o' that black," Jag said. "But we've got ter kill the kid, Pooch. He's the one person in the West who might get wise ter us. Take a little trip up to the Red Target next week."

## CHAPTER V.

### NIGHT RIDING.

FOR weeks, Sunset traveled the cattle trail to find rodeos. He knew a description of himself had been forwarded to all sheriffs. He changed his purple jersey and denims for a red flannel shirt and green pants.

His pinto no longer showed the Red Target brand. With special glue and hair shaved from his bronc's flank, he blotted the old sign with skill that would have earned praise from Round-up. It was a temporary job that had to be doctored after every sweating, but it fooled the casual eye.

Hat pulled low over his eyes, with his horse showing a T Bench brand, Sunset rode into the main street of Deering. He mingled with the crowds, always on the alert. He attended the rodeo, and rode out of Deering, disappointment in his heart.

Three more towns saw him, took him for a cowboy attending the rodeo celebrations, and watched him go away with the other visitors.

At one place he heard a livery man telling of the theft of a fine Circle 8 racer a month before at Wolf Jaw. At another town, he learned that two other speedy race horses had been stolen at different tracks.

Watching a pool game one day in Sleepy Eye, he heard a player say:

"It looks like them thar rustlers have given up cows fer race hosses. The skunks must be shippin' the critters ter Canada or Mexico, 'cause them stolen hosses is famous an' nobody could blot thar brands."

Sunset's eyes grew hard. "Nobody but Round-up," he growled under his breath. "I kin see the thing as clear as daylight. The rodeos are about finished. It's a cinch that those two coyotes aren't goin' ter wait until next fall ter clean up on the stolen cayuses."

The following morning found him headed for the larger towns on the branch lines of railroads. Weekly newspapers informed him where horse races were being held.

Winter was setting in, but only the mountain country knew the real cold. Sunset took in Prescott, Flagstaff, Tombstone, and Phoenix. There were long rides between them, but races were far apart. He began to recognize the gambling fraternity from seeing them first at one track and then at another. He avoided them, and kept his eyes on the horses.

He earned his reward.

At the track rail in Nogales, he studied his racing chart, marking off the contesting horses as they lined up at the post. Six of the animals had their history printed on Sunset's chart, and the gambling odds were given. One of the broncs was an unknown, with no previous record.

"That's the black one," Sunset

said to himself, glancing at No. 7, waltzing behind the starting tape. "It says on my paper that the owner is a Colonel Sutkins, who bred the hoss from a thoroughbred from Kentucky an' a Morgan range bronc. Huh!"

Sunset eyed the racer critically. It was completely black, from nose to tail, without a white hair showing. From where the puncher stood, he could read a Boxed Z brand on its flank.

Sunset remembered no entirely black bronc that had been stolen last fall. But he waited for the tape to break, and then studied the animal as it came streaking past.

A cold chill went down his spine and suddenly he felt the desire to yell "Circle 8," but he restrained himself. He couldn't fail to miss the long gait of that black racer. He recalled its muscular chest and slim legs. There had been a white star on its forehead.

"The skunks got Round-up to dye the white markings," Sunset gasped. "I'm shore o' that bronc." His fists clenched. "I've got to hold onto myself. I can't fail at the last moment."

He turned away from the starting rail, head bent to hide his face, and slipped through the crowd to get to the stables. He knew that the black racer would win the race.

The gambling odds had been posted as twenty to one against the animal that was supposed to be unknown. It meant that Jag Jennings and Pooch Brown would collect twenty dollars for every one dollar they bet on their horse.

Bookmakers who had never heard of the Boxed Z animal would lose their shirts for thinking that an unknown bronc didn't stand a chance against famous animals.

Yes, Jag and Pooch were cleaning

up more mazuma than they ever dreamed of making in the rustling game. They were stealing famous Western racers, getting Round-up to change the brands, and then they were racing the cayuses as unknowns.

Sunset started through the gate to the stable yard when a stout hombre with a star on his breast stopped him.

"Where do yuh think yo're goin'?"

The cowboy caught his breath. "Back to the stables," he replied.

"What for?" the lawman demanded, squinting at him.

Sunset's heart began to pound against his ribs. "Kin you keep a tight lip?" he said with a show of boldness.

"Shore, I kin keep a tight lip, cowboy, but I ain't forgettin' that thar's been a lot o' hosses stolen recently. Yuh better speak up afore I throw yuh in the calaboose. It seems I've read a description o' some hombre like yuh. Have yuh got anythin' ter show who yuh are?"

Although the puncher didn't want to do it, he was forced to unbutton his shirt front, draw the fold aside, and allow the sun to glint on the deputy inspector's badge given him by Jack Tweed.

"Say nothin', an' forget me," Sunset growled, and brushed past the law man.

"Gosh, an' I thought he might be a hoss thief!" the sheriff ejaculated.

As Sunset reached the stable yard, the howling stands told him that the big black unknown had won the race. He drifted down the line of stalls until he came to an empty one.

Men were working about most of the doors, but they paid him no attention. He slipped into the empty stall, closed the door and waited.

It wasn't long before the animals in the last race came into the stable yard. Opening the door a crack. Sunset peered out at the big black, which halted three stalls away. There was a small Indian on the animal's back—an Apache Indian. As he dismounted, two gun-hung toughs appeared out of the black racer's stable.

"Those are the skunks who fought me in Wolf Jaw," Sunset ejaculated. "They stopped me from grabbing Pooch Brown, after I busted him in the nose."

He watched them remove the black's bridle and saddle, fasten a halter to its sleek face and cover its sweaty body with a dark blanket.

As they removed the wrappings from its legs, the Apache led up two saddle broncs. The Indian mounted one bronc and took the halter rope to lead the racer.

One of the toughs mounted another bronc to follow the Apache out of the stable yard, while the other tough strode off to the grandstand.

"Well, I'll be darned!" Sunset exclaimed. "That's fast work. The Injun an' one gun-slinger aim to get the racer out of town as soon as possible. That other gun-slinger goin' to the grand stand must aim to collect their winnings, then meet them."

Sunset stepped out into the sunlight, and walked swiftly down the stable yard after the Apache and the mounted tough. He followed them at a safe distance to the street, took note that they were striking west out of Nogales. Then he turned and ran toward the livery where his pinto was waiting.

Would Jag Jennings and Pooch Brown be waiting out in the hills for their henchmen?

Sunset left town by a northern road, raising a cloud of dust for more than two miles, then headed west across open country. But he kept to the low swales and hollows to foil detection from afar. He was tortured with the fear that the outlaws would get away or that they would spot him first and escape.

Every time the puncher's horse hoofed the ground, it stirred up dust, which lifted slowly, was caught up by the breeze and spread in a tan haze. There was no way that Sunset could prevent making that evidence of his route.

He tried riding through sandy arroyos, but the winds had blown the dry washes six inches deep with fine particles of dirt. The drought had not let up. Every blade of grass was covered with dust, every clump of sage.

"If I make a fog, so do they," Sunset finally decided, and he angled to reach a hill top.

Halting just below the height of the outpoint, he dismounted and went on foot to take a look-see from this high advantage. A mile to his south, a cloud of dust was drifting westward across a barren sea of burned out range.

Sunset never doubted that he was watching the Apache and one of the gun-slingers. He made sure of it when he noted another dust cloud leaving Nogales to the east.

"That's the second hombre with the race-track winnings, riding hard to join up with the Injun."

The puncher's impulse was to cut off the second gunman, prevent him from joining the others, but wisdom laid a cautioning hand on his shoulder.

Sunset was not dealing with fools. He remembered all the precautions that Jag Jennings and Pooch Brown had taken before entering the Red

Target Ranch. These outlaws were trail wise. Their Apache had the instincts of a wolf. One false move, and Sunset would lose them.

Anxiously, he watched the second gunman pass him a mile away, go on to the west, and then the rider's dust cloud joined the fog stirred up by the Apache and the first gunman.

"Four horses make more dust than one," Sunset figured. "I'll wait till I kin hardly see 'em. Then I'll hit the trail."

All afternoon, Sunset stalked the three riders with the black race horse. He gave their actual tracks a wide berth, suspecting that the Apache might lie in wait to determine if they were being trailed by the prints left on the ground.

The Red Target waddy kept far behind them and always a little to the north of the course they took. He crossed no ridges from the top of which he might be seen miles away.

The sun slipped down the western sky. The air grew chill. Twilight set in, and he had to press closer to his enemies to keep their dust in view.

With the deepening of the shadows of night, he approached to within a half a mile of them, and found that they were changing their course to due north.

"They can't be on their way to any town," Sunset decided. "There ain't no towns with race meetings up yonder. They must be striking for their hide-out to get another re-branded race horse."

Now he began to wonder if Jag and Pooch had joined the party. The anxiety of not knowing was too much for the puncher to bear. He was eager for a shoot-out. If he could catch the gang all together, he might be able to end his quest.

Spurring his pinto, Sunset raced far around the outlaws to get ahead of them. The clustering stars allowed a broad vision of the sleeping desert. The puncher studied the country which fell behind him, trying to decide which route the owl-hooters would take.

He picked out a low cliff that overlooked a wide, shallow arroyo. Trotting along the rim of this cliff, he halted at a lone mesquite and dismounted.

Six-gun in hand, he stood hidden in the dark shadow of the thorny tree.

It was not long before his pinto's ears twitched.

"Easy, boy," Sunset warned the trained animal. "Keep a tight lip. No whinnying."

## CHAPTER VI.

### TRAPPER SAM TALKS.

SOON the faint clop of hoofs reached his ears. The outlaws were coming up the arroyo. They too were traveling the low troughs of the dry country. Sunset presently made out their dark figures riding along the base of the cliff on which he stood.

"Three of them!" he breathed. "Jag an' Pooch are not with 'em. I'll have to follow the black race horse for gosh knows how long."

Torn between anger and disappointment, he watched the three riders pass below him. The murmur of their voices drifted up the cliff, and Sunset strained to hear their words.

Then the worst happened.

The Red Target waddy saw the black race horse throw up its head to look at the dark mesquite on the cliff rim. The animal seemed to detect the presence of a being. It held back on the halter rope which the

Apache trailed from the saddle of a bronc ahead of it.

Sunset froze as the Apache glanced at the racer, and then whirled to throw a rifle into aim at the shadow of the mesquite.

The puncher's first thought was that the Indian might kill his pinto. With a leap, Sunset came out of the mesquite's shadow, hoping to draw the Indian's fire. He did, just as the Apache was pulling the trigger of the rifle.

*Crash!* Sunset felt the Indian's bullet whisk past the nape of his neck.

A miss. But only because the cowboy moved so suddenly. Sunset saw the Indian working the lever of the rifle to jam a fresh cartridge into the chamber. At the same time, the Apache was swerving the rifle's barrel to keep its sights lined on Sunset's running figure.

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

He threw himself flat on the cliff rim as he fired. His .45 caliber slug knocked the Apache clean out of the saddle. And the thunder of the exploding powder sent the broncs in the arroyo on the stampede.

Before Sunset could shout a command for the two white hombres to halt, they were galloping away, followed by the black race horse and the riderless mount belonging to the Apache.

Smoking weapon in hand, Sunset stared down the cliff at the huddled figure of the Indian in the bottom of the arroyo. By the light of the stars, he could see a rifle near the Apache's hands. Suspicious, Sunset listened to the hoofbeats of the two white outlaws fading in the night. He called down the cliff:

"Stop fooling, Injun. I might decide to put another slug in yore carcass if you don't roll over on your back an' raise your arms."

There was a muffled oath from the Apache, who began to roll over on his back. Sunset's quick eyes caught the glint of starlight against steel.

"Chuck the knife away, Injun!" he ordered.

"No knife," the Apache groaned.

"You're holdin' it against your chest to make me think you're clawing at a bullet wound. I shot you in the left shoulder, you snake! Where do you want to be hit ag'in?"

"I am dying, señor," the Indian whined. "Water."

"You mean you're trying to keep me from hitting the trail of those other two skunks," Sunset said. "Stand up, reaching for the stars. Quick."

A rattle broke in the Apache's throat as he moved. His face fell to earth, and he lay still.

"Buzztails!" the cowboy exclaimed. "He'll keep me here all night. Those other coyotes have got clean away."

Taking careful aim with his six-gun, Sunset sent a bullet so close to the Indian's ear that he saw the lobe flip. Instantly the Apache sprang up, yelling for mercy, arms raised.

"Climb up here," Sunset ordered, covering him. "Come crawling an' flatten on yore belly on the rim of this cliff."

Three minutes later, the cowboy had his prisoner bound hand and foot. He patched up a bullet hole in the Indian's right shoulder, then hoisted him into the saddle of the pinto.

Mounting behind him, Sunset struck north. It was no use to trail the two outlaws. The night hid their flight.

Sunset had one consolation. The owl-hooters didn't know who it was that had surprised them in the arroyo. The coyotes might figure it was a passing stranger or a gambler

from Nogales gunning for their race-track winnings.

They most likely gave the Apache up for dead. Sunset's immediate problem was to find a place to put the Indian where no other hombre would find him.

The cowboy's thoughts turned to the Red Target Ranch.

It was two weeks before Sunset reached the Buckhorn Hills. Winter had set in, the oaks and maples had lost their leaves, and the grass was no longer green. But there was grass in this country, and no dust.

Swelling his lungs to the scent of the mountain pines, the Red Target puncher trotted down the long slope behind the bull pen. Behind him rode the Apache on an Indian pony caught roaming the wilds.

The prisoner was tied hand and foot to the mount. His dark eyes filled with hatred at the sight of the ranch.

"I wonder if Trapper Sam is at home," Sunset remarked, eying the lower terraces of the valley. "There's stock grazing. Everything looks shipshape."

His ears caught the baying of a hound in the distance, and soon a stooped rider put in an appearance from a draw behind the cabin.

Sunset rode into the ranch yard first, put his pinto in the corral, and stood beside the Indian prisoner's bronc as Trapper Sam approached, rifle cradled in his arm.

"Glad to see you, partner," Sunset greeted him.

Trapper Sam grunted, and stared at the Apache with an intensity that surprised Sunset.

"This is the snake who creased me a few months ago," the puncher explained. "He's bad medicine, Sam. Could you keep him prisoner in the cellar until I come back ag'in?"

Trapper Sam swung his skinny figure down from the saddle and drew a deer knife from his belt. He thumbed the edge of the blade.

"Mebbe I keep him, mebbe I won't," the old fellow muttered.

The Apache trembled with fear. There seemed to be something between the Indian and the trapper. Sunset sensed it. He also noted that the liver-colored hound had failed to come up close to greet him. The animal stood off, glowering at the Apache.

"Do you mean that you might get reckless with that knife?" the puncher asked Sam.

"He tried ter pizen my dawg," Trapper Sam growled.

Conversation was not Trapper Sam's strong suit. He avoided talk as much as possible. But now some inner fury opened his lips.

"The Injun set out arsenic twice since yuh left, Sunset," he muttered. "They've been lookin' fer yuh. They come around about once every two weeks. They lay out in the hills with field glasses, watchin' me all day long. But the hound always tells me they're thar. I don't want no fight with 'em. But when they try ter pizen my dawg, that's plenty reason fer me ter take steps."

Sunset's mouth dropped open and snapped shut. This all was disheartening news. Plainly, Jag Jennings and Pooch Brown meant to dry-gulch him for that fight in Wolf Jaw on the day that they stole the black race horse.

The Indian must have discovered that Trapper Sam's hound was giving their game away. Perhaps Jag and Pooch thought that Sunset was hiding out in the cabin, or perhaps they thought he'd return some day, and they would be able to kill him.

"Sam, why didn't they shoot you?" Sunset asked.

"They was most likely scared it would give yuh warnin'," the toothless old fellow growled. "They figure I'm baitin' thar trap ter draw yuh inter it."

Sunset took a deep breath. "Do you know anything about Jag Jennings an' Pooch Brown, Sam?" he asked. "Don't tell me unless you want to. I know how you don't tell tales about no man."

"The snakes tried ter pizen my hound," the trapper muttered, thumbing the edge of his knife. "Yuh can't never find no outlaw in the Porcupines, sonny. I've been round thar a lot. I don't know no more than when I started trappin' them mountains."

"You mean that Jag an' Pooch have a hide-out in the Porcupines," the puncher said thoughtfully. "The law already has Jag figured for the leader of the Porcupine gang. That don't get me nowhere, Sam. If I started into those mountains, I'd be spotted right off the bat. I'd get ambushed. I thought of trying to sneak around there, but that would have meant combing ten thousand square miles of mountains. Like looking for a needle in a haystack."

Trapper Sam nodded his head in agreement. "Yuh got ter know the exact spot ter look."

"Do you know that spot, Sam?"

The hermit was silent for a long time, his eyes studying the Indian. Sunset saw him turn to the Apache's rifle, which he had leaned against the corral. Trapper Sam picked the weapon up and examined it carefully. Twice, he snorted.

"I know guns," he muttered, "but I don't know whar them snakes is hangin' out. Mebbe this gun will tell us."

"That rifle?" Sunset questioned.

Trapper Sam grinned for one of the few times in his life. "Sonny,

yuh go ter Prescott with this rifle. Ask for the gent who put the new sights on the barrel. It looks ter me like thar's only one gunsmith what could do a job like this one. His name is Thorne. Mebbe he shipped this gun by stage ter some place in the Porcupines. I'll keep the Apache until yuh come back."

"Sam, you're a better sleuth than Round-up!" Sunset exclaimed.

Rifle in hand, he opened the corral rails to get his pinto. Sunset meant to lose no time.

## CHAPTER VII.

### SETTING THE TRAP.

**B**EN THORNE was one of the best gunsmiths in the cattle country. His shop on a back street of Prescott contained every make of weapon known to the puncher, from the flintlock pistol to the newest type of express rifle.

His main trade was in rebuilding old guns to shoot high-speed cartridges. But Thorne's hobby was gun sights. He could take a weapon that wouldn't hit a barn door at fifty yards and fix its front bead so that the owner could extinguish a cigarette in the mouth of a man at the same distance.

A bent-over, spectacled old man, Thorne studied the rifle which Sunset Settle placed on the counter. The cowboy watched him read the serial number on its barrel.

"It's a mighty fine rifle, cowboy," Thorne said admiringly. "It cost plenty o' money, too. Ain't it a shame them manufacturers never kin learn about sights? Yuh spend a lot ter buy it, but folks come ter Ben Thorne ter make 'em shoot straight. Who put new sights on this gun?"

Sunset unbuttoned his shirt, revealing the C. A. badge as he said,

"Didn't you fix that gun once, Mr. Thorne? My friend, Trapper Sam, recognizes your work."

"Trapper Sam!" Ben Thorne exclaimed, looking up. "Now, thar's a real hunter fer yuh. I've known Trapper Sam fer years." He caught the glitter of the deputy's badge, frowned, and said: "I know now what yuh come fer."

"I want the name and address of the hombre who asked you to fix the sights, Mr. Thorne. It's a private matter between us. It goes no farther."

"I always respect the law, younker," the gunsmith replied, grinning. "But I ain't ever been called ter testify in a trial yet. Remember that. The older man hunters never make the mistake o' tryin' ter git me ter testify. Don't yuh."

He limped to a filing cabinet, and began to sort through a drawer of cards. Finally, he found the one he was looking for. He laid it on the counter for Sunset to see.

The name of the man who had brought the weapon to the gunsmith was John Jones, according to the filing card. John Jones, it appeared, had ordered the rifle to be resighted and shipped to the town of Best Water.

"John Jones," Sunset snorted. "Why not John Smith?"

Old Ben Thorne shrugged his shoulders. "John Jones is as good a handle as John Smith. Thar's lots of John Joneses floatin' around. But thar's only one town o' Best Water, whar he gits his mail. Why, it wasn't more'n two months ago that this hyar John Jones ordered me ter send him an old derringer that didn't make much noise when it was fired."

"Thanks a lot, Mr. Thorne," Sunset replied. "I think I've seen that derringer. It didn't make much

noise when it was fired. I'm in a bit of a hurry now. I'll have to say *hasta luego*."

"Give my regards to Trapper Sam," Ben Thorne said in parting. "He saved my life once up in the Rockies. I ain't ever forgettin' it."

As Sunset rode toward the telegraph office, he knew that he had been lucky only because of his friends. A man couldn't live without them, Round-up had first won the loyalty of Trapper Sam by befriending the liver-colored hound after a scrap with a cougar.

Trapper Sam was returning the favor by attending to the Red Target ranch. And now old Ben Thorne was paying Trapper Sam back for having saved his life.

Sunset had heard his father often explain the code of the cattle country. It was simple: Mind your own business.

Chasing outlaws was the law's business. A lawman might call upon citizens to form a fighting posse, but when it came to piecing clews together and tracking down an outlaw, ordinary citizens usually took no part in the game.

Trapper Sam was a good example of the way the ordinary citizen acted. The old fellow undoubtedly knew much about the owl-hoot tribe because he lived in the wilds. But he attended to his own affairs, said nothing, and let the law figure things out for itself.

All these facts had been gradually making a true lawman of Sunset. He was beginning to understand that he was a complete outsider as far as other men were concerned.

He was cut out to be a lawman. His mind and spirit were the type that belonged to the courageous breed who gave their lives to enforce the statutes of the government.

Under Sunset's shirt was a deputy's badge, which he had found necessary to use twice. He had hoped that he wouldn't have to use it. Inspector Jack Tweed had given it to him as a help in finding Round-up Settle. But now, the Red Target waddy was beginning to realize that just the saving of Round-up Settle's life was a small part of his business.

As a deputy, Sunset had another task. That was to nab the entire Porcupine gang and put them behind bars.

It was a job that he could not do alone. He was one hombre against at least a dozen. He was not foolish enough to think that he could corral a dozen gun-slingers in one stroke.

So on reaching the telegraph office, Sunset got out a code book lent him by Inspector Jack Tweed and he wrote a long, secret message to Cattle Association headquarters. His father had often told him what that outfit could do in the time of emergency.

And as Sunset filed the code message with the operator, he visualized the commotion that the words would soon stir in a dozen or more towns in northern Arizona.

Sunset's message would be the cause of many other messages sent out from C. A. headquarters. Deputy inspectors and trusted sheriffs working in many counties would get telegrams telling them to fork their broncs and light out for the junction of the Porcupine and Little Muddy rivers.

Leaving the telegraph office in Prescott, Sunset climbed into his saddle and struck north for the same spot. It was two hundred miles.

Five days later, the Red Target waddy sighted the dry bed of the Little Muddy River. He slid his

bronc over its bank, and started down the bottoms to reach the junction of the Porcupine. Miles to the west lay the tumbled Porcupine Mountains, with the frontier post of Best Water sleeping quietly in the foothills.

Through the bed of the Little Muddy, riders had passed ahead of Sunset. He failed to find their tracks, but he was certain that he had been preceded. The winds covered the traces of hoofs with a deep dust almost as soon as a horse passed. Sunset traveled slowly in order to make as little dust cloud as possible.

He drew near the spot where the Little Muddy met the larger river, and then took his deputy's badge from inside his shirt and pinned it outside. It wasn't long before the head of an hombre appeared on the rim of the cliff.

"Howdy, stranger!" the man called as Sunset halted his horse, hand on his gun butt. "Are yuh lookin' fer somebody?"

"Where are they?" Sunset replied with no little nervousness.

"Up hyar in the prickly pear," the hombre answered, and flashed a law badge.

The Red Target waddy climbed the bank of the dry river and followed his guide into a dense patch of mesquite and pear. They came to a small clearing in its center, where a dozen stern-faced lawmen were loafing on the ground.

"Here's the latest one, gents," said Sunset's guide. "Who is takin' names? We ought ter be almost through waitin'."

One of the hombres on the ground stood up, and Sunset was astonished to find it to be Inspector Jack Tweed.

"Glad ter see yuh, sonny," Jack Tweed chuckled, then caught him-

self. "I mean Sunset," he hastily supplied. "Say, I was figurin' that my code message had somethin' ter do with yuh."

Sunset shook hands with the inspector, and then was introduced to the other lawmen who had been sent to the junction of the Little Muddy and the Porcupine. The Red Target waddy's telegram to C. A. headquarters had brought results with surprising speed.

All these man hunters had come to this spot with the greatest of secrecy. Their orders from headquarters had told them it might mean the rounding up of the Porcupine gang.

Sunset squatted on his haunches and began his story.

"The leader of the Porcupine outfit gets mail in Best Water under the name of John Jones," the puncher said. "We've got to surround that town without anybody knowing it. We won't know if the gang is in Best Water or not. We'll have to take our chances. Once we get them penned up in the town, we can't let none o' them escape."

Jack Tweed nodded his head. "If any coyote does get away from us, he'll hit back to the hide-out an' beef Round-up Settle."

Sunset's fists clenched. "I'll ride on into Best Water as soon as you boys surround the place. I'll hang out there for as long as it takes Jag Jennings or Pooch Brown to come there. It might mean days of waiting, but we'll get them in the end. I know that they've taken the black race horse back to the hide-out. The skunks are in this locality."

"We'll git 'em," Inspector Jack Tweed growled. "But I hate ter see Sunset go inter that town alone."

"I know a lot of the gang by sight," the Red Target puncher said quickly. "I ain't much of a law-

man, but I've got a personal feud with Jag Jennings an' Pooch Brown. I've jest got to nail them by my lonesome. I won't stand for no other plan."

The man hunters glanced at one another, grinned, and then nodded their heads. They all knew the history of Round-up Settle. Perhaps they were thinking that his kid was pretty much the same breed.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A RACE AGAINST DEATH.

JAG JENNINGS and Pooch Brown were riding into Best Water. Behind them were five gun-hung toughs, who cast admiring glances at a long-legged sorrel race horse that Jag was leading by a halter rope. Jag himself was mounted on a powerful black cayuse bearing the Boxed Z brand.

The black was the animal that had won him twenty-thousand dollars in Nogales not long before. Jag had figured that was enough winnings for one horse, so he had taken it as his own personal mount.

"We've got other race horses, Pooch," Jag said to his squat little pard. "After the killin' o' that Apache near Nogales, I'm scared ter race the black ag'in."

Pooch glanced at the wide flat across which they were trotting. "Mebbe yo're right, Jag," he agreed. "I figure it was a gambler what shot the Apache. I only wish we'd been on the spot ter see it. We can't be too keerful with that kid o' Round-up's runnin' around loose."

"We'll take another trip up ter the Red Target next week," Jag growled. "I got a good mind ter beef that old trapper what's runnin' the spread. We might torture him an' find out what's happened ter the kid."

"Yuh'll never surprise him as long as he keeps that hound," Pooch predicted, and then he lifted his head to see a dust cloud drifting out the town of Best Water, two miles away.

"Hyar comes our spotter," Jag said.

In a few minutes, a horseman galloped up to meet the gangsters.

"Howdy, Jag," the newcomer called. "I've been watchin' fer yuh ter hit town. I thought I'd better come out an' say somethin'."

Jag scowled. "Anythin' wrong?" he asked.

"Thar's a new face in Best Water," the messenger replied. "It's a young puncher. He's been hangin' around the post office fer two days. Seems like he's waitin' fer a letter, but yuh can't never tell."

Pooch Brown leaned over his pommel. "What's the waddy look like?" he asked suspiciously.

"He's wearin' a red shirt an' green pants," the messenger described Sunset Settle. "He wears a gun like he knew how ter draw it. His cayuse is branded T Bench an' looks like it could shore run."

"Huh!" Jag Jennings grunted. "Mebbe it's some waddy hidin' out from a hold-up job. He might be waitin' fer a letter from some pard ter tell him the coast is clear. Thar's been other fellars like that in Best Water."

As the gang spurred their horses, Pooch Brown spat at the dusty earth.

"Do yuh reckon it could be Round-up's kid?" he asked Jag.

Jag Jennings started in his saddle. "Say, Joe," he called to the horseman who had come out from town, "has that stranger got a scar over his ear where a bullet once creased him?"

The hombre called Joe chewed his lips. "I never seen no scar, but

mebbe it's 'cause I wasn't lookin' fer one."

"Have yuh seen anybody else around Best Water, in the last two days?" Pooch asked suspiciously.

"Nary a soul," Joe replied. "The stage come in empty an' went out empty. I've kept my eyes peeled across the flat land around the town, but thar wasn't so much as a rabbit stirrin' up the dust. O' course, thar's plenty of arroyos an' sink holes on these flats, but yuh don't expect me ter go combin' through 'em every day, do yuh?"

Jag Jennings laughed. "No, I don't, Joe," he replied. "Thanks fer tellin' about the stranger. We'll have a look at him. Where is he now?"

"I left him sittin' on the porch o' the store across the street from the Silver Dollar Saloon," Joe replied.

Pooch turned to the tall, lean-jawed Jag Jennings. "Me an' the boys will ride around behind the store an' come through the back door ter the front, Jag. Yuh come inter town with the race horse all by yore lonesome. If that stranger shows any sign o' recognizin' yuh, we'll jump him from behind."

"Good idea," the outlaw boss agreed.

And Pooch called for the gang to follow him into Best Water on the gallop. Not one man in the owl-hoot outfit was aware that they were watched from a dozen arroyos scattered over the flats.

But the outlaws were being watched by lawmen who had lain in hiding for two days and nights, rifles in their hands, horses staked in the bottoms of the dry washes.

Sunset Settle sat with back against a wall on the front porch of the general store in Best Water. Now and then his head fell on his

chest, as if he were asleep. But the Red Target waddy was keenly awake to everything that was going on in the town.

Under the brim of his ten-gallon hat, his blue eyes never relaxed their vigilance on the Silver Dollar Saloon across the way. He studied every hombre who went into the building. His ears recorded every sound made in the store behind him.

With chair tilted against the store front, Sunset's six-gun butt leaned out from his thigh, in a position where he could grab it with lightning speed. His pinto stood at the hitch rail.

There was little life in Best Water. The store, the saloon, and the post office at which a stage stopped once a week, made up most of the town. There was a scattering of adobe huts behind the store, where a ragged lot of peons lived. The road into town forked at the head of the main street to allow horsemen to pass around behind the store to the adobe huts.

Waiting patiently, Sunset watched a cloud of dust rolling over the flats and heading toward the fork in the road. He could tell there were at least six horses in the outfit coming to town. While pretending not to notice, he saw the riders take the fork to pass around behind the store.

A hard grin curled his lips. Ears cocked, he listened to the echo of hoofs die away among the huts which he couldn't see. It was not long before he heard the back door of the store creak and the startled gasp of the proprietor.

That was all that Sunset did hear. Now his eyes caught sight of a lone rider leading a sorrel bronc without a saddle into town.

The lone rider was tall. He was bent forward to keep his weight off

his black mount's hind quarters. He guided his mount with knee pressure, in order to have his hands free to tow the sorrel behind him.

Sunset's muscles tensed. The hombre coming up the main street was Jag Jennings. He knew the outlaw by the way he rode. And he sensed that Jag Jennings had come to Best Water for a certain purpose.

Sunset had been suspicious of the creaking of the back door of the store. Now he was certain that the building was filled with Jag's gang.

Did they know that it was Sunset who pretended to be asleep on the front porch?

The Red Target waddy doubted it. He didn't move. He continued to give the appearance of a drowsing puncher. At his right, there was an open window. If he moved across the porch, an hombre standing behind that window would be able to shoot him in the back.

As Jag Jennings headed toward the Silver Dollar Saloon across the way, Sunset stirred. His right hand moved lazily to his thigh. He could see Jag watching him out of the corner of an eye.

Suddenly, the Red Target waddy came alive. "Fill yore hand, Jennings!" he shouted, leaping to his feet as he drew.

He saw Jag whip a six-gun into aim and dig spurs into the black mount. Sunset had his gun lined on the outlaw, but he held his shot. He was afraid his bullet might hit the black race horse by mistake.

*Crash!* Sunset saw the flame of Jag's weapon, and he felt its slug gash him in the left side.

He shot in reply, aiming high for the outlaw's head, and missing. There was no time to shoot again. Jag was fleeing up the street.

Sunset's mind flashed to the gun-

slingers hiding within the store. He whirled to the window, and was just in time to see the ugly head of Pooch Brown leaning out to the porch. There was a gun in Pooch's extended hand, and the barrel swerved to aim at Sunset.

Sunset's weapon spoke first, driving a bullet into Pooch's face with such force that it knocked the squat little skunk clean back into the store.

"Who's next?" Sunset shouted.

He triggered three times in quick succession, raking the inside of the store with lead. A chorus of shouts sounded within the building, and then the scurry of boots retreating to hiding.

Sunset didn't want to fight it out. With a leap, he was off the porch and running to his waiting pinto. He threw himself into the saddle and gave the bronc the spurs.

The animal sprang out in pursuit of the black horse carrying Jag Jennings. Sunset whirled in the saddle and sent the last bullet in his weapon smashing back into the store.

It was that last shot which held the owl-hooters back in the store until Sunset got out of their range. Spurring the pinto to breakneck speed, he flashed past the post office, reloading his spent weapon as he went. Ahead of him, Jag Jennings was already leaving town with a two-hundred-yard lead.

"He's headin' for the Porcupines!" the Red Target waddy exclaimed. "He'll never run through the ring of lawmen."

And then Sunset was struck with the fear that Jag might dodge the bullets of the lawmen. Now the Red Target puncher saw figures appearing out of distant arroyos on the flats ahead of Jag's speeding bronc. He noted that Jag changed

his course to avoid running into the deputies. But more hombres hove into view in the new direction.

Sunset's heart caught in his mouth as Jag slowed down and wheeled the black race horse to come back to town.

"He's thinkin' that the lawmen will shoot his cayuse down an' nail him in the open," Sunset figured, and he drew his pinto to a lope.

This meant a shoot-out between Sunset and his enemy. Blocking Jag's route back to town, the Red Target cowboy watched his foe spur toward him.

Sunset halted his bronc and swung down from the saddle, six-gun in hand. He took aim at the oncoming rider, but held his fire, for Jag was lying flat on the neck of the black racer.

*Ka-zung-g-g!* A bullet flashed past Sunset's cheek as Jag opened fire.

Another bullet came whining in at the Red Target puncher. Sunset still held his fire for fear of hitting the black race horse. He knew that Jag was having a hard time to hit him because of the jolting of the running bronc.

*Wham!* A third slug from Jag's flaming gun caught the Red Target puncher in the left arm, and sent him staggering backward.

Sunset caught his footing, took deadly aim, and shot in reply. For a second, he thought he had missed. But Jag's gun didn't flame again.

Sunset saw the outlaw drop his smoking weapon in order to cling to the back of the galloping racer.

As the animal came pounding past the Red Target waddy, Jag Jennings pitched to earth, struck with a sickening crunch, rolled over twice, and lay still.

Sunset stepped up close and spied a bullet hole through Jag's neck.

"That finishes it," the Red Target waddy growled, and turned to his waiting pinto.

Now the lawmen were riding into Best Water from the four points of the compass. Sunset swung into his saddle and waved to Inspector Jack Tweed.

"Let the others finish the job," the Red Target cowboy called. "We've got to back-trail the gang to the mountains an' find Round-up."

Jack Tweed slowed to a halt. "Kid, I never seen anythin' like it. Yuh jest stood there in the face o' bullets an' waited ter beef that skunk."

"We've got to hurry, Jack," the puncher said. "The breeze might cover the tracks with alkali before long."

The back trail of the outlaws was easy to follow for five miles. If it had not been for the drought, Sunset never would have tracked down the route to the hide-out in Porcupine Canyon. He and Jack Tweed found the river almost dry.

Scrambling over boulders and falls, leading their broncs, they traveled up the deep defile, six-guns ready. They came to a small cabin tucked against the cliff.

The near-by corral held four stolen race horses. There was no man guarding them. They opened the cabin door and passed inside.

"He must be in that back room if he's here at all," Sunset said, pointing at a door with heavy bars.

"Yuh go in alone," Jack Tweed advised. "I'll wait outside. I reckon there might be a bit o' weepin', an' I don't want Round-up Settle ter see me cryin', too."

"Thanks, Jack," the Red Target puncher said.

And he unlocked Round-up Settle's prison.

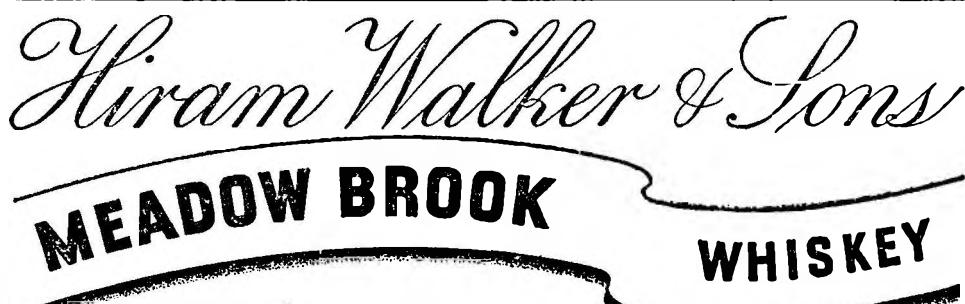
Standing outside the cabin, Jack Tweed heard Sunset's voice say:

"Howdy, Round-up. What are you doin' with all those chains wrapped around your legs an' arms?"

Then, the inspector listened to Round-up's husky voice reply, "Howdy, Sunset, that's a fine-lookin' red shirt yo're wearin'. Have yuh joined some fire department?"

And instead of breaking into tears, Jack Tweed slapped his thigh and roared with laughter.

"Yuh can't beat 'em!" he exclaimed. "Gosh, what a pair!"



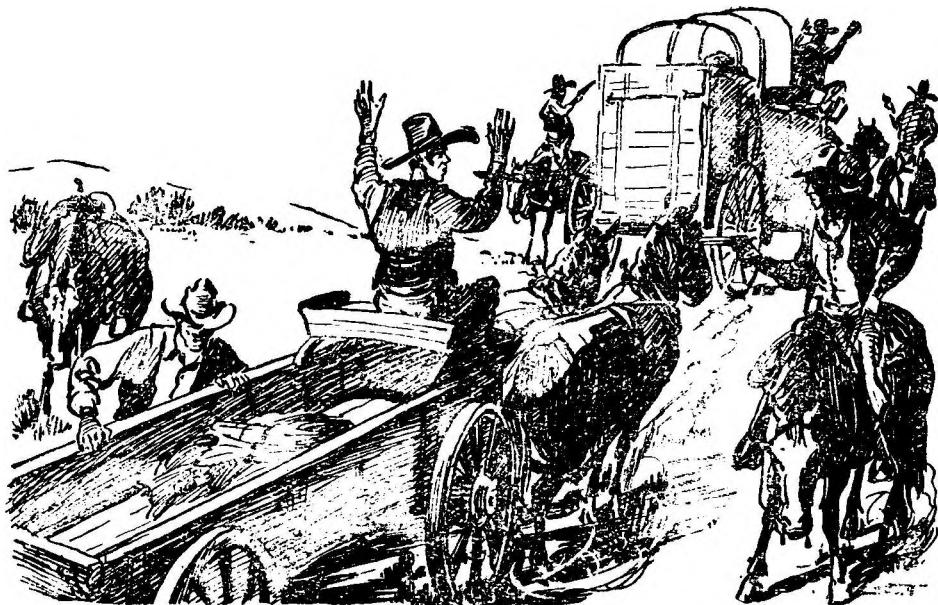
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# The Stolen Chuck Wagon

By Stephen Payne

Author of "Stoppin' The Hot Spur Stage," etc.

THE Cross L Bar chuck wagon, followed by the bed wagon, was pulling northward up along the valley of Silt River when the five bandits appeared. However, young Beryl Wallace, who was driving the bed, or hoodlum, wagon, hadn't the least idea that they were bandits.

Beryl, nineteen, and small for his age, freckled and impish with a tangled mop of straw-colored hair, didn't think much of his present job of hoodlum-wagon driver and flunky to the cook. But he considered himself lucky to get on the Cross L Bar pay roll at all.

He liked the quiet and drawly foreman fine, liked most of the rannies, too, even those that hoorawed him unmercifully. And he got along first class with old "Gravy-apron Gus," the cook.

Gravy-apron was, of course, driving the chuck wagon this afternoon when the outlaws hove in sight, riding slowly down the valley from the north.

Beryl's alert gray-green eyes focused upon them with interest. Three of their ponies limped painfully, and all five were hollow-eyed, hollow-flanked, staggering as they walked. The riders were bewhisk-

ered, grimy hombres, with wicked eyes. In addition to low-slung six-guns, each man carried a rifle scabbarded under his left saddle fender.

Three of these toughs began to talk to Gravy-apron Gus; two rode past the chuck wagon to halt their miserable, worn-out broncs close to Beryl's team.

"Lo, younker," greeted one bandit gruffly. "Is a night-hawk snoozin' in yore wagon?"

"No," said Beryl.

But the speaker had swung off and was climbing up the side of the wagon to make sure of this point himself. The night-hawk, or night-wrangler, who takes charge of the cavvy at night, generally does his sleeping in the bed wagon while it is being moved from one camp to the next.

"No," the kid repeated, his eyes kindling as he noted spur cuts and quirt welts on the pitiful horses. "The night-hawk is helpin' the punchers. Said he didn't need no shut-eye to-day."

"Whar's the cavvy?" demanded the second bandit, riveting his bloodshot, slate-colored eyes upon Beryl in a manner which made the kid feel strangely apprehensive.

"Ten miles south o' here," the freckled kid informed.

The man swore with a sort of bitter chagrin. "How many punchers on this round-up?" was his next question.

"Twenty-five," said Beryl, and the bandit's eyes opened wide, then thinned calculatingly.

Suddenly Beryl shifted his gaze to the chuck wagon ahead of his own halted outfit. Two six-guns had been trained on the old cook. Gravy-apron Gus, with his arms raised high, was descending from the seat. As he reached the ground, a stocky bandit took his gun and his

belt, then tied Gravy-apron's hands behind his back.

Observing this with blank astonishment, the kid heard a harsh command:

"Climb down, yearlin'. Yuh ain't totin' no smoker as I can see." The black muzzle of a Colt pointed straight at his head.

"Don't own none, yet," gasped Beryl. "If I did, I'd—"

"Aw, dry up!" snarled the mounted hombre. Without taking his wicked eyes from the kid, he called: "What's the orders now, Scar?"

A stocky fellow with bowed legs and the longest arms Beryl had ever seen on a human being came striding toward the bed wagon. He had yellowish, animal eyes and a brutal face rendered all the more ugly by a white scar which ran from his temple clear to his lower lip.

"What yuh caught, Drake?" he asked. "Huh! A freckled kid what ain't even heeled! Plumb harmless," contemptuously. "As yuh know, Drake an' Buffalo, we'd shore like to get at that Cross L Bar cavvy. But that ol' cook says the cavvy was held back so the punchers could get a change of horses at noon. The wagon's pullin' on to a new camp without stoppin' to get dinner."

"Cavvy not bein' here makes it bad fer us," said Drake, the tall hombre who'd looked into Beryl's wagon. "Horses we got to have—pronto. But when do we eat? I has tied three knots in my belt an' they ain't nawthin' under it."

"Me, too. I'm holler from my ears to my spurs," put in "Buffalo" quickly. "Can we chaw now, Scar?"

"Scar's the boss," thought Beryl. "By golly, they must be outlaws!"

"Not yet fer a spell," "Scar" replied to Drake and Buffalo. "Too

many cowboys ridin' the range fer us to risk stealin' horses out o' the cavvy. But we can't be caught afoot," he continued. "Here's the play: Agate-eye Ab, who once worked fer this Cross L Bar, claims he knows the lay o' the land in this neck o' the woods. He says that over yander, 'cross the river'—Scar lifted one long arm and pointed to one canyon opening out of the foot-hills, with the scarred and rugged mountains behind them—"in that thar bottle-necked pocket, we can camp an' take our time 'bout eatin'."

"What 'bout fresh hosses?" Drake inquired.

"Good hosses pullin' this hoodlum wagon and the grub wagon," stated Scar. "Six of 'em. That's answered. As fer cow-punchers hittin' our trail—Agate-eye says in the gap openin' to that pocket one man can hold off a hull danged army. Agate-eye says fu'ther it'll take the punchers or that danged posse from Montana a full day to work through the brush up onto the ridges and get at us from behint."

"But when they do get at us—" Buffalo began.

"We'll be leavin' thar, quick as we eat," Scar went right on. "Some of them canyons is blind pockets, but Agate-eye says this particular one has a pack-hoss trail leadin' out of it back inter the mountains. On these yere work hosses we shore can make our get-away, and it's a good thing them cow-punchers is a long way off."

"Good enough," approved Buffalo. "Pack one hoss with grub now, Scar?"

"No, yuh dumb goof! We're pullin' the chuck wagon over into yon canyon, takin' this kid and the cook with us."

While Scar was explaining to the

others, two of the bandits had been busy, unloading such articles as they did not need from the chuck wagon, peeling their saddles and bridles from their jaded horses and placing them in the wagon.

Buffalo and Drake now started to tie Beryl.

The infuriated kid managed to hit one a solid punch on the nose, and kick the other on the shin. But he hadn't a ghost of a show. The burly outlaws threw him down, sat on him, and tied his hands and feet.

Then they tossed him up into the chuck wagon's high box. Beryl was soon joined by the cook. Gravy-apron was old and "stove-up." His leathery face was haggard now.

"We're goin' tuh be killed off, kid," he announced tragically. "This yere is Scar Scanlon an' his gang. I has heard aplenty 'bout 'em. One of 'em's called 'Drake the Butcher.' They're the killin'ist bandits what ever terrorized Montana. They must 'a' pulled somethin' terrible up thar the way they has killed off their hosses a-foggin' out. If I'd just suspicioned what they intended —" He broke off.

Beryl gazed sympathetically at the cook. The kid knew Gus cherished a dream of quitting after this round-up and going to live with his grandchildren.

"Somehow, you and me has got to save this chuck wagon an' the hosses for the old Cross L Bar," the kid announced grimly.

"Ifn I could save my own neck and yourn, I'd be satisfied," muttered Gus.

## II.

Two of the bandits had placed their saddles on the bed-wagon team. This pair of horses was not broken to ride, so Beryl hoped they would buck off the outlaws.

No such luck. These gents of the owl-hoot trail were expert riders, who knew how to get horses, green to the saddle, strung out by sheer force and abuse. The kid boiled with helpless rage as he saw them spur and quirt the docile old team.

The other three outlaws mounted to the chuck wagon. Scar Scanlon took the lines. On the seat beside him sat the lanky jasper whom Beryl now knew to be "Agate-eye Ab"—an hombre with pale, almost colorless, eyes which fairly made the kid's flesh creep when he looked at them. "Drake the Butcher" rode in the wagon box with the two prisoners.

Scar turned the four-horse team to the west and crossed the wide river. The current was swift and in mid-stream, wagon and horses were almost submerged.

The opposite bank was both steep and high, but slashing the four horses with the whip, Scar made the tough pull. The two mounted outlaws followed the wagon.

Left behind was the bed wagon, a set of harness, some food thrown out of the chuck wagon to lighten it, and five dejected, utterly heart-broken ponies that would never again be of any use as saddle horses.

Scar Scanlon drove westward across a flat covered with heavy sagebrush, toward one certain opening in the hills. Beryl scanned the country to the south, hoping he might sight some of the cowboys.

No riders were visible, and this was unsettled range country where no help from other sources than the Cross L Bar cowboys, or from the posse on the trail of the outlaws, might be expected.

Drake, in the wagon with the kid and Gravy-apron Gus, muttered: "We jus' dunno if we has shook off them law hounds or not." He looked

at Beryl and continued: "Montany got too hot fer us. Figured yest'day to get us fresh broncs, but was crossin' danged sheep territory, and it couldn't be did."

Beryl tried to keep up the conversation. "But you're fixed up all hunky-dory now, Drake," he opined.

"Uh-huh. Course we'll slit yore throats, afore we head inter the mountains."

"Why?" asked Gravy-apron. "We ain't done nothin' to yuh."

"Why?" iterated the bandit with a grim chuckle. "We ain't goin' to leave no men as has seen us face to face and can describe us accurate, behint us. Still, you and this kid is both plumb harmless."

"Harmless, am I!" gritted Beryl. "If I get a break, I'll show you."

It didn't look as if he'd get a break. The stolen chuck wagon passed through a short and narrow canyon which widened out to a small, basinlike area surrounded by almost straight rock walls. It was indeed a bottle-necked pocket.

Without stopping, Scar clipped a command to one of the mounted bandits:

"Runt, climb up on the side o' the gap and act as lookout. Take yore Winchester. If anybody starts to ride through the gap, stop 'em with hot lead. Give Buffalo yore hoss fer the present."

The outfit went on up into the basin where rank grass carpeted the rocky ground. Chokecherry bushes grew in profusion, also willows and aspens. On the farther side of a thick grove of the latter, Agate-eye Ab announced that they could camp and cook dinner.

"Waal, be a-cookin', Ab," snapped the boss. "Sooner we flag our kites the better. Buffalo, build a fire. Drake, throw them prisoners out o'

the wagon an' get some grub ready to pack on a hoss."

Lying on the hard earth a minute later, Beryl propped himself up as best he could and with smoldering eyes watched the outlaws at work. Scar stripped the harness from the work horses, tied them to aspens, and saddled three of the four with saddles that Drake heaved out of the wagon.

Agate-eye proved quite an efficient cook. In half an hour, he had biscuits baked, cans of corn, beans, and tomatoes heated, steak fried, and coffee boiled.

"Grab a root and growl!" he shouted, and set the example himself.

How those four bandits did eat! But they noticed young Beryl try to reach the ax which Buffalo had used to smash up firewood.

"Keep away from that," Scar roared, "or I'll take it and split your head wide open."

Beryl desisted. How the dickens was a fellow with hands tied behind his back and ankles bound together going to get the best of these ornery brutes?

Scar swallowed his fifth cup of coffee, wiped his thick lips with his grimy hand, and announced: "Some feed! Pards, swipin' this chuck wagon is the best stunt we ever pulled." He rolled a cigarette and puffed contentedly.

Abruptly from down the pocket came the sound of a rifle shot. The four bandits leaped to their feet, hands dropping to their six-guns. A second loud crack, and echoes rolled back from the mountains. Then, *bang-bang-bang!* Reports that were not so loud, decisive, and sharp as the first two.

"That's six-guns talkin'," said Scar tersely. "Six-guns answerin' Runt's carbine. Come on, Drake!"

You other two stay here and be gettin' ready to git. Snub that ol' cook an' the kid to wagon wheels or trees."

The boss snatched his Winchester and, followed by Drake, went running around the grove and down the pocket.

Beryl, hopeful, all keyed up, heard "Runt's" Winchester talking again. Four shots in rapid succession, then silence.

Abruptly Buffalo grabbed the kid by his feet and roughly dragged him away from the wagon to the aspens near by. The hefty bandit took a piece of rope and, knotting it around the one already on Beryl's ankles, tied it to a small tree high enough up to raise the kid's legs clear of the ground, so that his body was resting on his shoulders.

Buffalo treated Gravy-apron Gus in the same manner, taking care to place the prisoners far enough apart so there was no possibility of their aiding each other.

Agate-eye was packing one horse with gunny sacks stuffed with food and cooking utensils, when Runt came hurrying around the grove to the camp.

"Give me somethin' to chaw on," Runt demanded.

"Yere's a plateful I saved fer yuh," said Agate-eye. "What happened?"

"I kilt a danged cow-puncher," squeaked Runt, and young Beryl suddenly felt hollow inside, sick.

"Three of the cusses there was," the undersized scoundrel continued. "Forkin' Cross L Bar hosses. I sighted 'em when they reached that 'bandoned hoodlum wagon yon side the river. They sized up our useless nags left thar, an' they hit out on our trail instanter." He began to wolf his delayed meal.

"An' when they reached the gap  
yuh cut loose?" Agate-eye inquired.

"Uh-huh! Them punchers was  
shore bent on takin' the one I'd  
dropped away with 'em. I missed  
my second shot, then begin to dust  
'em off proper, an' they high-tailed  
with the dead un. Give me some  
java."

So calloused was Runt about hav-  
ing done murder that Beryl felt an  
icy shiver run up his back.

Scar Scanlon now returned to the  
camp. He said briefly: "Thar'll be  
a hull smear of cowboys foggin' this  
way suddent. Drake's stayin' to  
hold 'em off. We'll leave him the  
fastest hoss. Rest of us is ridin' out  
pronto."

"All set tuh ramble, boss," an-  
nounced Agate-eye. "Kill this ol'  
whelp of a cook an' the gritty kid  
afore we go?"

Beryl held his breath. Was this  
to be the end? Scar's harsh, deep  
voice came:

"Let 'em be. Drake'll tend to 'em  
afore he fogs after us."

The four bandits swung to saddle.  
They had some difficulty managing  
the work horses, unbroken to ride,  
but in a very few moments they  
were on their way, one leading the  
pack animal. Up the pocket through  
the brush they rode, and passed  
from Beryl's sight.

Immediately then the kid began  
to try to free himself. Drawing his  
body nearer to the small tree, he  
caught hold of it with his hands,  
even though they were tied behind  
his back. Then, practically standing  
on his head, he began, very awk-  
wardly, to use his heels on the rope  
which was tied about the tree high  
up. He could kick this rope down-  
ward an inch or so at a time.

"Work fast, Button," pleaded  
Gravy-apron, who was unable to do  
anything himself. "If yuh can save

me as well as yourself, do 'er. But  
if yuh can't—"

"I'm gettin' yuh out of it, if I  
can," mumbled Beryl in a strangled  
voice. This standing on his head  
was hard. Suddenly, to his dismay,  
he heard voices.

"I'd a-swores 'twas the same pocket  
I was in when I rid round-up fer this  
Cross L Bar outfit." Thus Agate-  
eye, his words shrill, high-pitched  
and defensive. "Me an' old  
Rocksby, the ramrod, an' 'nother  
jasper rid up in yere and struck a  
trail an' got out."

"Yah. Says you!" stormed Buf-  
falo. "Thar ain't no trail here.  
Not even a coyote could climb this  
crack in the rocks." Lurid oaths.

"Nothin' but a bird could get out  
this a way," shrilled Runt.

"Agate-eye, yuh done led us inter  
a danged blind pocket," yowled Scar  
Scanlon. "I could cut yore belly  
open fer it. Maybe thar is a canyon  
along here as has a trail out, but this  
ain't it, yuh blunderin' chump."

"Them Montany law hounds com-  
in' from the north, them ringy cow-  
punchers foggin' up from the south,"  
Buffalo snorted. "Their chuck  
wagon stole, cook an' hoodlum-  
wagon driver catched, one ranny  
shot. Will them punchers be on  
the prod? I ask yuh."

"And us trapped in a blind  
pocket!" bellowed Scar. "Got to get  
out the way we come in an' ride fer  
our necks while thar's time!"

### III.

Horses were crashing through the  
underbrush. But Beryl had not  
been idle. With desperate haste he  
had forced the rope around the tree  
down and down, until by doubling  
his knees and still standing on his  
head he was able to get at the knot

with his hands. He freed himself from the tree.

But wrists and ankles were still lashed together. Rolling to the rear end of the chuck wagon, the kid managed to get hold of a case knife, and just a second before the four bandits reached the small open area around the wagon, Beryl snaked his body into the heavy aspens.

"Whar's that yearlin'?" Scar barked at Gravy-apron.

"Why ask me?" retorted the cook. "Can't yuh see he's high-tailed?"

"Yah. But which way'd he head?"

"Down country," lied Gravy-apron.

"We're wastin' time when every second counts," Buffalo snorted. "Come on!" And to Beryl's great relief the four bandits, taking with them the horse for Drake, went charging down the pocket.

"Last I'll see of them," thought Beryl.

But he was mistaken. Runt and Buffalo came dashing back to the camp before the kid had managed to cut the rope on his wrists. The outlaws were sputtering and swearing. Beryl learned the cause of their annoyance when Buffalo told Gravy-apron Gus:

"Them Cross L Bar punchers has arrived—all of 'em! They got us shut off. Bottled up! But they don't dast try to ride up the gap no more than we dast try to ride out, with odds about five to one agin' us."

Young Beryl Wallace thoroughly enjoyed the dilemma of the hard-boiled crew. His greatest worry was that they would murder Gravy-apron Gus with himself powerless to prevent it.

Scar Scanlon himself returned to the camp, and Buffalo asked if he had any plan.

"I been lookin' round this danged

hole in the mountainside," retorted the boss. "Huntin' that dag-goned kid and seein' if they was any chance of throwin' a rope up to the rim and climbin' out. Can't be done. Hombrés, it's only a matter of hours or days at the most, afore we get surrounded and shot down from the rim o' this pocket. We has stole our last hoss, robbed our last bank or train, unless—" He broke off, to gaze sort of bleakly at the stolen chuck wagon.

"Might use the ol' cook as a hostage," suggested Runt hopefully. "Good thing we ain't slit his throat yet."

"Yeh. Good thing!" shouted Scar, his wicked eyes glowing like those of a mountain lion.

"Oh, good golly!" thought Beryl, who was at last entirely free of his ropes. "I s'pose the punchers will make a bargain with Scar to save Gravy-apron's neck. What can I do to—"

But the boss outlaw's next words showed that he had no intention of using Gravy-apron as a hostage. Scar Scanlon proposed to have the Cross L Bar cook drive the chuck wagon out of the trap, the bandits hidden in the wagon bed, under the tarpaulin which Gus used to cover his load.

Instantly Buffalo and Runt began to get ready to carry out this plan, dumping cases of canned goods, sacks of beans and flour and other provisions still in the chuck wagon out on the ground. To hold five bandits, their saddles and their guns, the wagon box must be practically empty.

"What if them cow-punchers lift up the tarp and look in on us?" asked Runt.

"A fight to a finish," Scar replied. "But I figure them red-hot rannies won't look in the wagon. Why?

'Cause Gravy-apron'll tell 'em we has high-tailed it over the mountain and our trail is red-hot. Course, the punchers'll fog into this pocket. We'll drive on 'cross the river to where I jus' now saw the Cross L Bar cavvy is now bein' held by the wrangler. We'll get us fresh hosses and—” He wagged his head.

“Good scheme all right,” thought young Beryl, who knew that Gravy-apron would be placed in a position where he would simply have to tell the cowboys just what Scar told him he must tell them.

“I got to get out o’ here and tell Foreman Rocksby what’s what,” the worried kid meditated further.

Get out of the little basin? The only exit was by way of the bottleneck which two of the efficient bandits were guarding with Winchesters. Beryl couldn’t get out of the trap, unless—

He peered cautiously through the aspens at the chuck wagon. Was there any place about the vehicle where the kid could hide and thus accompany the tough outfit himself—unseen? There was!

Runt, now mounted, rode away, and presently returned leading the two horses which had been ridden by Drake and Agate-eye Ab. The pack was removed from the horse which had been packed. The other five were unsaddled, and four of them—the chuck-wagon team—were harnessed up and hitched to the wagon. The bed-wagon team was tied behind it.

All saddles were loaded into the wagon box. Everything was ready. Drake and Agate-eye, though still guarding the gap, had been told of the scheme by Runt. The sun had set and soon darkness began to steal over the land.

Then Scar released old Gravy-apron Gus and told him over and

over again exactly what answers he was to make to the cow-punchers. “And yuh know what’ll happen to yuh if yuh cross us,” the bandit snarled.

Gravy-apron climbed to the seat and took the lines. Runt and Buffalo were already in the wagon box. But the boss outlaw hesitated. “I wish we’d ‘a’ kilt that dag-goned kid. His bein’ loose is the big flaw in our scheme,” he growled.

Buffalo didn’t see where the kid could be dangerous. So Scar explained:

“He’s shore hid some place in this pocket. Waal, the minute them cow-punchers come doggin’ in yere, he’ll wise ‘em up to our play.”

“And the cow-punchers’ll tear out after us,” squealed Runt in dismay.

Scar was lost in thought. Abruptly he snorted:

“Thunderation! Can’t see what ails my noodle I didn’t think o’ this afore. It’s easy as fallin’ off a log. Once we get through the bottleneck, hombres—pervised we makes it and pervised the snorty cow-punchers comes afoggin’ up inter this pocket—all we got to do is post one man to guard the lower end o’ the gap with his rifle. Trap the danged cow-punchers!” He swung up into the wagon box.

As the wagon started forward, young Beryl stole swiftly out of the aspens. Coming from the rear in the dim light, and screened from the outlaws in the wagon bed by the high chuck box, the kid passed between the led team behind the vehicle, slipped under the wagon, and drew his body up onto the reach, or coupling pole, between front wheels and hind. His feet rested on the brake beam and there was barely room for his slender body.

Before the chuck wagon reached the narrow gap came a brief halt as

Drake and Agate-eye Ab joined their partners. Beryl heard their report:

"Cow-punchers is still out yander. Jus' watchin' and waitin'. We figure they has a'ready heard the wagon."

#### IV.

The tarp was adjusted over the top of the box and the cook drove into the dark notch. A hundred yards or so, and Gravy-apron lifted his voice in a booming shout:

"Ya-ho! Rocksby, Hank, Jack, Kinky, yuh other waddies, this yere is Gus, the cook, comin'. Alone."

Then, as the wagon emerged from the bottle-neck to open country, an abrupt challenge came out of the heavy sage, the speaker remaining unseen.

"That really you, Gus? This ain't no trick?"

"It's shore enough me, Rocksby," Gravy-apron replied. "Don't yuh shoot. Whoa, hosses!" The vehicle stopped and the cook continued rapidly: "Lissen, rannies, I know yuh is hid all round me. Them double-danged outlaws stole our wagon like yuh must know, takin' me pris'ner. But now they found a way they could climb out o' the pocket afoot and they has done it, lammin' out 'cross the mountains. If yuh hustle yuh can—"

"You say they got out o' that hole?" demanded the astonished voice of Foreman Rocksby. "Don't seem possible. But, boys, this is Gravy-apron on the seat sure as cows beller and—"

"Yeh! Yeh, I tol' yuh they drifted. They left me tied up solid," Gravy-apron shouted. "But I got loose and I hooked up the hosses and—"

"What become o' Beryl, the kid? That bunch o' murderin' coyotes—

they shot poor Joe Forest—must 'a' caught him as well as you, Gus."

"Yo're wastin' heaps o' time," said the old cook in a strained, unnatural voice which Beryl could understand.

The kid knew how hard it must be for Gus to tell those lies. But under the peculiar circumstances the cook could not do anything else.

"Them killers is gettin' farther 'way every second," Gravy-apron went on. "The kid Them bandits took him with 'em. Figure to kill 'im, I reckon."

"They do, huh?" roared the foreman, and sprang to his feet.

Other cowboys followed his example. Peering out from under the wagon, Beryl could see a dozen of them and Rocksby yelled to some one down country:

"Bring the hosses, boys, and get a wiggle on. We're goin' bandit huntin'!"

Beryl was in a quandary. He could crawl out from under the wagon and let them know the truth of the situation. But if he did, there would be hot lead flying long before the punchers could realize there were five desperate men hiding in the wagon.

The advantage of getting in the first shots lay with the outlaws, and they had Winchesters. They'd slaughter at least five cowboys before the rannies could even answer their fire.

On tenterhooks to be doing something, the kid nevertheless knew he simply dared not say anything or do anything—yet.

Rocksby and another puncher came running to the wagon, stopped at the front wheel and looked up at the cook, spouting questions at him. How many bandits? What outfit were they? Why had they stolen the wagon?

Meanwhile, Beryl scarcely dared breathe, fearing that Rocksby might jerk up the tarpaulin and look into the wagon box. If he did—Well, Beryl hero-worshiped the grizzled old foreman, and it was altogether horrible to think of him lying in the sage, his body bullet-riddled.

But Rocksby did not raise the tarp, nor did the other cowboy. Came a swishing drum of hoofs as other punchers arrived leading many saddled horses. In a jiffy the Cross L Bar men were mounted. Beryl thought they were all there except only "Laughing Harry," the wrangler.

Rocksby, now in his saddle, clipped two orders: "Drive on 'cross the river to where the bed wagon and cavvy are, Gus. Get a meal ready for us. Maybe we'll be back soon, maybe not. Ride, waddies, up into the pocket. If that skunkish gang's killed young Beryl or even hurt the button, I'll hang all of 'em."

Beryl hadn't known how he stood with the foreman, but these words warmed his heart. It seemed he stood pretty well. Now the cow-punchers, with drumming ring of hoofs, were loping swiftly through the bottle-neck. Beryl hated to see them go, but he couldn't help it.

The chuck wagon rolled along, but suddenly the tarp was raised and a bandit crawled over the edge of the box. This outlaw's foot rested on the brake beam within two feet of young Beryl, who ached to grab that foot and send the fellow sprawling.

To do so would be plain suicide—the cook's life at stake as well as Beryl's. The outlaw dropped to the ground, and the kid saw him plainly—Agate-eye Ab, with his Winchester.

He was to keep the cowboys bottled up while his partners picked the best horses from the Cross L Bar cavvy. Later, so Beryl supposed, one of the outlaws would ride over to the bottle-neck with a horse for Agate-eye. Then the two would fog out for their lives.

The kid could imagine just how Agate-eye would stop the Cross L Bar rannies as they came charging back down that gap. He would pump the magazine of his Winchester empty, sending bullets into both horses and men.

"But maybe I can spike Ab's gun," gritted Beryl.

He slipped from his precarious perch on the wagon reach, lay flat in the sage, and the hind wheels of the vehicle passed one on either side of him. The led team snorted and shied. But they stepped around his body and went on. The wagon made enough noise so that Scar and his men had not heard.

Agate-eye Ab was walking rapidly toward the dark opening in the hills. Instantly the kid jerked off his boots and cat-footed after the tall bandit. Beryl was ten feet behind the fellow, then six, then four.

He threw an anxious glance over his shoulder. The chuck wagon was rolling steadily onward, and he did not see any one peering around the sides of it. He faced ahead and looked straight into the peculiar pale, agatelike eyes of the outlaw. Eyes that were fairly popping from Ab's head.

For a sliced second the bandit seemed to be a statue, his rifle held in his right hand. Then the rifle dropped, and Agate-eye's hand flashed to the handle of his six-gun. As it did so, Beryl leaped and struck.

*Sock!* The kid's right fist, aimed straight and true, connected with

the man's chin. Agate-eye's head snapped back, and then the sagebrush caught his body.

No word had been spoken. There had been scarcely a sound. Beryl snatched the rifle, bounded forward, bent over the bandit. Agate-eye Ab was out cold.

"What a darned lucky punch!" said the kid, swiftly stripping two belts from Ab's body. He buckled one belt about the man's ankles, tied the outlaw's hands with his own bandanna.

The next instant, Beryl was running for all he was worth after the chuck wagon. Exultant over his victory, he still feared that some of the bandits would be looking out above the wagon box.

He'd spiked one of their guns, but if he started a battle with the four, he hadn't a chance of winning, and Gravy-apron was sure to be shot first thing. However, he made it to the rear of the wagon, apparently unseen.

Here, once again the led team was in his way. But as he stole up between these horses, a sudden idea came to him.

Beryl untied the led team, let their halter ropes drop, then he slipped underneath the wagon. Once again he climbed up on the coupling pole, the rifle proving a great handicap.

Scarcely had he hidden himself when a voice from the wagon bed growled, "That led team has broke loose."

"Want me to stop, Scar?" asked Gravy-apron.

"Naw," came the outlaw's reply. "We don't care nothin' 'bout them nags now. Here's the river; beyant it's the cavvy. Drive careful, Gus, and be dag-goned shore yuh don't tip that hoss wrangler off as nothin's wrong. Hombres, we'd best all stay

down out o' sight, 'cause I can see the wrangler settin' his hoss close to yon bank o' the river and lookin' this way."

They were almost to the stream, and Beryl abandoned the rifle at last, for he could not handle it and do what he figured on.

Hanging to the running gear, Beryl crawled under the front axle of the wagon. His hands gripped the tongue and the doubletrees. He came up between the two wheel horses, dangerously close to their heels.

And as the kid rose up on the tongue of the wagon Gravy-apron Gus saw him. The cook all but dropped his lines, all but fell off the seat in his blank astonishment.

The team was moving down the steep slope into Silt River. The wagon crowding them, and the tugs were therefore slack.

Beryl ran out on the wagon tongue between the wheel horses. Underneath this tongue at its point was a hook to which the stretchers—as the lead doubletrees are called—were fastened. It was then the work of only a second to free those stretchers from the hook.

The kid let them fall and scooted back along the tongue. The wheelers, though gentle, were snorting and shying away from this strange figure. The wagon plunged downward to the dark, swirling stream.

Still on the wagon tongue, but now close to the wagon box, Beryl reached down and pulled out the wagon hammer which held the doubletrees in place. Thus he released both teams from the wagon. The neckyoke would slip off the front end of the tongue the moment the wagon stopped.

As Beryl straightened up facing the cook he saw a black hat shove

aside the tarpaulin in front of the seat. Under the hat was a bandit's head, and, next instant, two glaring eyes looked straight into Beryl's.

The wagon hammer was still in the kid's hand. Without an instant's hesitation he swung at the outlaw's head.

*Thud!* The head vanished.

A yell sounded inside the wagon box. The horses were splashing through the water. But the wagon had stopped, and Gravy-apron Gus, realizing what Beryl wanted him to do, jumped into the river. The kid was only an instant behind the cook.

Ahead the four horses were making swift time across the stream. Behind in the stranded wagon, confusion reigned. The tarp had been hurled aside. The bandits were on their feet, staring at the swirling water, at the team going away from them, but as yet unable to comprehend what had happened.

## V.

A yell smote Beryl's ears as he came up from one dive:

"I seen the kid! He hit me! Didn't put my light out. I seen him. That kid! He got the hosses loose from the wagon. He has took the cook. They're swimmin'! Smoke 'em up!"

Streaks of flame. Shots crashing, booming. Hot lead striking water with a strange hissing sound. Four infuriated bandits raking the stream with rifles and six-guns.

Beryl couldn't see Gravy-apron, but he happened to know the old hand could swim. Bullets hit perilously close to the kid. He dived again, and completely submerged, swam on, struck shallow water, and came up.

There was the eastern bank of the

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river. Beryl scrambled up it, seeing dimly the cook much farther downstream. Gravy-apron was safe and to all appearances unhit.

The four work horses had been caught by the wrangler. Motionless now in his saddle, he was staring popeyed across the river. Beryl shook water from his ears, rose to his feet and called:

"It's Beryl, Harry. Don't crack down on me!"

"You, Button! What's—"

From the farther side of the stream sounded a bellowed order: "Swim 'er, yuh darn chumps. We ain't licked yet. We'll drop the hoss wrangler afore he has time to run off the cavvy. Come on, hombres, 'cross the river!"

Beryl heard the infuriated bandits as they left the stranded chuck wagon and splashed into the water. He had hoped they would attempt to cross!

"Off your hoss, Harry," he called to the wrangler. "Get close to the bank, behind a rock. Turn them tough nuts back with bullets when they get in midstream. I'll be workin' up the river from yuh. Got your gun?"

Laughing Harry had his Colt. Without another question, but with a joyous whoop, he sprang to obey Beryl's orders.

As the four outlaws struck the deep water in midstream leaden slugs hailed all around them. Caught at a tremendous disadvantage, Scar, Buffalo, Drake, and Runt could not answer this withering fire. Men in swift water up to their necks and deeper cannot shoot with any accuracy. Scar yelled with baffled fury:

"Get back to the other bank, hombres, afore we're all killed!"

With one accord, and swiftly, the

bandits turned. But they did not reach the side of the river from which they had just come. For out of the west came the thunderous sound of hoofs. The Cross L Bar cow-punchers charging across the plain.

Up in the blind pocket they had heard the first shots, and instantly raced back through the bottle-neck. And there had been no bandit there to stop them. They had found Agate-eye Ab in the sagebrush and brought him along.

Now with the music of popping six-guns to guide them, these punchers tornadoed toward the river, and they reached the bank while Scar Scanlon with his three toughs were still in midstream. For a moment, there was no firing, and across the water to Foreman Rocksby's ears came Beryl's voice:

"Bandits in river! Me, the cook, and Harry's on this side. Get 'em, cowboys!"

The cowboys "got 'em!" Trapped in deep water, the outlaws couldn't put up much of a fight, and the punchers joyously leaped their mounts into the stream to drop loops over the heads of the four half-drowned men.

With the toughs dragging at the ends of their ropes, they splashed on

across the river to be welcomed by Beryl, Laughing Harry, and Gravy-apron Gus.

"Lo, boys!" shouted Rocksby. "Thanks to you three, we got a collection of water-soaked rats. Don't look much like killin' bandits, do they?"

"How yuh like it out West, far as yuh been, Scar?" Beryl asked the boss outlaw, who was sitting up and glaring dazedly about.

"Aw," Scar managed to snarl, "yuh double-danged kid, if it hadn't been fer what yuh done we'd 'a' come out all jake."

"I had a hunch 'twas the kid blew up your plans," said Rocksby. "Guess I know why the cook lied so swelligent too, I— What's that?"

"That" was a hail sounding from the north: "This is Sheriff Riggs from Montana with a posse. Who's outfit are you?"

"Cross L Bar," shouted Rocksby. "Come on in, sheriff. We got the tough nuts yuh want, thanks to a freckled kid," gazing at Beryl. "A kid who shore has earnt a better job than drivin' a hoodlum wagon. How 'bout it, Button?"

"I'll say he's earnt a better job!" ejaculated old Gravy-apron. "I was in the hottest kind of a hot place, but Beryl outfoxed them snakes in the only way it could 'a' been done!"



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# White Masks

A "Bud Jones Of Texas" Story

By J. Allan Dunn

Author of "The Men Of Split Mesa," etc.

EVERY nerve in "Bud" Jones's body tingled with the sense of close and increasing danger as the *cantina* began to fill with men. They drifted in, one and two at a time, to lounge at the bar or take seats at the tables.

They glanced at him as they entered and seemed to take no more notice, but Bud knew that they were thinking of him, discussing him in no friendly fashion.

They probably didn't suspect that he was a Texas Ranger, for he was well disguised. But he was a stranger, and looked upon with suspicion.

He had a hunch that these men were, most of them, also strangers to Nagaza, but they had been ex-

pected; they had shown some sign or passed some word of which Bud was ignorant.

He sat as he had done for the past week—at a table in the rear of the *cantina* attached to the Posada del Racimo (The Tavern of the Bunch of Grapes) sipping glass after glass of *tequila*, the fiery liquor distilled from the button tips of the mescal plant.

He did not swallow any of it, but spilled it on the dirt floor.

He wore much the same clothes as most of the men who had entered—a short jacket over a shirt of colored but faded silk, pantaloons tight above the knees, slit below them, with an inset of vivid velvet,

a striped serape, a sash below his belt in which the hilt of a knife showed. An ivory-handled six-gun swung low on his right hip in a holster.

His sombrero was high-crowned and saucer-rimmed, trimmed with tarnished silver lace. Its wide brim shaded his features in the dimly lighted room.

There was a double-barreled derringer in a sheath strapped to his right leg, where the velvet inset was only lightly basted to the cloth of his pantaloons.

The room had only one entrance. Two windows were deeply set in the thick adobe wall, and barred. The one door led into the inner court, and that had but the single exit beneath the arch directly under the second story of the inn. In this short tunnel below the arch were two doors, one on each side.

This was a tight place for a man to be caught in, surrounded by men whose most merciful deed would be to cut his throat without torture, before they tossed him into the Rio Grande for the fish or the quick-sands.

And Bud Jones began to think that this was the situation in which he found himself involved. His hunch told him it was time to go.

He had learned part of what he had come to the little fishing village to seek, that Miguel Arana was expected there. Bud wanted to see the man who had obviously changed his own name to "Arana," or the "Spider."

There were a few Americans present, the sort of outcasts found in the river towns along the Rio Grande—men who made Bud ashamed they were his countrymen.

Now two more drifted in with two Mexicans and ranged themselves against the bar. They did not look

toward Bud, but he was sure that the bartender was telling them Bud was there, talking about him.

One of the Americans had lost the tip of his nose, by knife or gun. Bud saw his profile and tried to place him. The man's description was not in the Rangers' "List of Fugitives from Justice," but the Ranger had a feeling that he had seen the other somewhere. He had a vague idea that the man had once stood in a crowd, gazing at him, but he could not place him.

The feeling heightened when the man turned, but still Bud could not bring out of his mind where, and when, and how he had looked at that evil face before.

Bud got to his feet, seeming to be unsteady on his legs, not too sure of his eyesight. But he saw the men in the room tense.

The bartender had folded his arms on the bar, with the attitude of a spectator about to watch a tragic play from the front row of the gallery.

The Ranger reeled toward the door, alert. He knew that the first shot or blow would be the excuse for a murder—*his* murder.

And the odds were too heavy. He did not think highly of Mexicans as foes, but their knives were like the talons of pumas, the fangs of wolves. They would combine to bring down a man none of them dared face alone.

It was the Americans whom Bud was wary of. He was not going to start the trouble, so long as they did not prevent him from leaving. But he felt in his bones that they were going to do just that.

He saw a sort of signal made by the man whose nose had lost its tip, a glance and a brief nod as the other stepped from the bar in front of Bud. Bud checked his progress,

standing with his right hand on the back of a chair.

He had paid for his spilled liquor; he was sure they had not seen him toss it away. His Spanish was perfect. He had done nothing in the few days he had been in Nagaza to arouse suspicion. He had acted perfectly the part of a man who is lying low, talking little.

At the same time, Bud had listened when they must have thought him drunk, his head on folded arms.

But they doubted and disliked him for some cause. The man with the clipped nose had brought it to a head. It was time to go.

"Not so fast, amigo."

Three men barred Bud's way to the door, others behind them. In the mirror back of the bar he could see the rest gathering about him in a vicious circle, all on their feet.

The Ranger looked vacantly at the man with the clipped nose.

"What's the matter?" he asked hoarsely in Spanish.

"We want to look at you, have a chat with you, hombre." Suddenly the man shifted into rapid-fire Spanish. "It's the one! Seize him! Get his weapons. Arana wants him alive!"

They still talk of that fight in Nagaza and the little river towns along the Rio Grande. Of how the Ranger fought like a bear attacked by a swarming pack of giant dogs.

Bud showed himself suddenly sober as he swung up the chair and shook off the first who grasped at his arms as if he was a buffalo bull twitching off so many flies. Others caught him about the waist. Some grabbed his legs and strove to throw him down.

He swung the chair again, and the men ahead of him went down like ninepins in an alley. One of them was the man with the clipped

nose, struck on shoulder and head. For a second the way was clear, if he could wade free of the clinging arms about his knees and ankles.

He kicked them off and swung the chair once more. They hung onto it as his blow was stopped by those he felled. They were panting and grunting and shouting as they wrestled with his fury. Over the din came the voice of the man who had started it:

"Take him alive. Arana wants him alive!"

Bud saw no mercy in this message. It made him fight more desperately, knowing he could not win. Other men had come in to join the battle. They had his six-gun and his knife. He could not get at the derringer that they had not yet discovered. The chair was splintered and broken. He was on his knees.

He had marked plenty of them, broken some heads and limbs. But they were too many for him. They surged over him like waves over a stranded ship.

Something struck him crashingly at the back of his skull. It seemed as if thunder rolled and lightning flared in the *cantina*. Then all was black silence.

## II.

When Bud recovered consciousness he was being hoisted to the back of his roan troop horse, which his enemies had found saddled in the corral next to the *posada*. Bud had removed the saddle gun, the carbine in its leather scabbard which he carried, like all Rangers, under his thigh.

He had hidden this, together with his second cartridge belt, holding shells for the carbine, lest they might be a tip-off against him.

They had not yet found his derringer, partly because it was

strapped to the inside of his leg in the hollow of his calf, partly because of sheer good luck. Bud felt it now, as they fastened his ankles together with rawhide beneath the roan's belly, and it comforted him a little, though he did not see how he would get a chance to use it.

They tied his wrists together, and then to the saddle horn. He pretended to be still groggy from the blow that had knocked him down. His head throbbed, and it was not hard to act that way.

The little village, tucked into a gap in the limestone bluffs along the river, showed no lights. Even the inn was dark. No doubt this was done on account of Señor Arana, the Spider, ever spinning his webs in the dark.

The moon was setting back of the hills in Mexico. The stars gave a faint light as the band formed in double file. Some of them carried flaming torches of pine knots, and the glare fell on faces that were all masked in white, with strips of muslin, slitted for their glittering eyes.

All wore steeple-crowned sombreros. None of them spoke. No orders were given. It was impossible to tell which was the leader.

Arana might not be present. Even his followers might not know his identity, if he chose to appear always masked. That was likely enough. Such leaders found that mystery gave them power.

There were many rumors about Arana. Some said he was an escaped general of the last Mexican rebellion. Others, that he was an American outlaw pretending to be Mexican the better to cover himself.

Rumors had come to Ranger headquarters that Arana was plotting an uprising on the United States side of the Rio Grande. It

was supposed to be an attempt to win Texas back to Mexico.

It did not sound too likely. If Arana was a refugee from Mexico, this wild project would not find favor with the Mexican government.

On the other hand, it might be merely a scheme to combine the riffraff of the Mexican-speaking population—many of whom were supposed to be American citizens—with the outlaws from the chaparral.

The so-called rebellion would only be an excuse to loot. There would be more to it than that. The chance to pay off old grudges. There would be burning and killing—wanton murder.

One thing was sure: Arana was plotting something and gathering a band.

It was said that he had a birthmark shaped like a spider in the palm of his left hand. In Bud's mind, if there was any truth in this, the man who called himself "Arana" had had the mark tattooed there. It would go a long way with the superstitious Mexicans.

They were in awe of the man. He could poison you and send you mad, just as the tarantula could poison. His limbs were hairy as the tarantula's. He leaped from hidden ambush. He could not be killed by a bullet, unless it was cast of silver, or by a knife, unless the blade had been tempered in human blood.

To the Ranger, these rumors resolved themselves down to one thing: Arana had to be captured and made harmless before he got too strong, before he carried out whatever crafty idea he had in his head.

He was said to have killed more people with his own hand than he had fingers and toes. Sayings were not proofs. Bud had to find him, with definite evidence of ill-doing.

It seemed as if he was going to find him all right, if the cry of "Arana wants him alive," from the man with the clipped nose, meant anything.

They were taking him to Arana, bound and, as they thought, helpless. They did not know the spirit that burned within him. A Ranger was never helpless while he remained alive.

It looked hopeless enough now, as Bud rode in the midst of the torch-bearing, white-masked band, going up a narrow, rocky trail, with a cliff rising on one hand and dropping down on the other.

Near Nagaza, the sierra came close to the river, leaving only a narrow valley between it and the bluffs. They were going into the mountains.

Bud could hear the low roar of a torrent in the canyon below them, smell pine and cedar, catch occasional glimpses of thick forest with the tree tops touched by the last rays of the moon.

There was a brief stop. The leading torches disappeared. Others followed. They were entering a narrow cleft that had been screened by matted vines, now hauled aside. Nobody would have suspected the existence of the rift.

Ahead, the narrow trail led upward. No one told Bud to swing to the left. It was not necessary. The trail was blocked with stout logs the ends of which had been sharpened, like gigantic pencils.

They were half buried in the ground at a sharp angle. Three rows of them, bristling and impassable for mounted men, almost equally so for men on foot. Unless they were coming downtrail.

Good horses with good riders might then clear the barricade. Men could mount the great spikes and

drop clear. But it was efficient against any upward attack. Two or three snipers could dispose of all those who tried to make it.

It was a cunning contrivance, ages old. It showed Arana to be a resourceful man.

Despite the hunch that he was already doomed and would be sentenced when he met Arana, Bud longed for the moment when he would see him, perhaps without his mask.

The cleft ended abruptly at a wall of rock. They all halted, Bud hemmed in. An authoritative voice rang out. It was muffled by the mask, and spoke in Spanish:

"Give the signal. Bring up the prisoner. The two men next to me will go up first."

The perfectly imitated hoot of an owl floated out on the night, repeated from above.

Bud, his horse led through to the front, was astonished at having his feet and hands unbound. He was free for the moment, but escape was impossible. To attack with his small pistol was a crazy idea. Their glittering eyes watched him like cats surrounding a mouse.

He could not place the man who had given orders. It was plain he did not care to talk too much.

The men were dismounting, their horses being led away into a cave with a tall, narrow entry. Bud obeyed a thrust to his elbow. Two of the band had vanished in an opening hardly wide enough to receive them. Presently the hoot of an owl came down again.

Bud was shoved into the dark slot. It was a vertical chute, smoothed long ago by water. A lantern swung at the head of it, as he looked up.

Now he saw why he had been released. Iron spikes had been driven

into the rock, forming a crude ladder. They might have hauled him up, but they preferred to dodge that trouble, to make him climb to his own execution.

The Ranger had no doubt that they meant just that. He was an officer of the law, and they figured he had been spying on them. His hunch said there was something behind that.

The man whose nose was clipped, the man he could vaguely remember but not yet place, had some special cause of hatred against him.

He realized that they would have blindfolded him, if they had not already condemned him. They certainly would not have let him see this secret entrance to their hide-out, if they intended him to live.

But the last card had not yet been played. He had it in the hollow of his calf—a double-barreled two-spot of trumps. Two lives to balance his one.

The two men who had gone ahead were waiting for him, their guns ready to shoot him down. Inside the cavern he saw two others standing, also masked in white. One of these had answered the signal, hung out the lantern. They were the home guard.

The cave was lighted by more lanterns, and also pine knots. It was, Bud saw, only the natural hallway to a much larger natural chamber where a fire was burning. He could see the reflection on the walls through an archway.

He was backed against the rocky wall in a shallow niche while, one by one, Arana's band came up from below. Bud did not count them. He did not want to reckon the odds. He supposed one or more of them would be looking after the horses in the natural stable, looking after Pepper.

It was scant satisfaction to know that Pepper would probably kill whoever tried to ride him. Bud wanted to live, to feel the big roan under him again. And the hope for that grew slimmer with every beat of his heart.

One or two of the men went through to the inner cavern. The rest grouped themselves about one they seemed to recognize as leader. When he spoke, Bud thought he knew the voice as that of the one who had given orders, but he could not be sure. The mask changed all tones.

He could only be sure that the voice was charged with a deadly hatred. The man spoke Spanish, most of his followers being Mexicans.

But Bud thought that the man's Spanish was not native-born. If this was Arana, as it seemed it must be, Bud suspected him of being an American.

It did not matter much, right now. Bud was still watched closely, covered by half a dozen weapons, a dozen more ready to riddle or hack him at his first hostile move.

Nevertheless, when it came to the last moment, Bud was resolved to attempt to play that two-spot card strapped to his leg.

"Ranger," said the leader, "you have spied upon me and my men. I am Arana. A spider has many eyes in its head. You are in my web. You will not leave it alive. The Rangers are like so many flies to Arana. All of them shall perish."

### III.

Bud Jones had no idea of denying his identity. He sparred for time.

"What makes you think I am a Ranger?" he asked.

"There is one with us who has recognized you, Corporal Bud Jones. You have old powder marks on your cheek, a scar on the lobe of your ear. It is impossible for him to be mistaken. For you helped to hang four of his comrades on the oak trees at Sunnyville, last spring. You would have hanged him, also, but he escaped. He was wounded, but he lived to stand in the crowd and watch his comrades strangled. One of them was his brother. Is it wonderful that he should remember you? He has sworn vengeance, and it is my will that he shall have it."

The identity of the man with the clipped nose sprang clear into Bud's mind. The Rangers had trailed six men who had held up a stage and killed two passengers. They had shot one of these bandits dead, captured four after wounding them. The sixth got away by good luck, after hiding in the thick brush till it was dark.

He also had been hurt. Bud himself had shot at him, a snapshot in the dusk. It had struck the other somewhere in the head or face as he darted between thickets.

Two months later, the four were tried, condemned, and hanged. Bud had been present. The crowd had been a big one. Bud, standing by the platform built beneath the oaks that served as gallows, had seen a face staring at him from the edge of the crowd—a man whose features were familiar, though one of them was altered. The end of the man's nose was tipped with a plaster. It was the bandit who had got away.

"If there was time for me to waste on you," said Arana, "I would take you to Sunnyville and leave you swinging on one of those trees. But there are plans forward that must be talked over and not delayed.

You do not deny that you are a Ranger."

"Do you deny you are Arana?" asked Bud.

"I do not."

"Neither do I deny being a Ranger. You may kill me, but others will run you down, Arana. You will end as the others ended at Sunnyville, at the end of a rope."

"Perhaps," said Arana carelessly, "but you won't know anything about it, Ranger. I leave you to the tender mercies of Pedro."

A man stepped forward. Bud's shoulders were broad, but this man was deep-chested as a bull. He was almost as wide as he was tall, evidently of enormous strength. He laughed under his white mask as he advanced, thanking Arana for the privilege.

"Pedro is simple-minded, but he is thorough," said Arana. "He also has had relatives slain by Rangers. He could kill you with his bare hands, Ranger Jones. Perhaps he will. I give you to him. Adios!"

They all left for the inner chamber but Pedro, who stood with one hand holding a six-gun, the hammer cocked, ready to fall. Bud wondered why his execution had not been given over to the man whose nose he had clipped with his bullet in the brush, the man who had identified him, recognized him in the *cantina*.

He supposed he was needed in the council, or agreed that Pedro would make a better job of it.

Pedro chuckled hoarsely. Bud imagined him a half-wit who would delight in playing with him before he butchered him.

"First, gringo," said Pedro huskily, "I make you say your prayers to me. Go down on your knees, gringo dog, and beg Pedro to give

you an easy death. Then we shall see."

The eyes behind the white mask were glittering with madness. Pedro was working himself up for the kill, for frightful torture. He would not shoot unless he was forced to it, though the muzzle of his gun covered Bud's heart.

Bud knew, clever wrestler and boxer though he was, strong and in fine training, that he was no match for this freak. Pedro could break bones like sticks with his great hands, squeeze a man's ribs until they cracked and drove into his lungs.

He kneeled down, and Pedro chuckled again, lowering his gun until the barrel was leveled at a spot between the Ranger's eyes.

"Good, you yellow, gringo dog! Cringe to Pedro, with your tail between your legs. Beg for mercy. Lick my boots, gringo; clean them with your cowardly tongue."

Bud bent his head low, now on hands and knees. He could not see, but he guessed the gun muzzle was now aimed at the top of his head.

Suddenly he struck with all his might, sidewise, with his hands clasped and both arms close together, making a club of them that bludgeoned against the side of Pedro's knees.

At the same time he flung himself sidewise, just in time. As Pedro crashed to the floor, the flame from his gun scorched the hair at the back of Bud's head, the lead scoring a groove in one shoulder.

The shot sounded loud as thunder in the cave; but, if they heard it in the larger one, they would be expecting it, sign that Pedro had finished with the Ranger, revenged his relatives, revenged the man with the clipped nose.

Bud risked all on the surprise of

his attack when Pedro thought him cringing. He had to make the most of it while he had the other off balance.

He flung himself on top of the giant, getting astride of him. As Pedro recovered, roaring behind his mask, Bud grabbed him by his enormous ears.

His sombrero had fallen off, and the ears were like handles to a pitcher. Bud proceeded to try and crack that pitcher as he felt the terrible power of Pedro's arms tearing at him, the drive of Pedro's body tossing him about while he smashed the other's head again and again on the rocky floor of the cavern.

Pedro's skull seemed solid. He had managed to twist sidewise; his thighs were about the Ranger's middle, squeezing the breath out of him, compressing his vitals.

There was a salty taste in Bud's mouth, a ringing in his brain. He used the last of his failing strength for one last smash, and suddenly Pedro ceased to fight.

He struggled convulsively for a second or two, his feet drumming the floor of the cave, and then he was still.

Bud had not even tried to use the derringer. He doubted whether he could have got at it. He had a better weapon now; not his own six-gun, but a .45 that was built for business, loaded in all six chambers.

From the inner cavern he could hear voices talking, arguing. He wound his own serape about his chest to make himself appear bigger. He put Pedro's serape in its place, traded Pedro's sash and sombrero for his own.

He could get away now, down the ladder of spikes, use the gun on the horse guard, get Pepper, and gallop to camp for aid.

His commander might approve of

that. He often told Bud that he had too much initiative. But Bud wanted to know what plan Arana was hatching, what web he would spin.

Camp was many miles away. Arana had said he had no time to waste. Bud could not get back with more Rangers before he was missed, before the outlaws had gone on their mission.

It would be too late to stop them. He must learn what they intended, perhaps save lives as well as property. Once he knew that, he could judge better what to do. The way was still open at the rear.

He put on Pedro's white mask, after he had hog-tied the giant. Pedro was breathing heavily and loudly. His skull must be fractured. If he died now, it would save the price of a rope.

Now the Ranger moved into the inner cavern, keeping to the shadows. He folded his arms to make himself seem as large as possible, and took a place against the wall.

The nearest noticed him come in, but they paid no attention. They did not doubt this was Pedro and that the Ranger lay dead in the outer cave. They were listening intently to Arana.

There were bales and cases piled against the irregular wall of the big cavern. Some of the bandits were perched on these or on kegs. There was a keg close to where Bud stood. Its head had been taken off and partly replaced. He ran his hand inside and felt a gritty powder. He took some of it out, smelled and tasted it.

The fire leaped high. Shadows changed. The tall figure of Arana stood near the fire, his gestures spiderlike, as his shadow doubled them.

A little more than half of the band was back of him. There were wick-

er-covered demijohns, and tin cups were being filled and emptied.

Bud listened intently to a crafty, evil scheme that chilled his very marrow.

"So we go to Live Oak Corners this morning, arriving soon after daybreak. The dam is already mined, and the fuses laid. Luis and Francisco are there, waiting. I have given Luis a good watch that keeps second for second with mine. At nine o'clock the fuses are lighted. At fifteen minutes after, the giant powder explodes, the dam blows up, the water rushes down the narrow valley, and the town of Live Oak Corners is destroyed. All the people, young and old, the houses, everything."

He paused dramatically, laughing out loud.

"Unless," he went on, "unless, of course, the good people make it worth our while not to light those fuses. We shall gather them together as they awaken and explain it to them. They are to bring us all the money in the town, from the bank, the stores, and their own purses. Also present us with anything else we may fancy. Such trifles as rings, brooches, bracelets, and watches, perhaps. All this to be done immediately, ended by a quarter before nine o'clock. Meantime, we shall see that none leave town."

"Going to tell them what will happen if they don't do it?" asked a man.

"Am I a fool?" demanded Arana savagely. "Naturally, I tell them. I paint them a picture of what will happen. How they will see their beloved ones drowned, swept away, crushed, before their eyes. It will make them bring their last penny. If the offering is enough, we ride

away, at nine o'clock, to the hills. We leave them their lives."

"How do Luis and Francisco know if they are not to light the fuses?"

"I arranged to send up a smoke signal. At least, I think I did," said Arana carelessly. "Of course, the contribution may not be satisfactory. In that case—" He shrugged his shoulders.

Bud's finger crept to the trigger of his six-gun. Such a fiend should not live another minute. But there were too many of them. At nine o'clock, only a few hours away, Luis and Francisco would light those fuses, if not stopped. A village would be destroyed.

The Ranger saw the cleverness of the plan. There would be no evidence that the dam had been blown up. All that would be swept away. It would be thought that the dam had burst.

"If we've got time to get away," put in a man, "why can't they, after we ride out of town to the hills?"

"We are mounted," replied Arana. "Few of them will be. Also, we shall not go beyond good rifle range. It would not do to leave any witnesses. You see that I have gone into every detail. When Arana spins a web he leaves no loose strands."

#### IV.

A man came swiftly in from the outer cavern. He was past Bud before the Ranger could stop him.

"Some one has killed Pedro," the man shouted. "He lies just outside with his skull broken."

Those close to Bud turned to look at him. One of them seized a pine torch and thrust it close to his face as he snatched at the mask.

The game was up. Bud tore off the strip of calico.

"Stand back," he cried, "or I'll blow us all to atoms! This is a keg of giant powder, and it's almost full. One move from any one of you, and I shoot into it. We'll all go together."

They knew he meant it, and they shrank back, like the cowards they were at heart. They guessed what Bud meant to do, to hold them off and then back out to the outer cave. So long as he was where he could shoot into the keg, he had them.

But he could not get down that ladder. That would need both hands. They could shoot him as he climbed down, and he could not return their fire. Also, there were the two guards below.

What was he going to do? That puzzled them. His desperate threat checked them. If they tried to rush him, to draw on him, they feared that he would blow them all to kingdom come. Yet what move could he make that would save himself, keep them back.

Bud soon showed them. He was wary of the darkest shadows, into which some of them had slunk. And he had cause to be.

Knives came singing out of the black spots of darkness. One grazed his neck; another went into his forearm, between the two bones.

But Bud had made his plan. With the knife still in his arm, he raised the keg of powder and hurled it straight at the fire.

It struck the rocky floor, and broke its hoops, just short of the flames that leaped at the powerful explosion.

Then there came a noise like the sound of great guns. There was one frightful flare, like lightning, that showed men tossed about like scraps of paper in a gale of wind. Their mouths were open in shrieks that could not be heard in the terrific

roar; mouths that would never speak again.

As Bud leaped back for the entry, half blown by the fury of the searing blast, the inner cavern was filled with the strangling fumes of the burned powder. They rolled in an acrid cloud that fogged the place, poured out through the entry.

The fire itself had been scattered in a myriad flakes and scraps of flaming wood, stinging like bees.

Through the cloud, Bud saw Arana leap forward, the mask scorched from his face. Arana was the man with the clipped nose.

Under that white mask, he had disguised himself from his own followers. He acted as Arana's leader most of the time, issuing orders as if Arana had given them to him to transmit.

But now he was unmasked. The flare revealed him, his clothing smoldering, spotted with fire. Two other vague figures were with him. Then the fumes closed in about him, as they forged through the entry.

The force of the explosion had reached even Bud, fast as he had moved, anticipating the blast.

He was choking, almost blinded by the powder gas. He tripped over something and fell sprawling. The fall drove home the blade in his arm, and he yanked out the knife as he lay on the floor of the outer cave.

The three figures broke through, howling threats at Bud, shooting at him while the sweet air from outside began to beat back and break up the fumes.

A fourth man followed them, his face roasted. He bolted, sightless, out to the ledge, over its lip, hurtling down the chute.

Bud shot from the cavern floor in reply. The three split up, trying to cut him off from the ledge.

He scored on one of them, and

the man went reeling back, still shooting.

As Bud started to get to his feet he was spun halfway about by a bullet from behind him. The fumes were still wreathing through the caverns. He could not see Arana, who was hiding behind some wooden cases.

The Ranger was between three fires. The man he had wounded slumped down, sagging to his knees, and another slug from Bud finished him. That was one of them. But not Arana. The inner cavern held nothing but dead bodies.

The bandit behind Bud shot again, and the bullet creased Bud's shoulder. But the Ranger saw the other clearly for a moment, against the mouth of the cave. He pulled trigger and saw the man drop, struggling, on the ledge, clawing and kicking in convulsive movements that sent him, also, down the chute, to join his comrade.

Bud's six-gun was empty. His hammer clicked on an empty shell as a shot from the concealed Arana hit him on the outside of his thigh.

It weakened his leg but it did not bring him down. As he reached to get out his derringer from where it was strapped to his leg, Arana rose up from behind the cases with a chuckle.

"I was countin' your shots, Jones," he said in English. "Looks like you're out of cartridges, and likewise out of luck. Looks like I'll have to finish the job myself, after all."

Bud plucked at the basting threads of the inset to his pantaloons carefully. If Arana suspected he had a hidden weapon there, Bud would never get it out.

"You hung my brother and my pals, Jones," Arana went on. "You

spoiled my face. I swore I'd get even for that, Ranger. I've got you where I want you, now. I may have to kill you first, but you'll be found hangin', with your nose slit and a piper pinned to your chest. You'll be just another fly in Arana's web."

Even in that moment Bud realized the cunning of the man. He had shielded himself behind the cases, saving his shots, except when he got a true aim, counting those of the Ranger, who was fighting three of them at once.

Bud yanked the derringer free, and the little weapon spat like an adder.

Its small slug of lead hit Arana over the heart. There was not enough power in the charge to shock Arana. He clapped one hand to the wound, then took it away, reddened. He laughed.

"That popgun didn't have kick enough to go through," he said. "You hit a rib, Ranger. I'll do better than that."

He fired at the same instant that Bud tried to discharge the second barrel of the derringer, aiming this time, as well as such a small pistol could be aimed, for Arana's forehead.

As Arana fired, he sprang backward, knowing well enough the limited range of the derringer.

The heavier gun roared. The cartridge of the derringer hung fire. Then the pistol was torn from Bud's grasp as Arana's slug struck it. The Ranger had done just that thing plenty of times. Now the tables were turned.

He was unarmed. Arana had his six-gun. Even if it was empty, it was a powerful club. Arana had a knife, with which he meant to slit Bud's nose, before or after death.

Bud seemed to sink to the floor.

But he was only squatting there, braced for a spring.

Arana found he had fired the last shell in his six-gun. He could have stepped back and reloaded, but his hate was too great for caution or delay.

He lifted his six-gun to club the Ranger dead or insensible and sprang in as Bud leaped from the floor. He tackled Arana low, but failed to bring him down. His wounds had weakened his arms.

Arana wrestled with him, as Bud caught Arana's arm to stave off the blow with the hogleg. They reeled about, and suddenly Arana tripped over the bound body of Pedro, and they both went smashing down.

Side by side they fell, and Bud twined his legs about Arana. The scissors lock was high up, and Bud put all he had into it.

The rib weakened by the derringer pellet gave way as Arana yelped with the pain. Then the Ranger was on top. He wrested the six-gun from Arana and crashed it down. The sight bit into the other's skull, above the temple, went through the bone as if it had been the parchment head of a drum.

Bud took the bandit's hand, looked at the palm, and saw the blue spider tattooed there. But Arana had spun his last web.

Weakly, gathering all his strength, Bud went to the chute. As he had expected, the horse guards stood there by the bodies of the fallen men, afraid to come up, wondering what had happened, asking Bud, whom they mistook for one of the gang.

"Powder keg blew up," Bud answered them in Spanish. "Come on up; Arana wants you."

The old formula worked.

They came up, one at a time, and Bud received each in the same way,

rapped them into unconsciousness, before he climbed slowly and painfully down the spikes.

It was half past eight by the sun when the Ranger eased up the galloping roan. They had won a race with death. Bud saw the gleaming water of the dam; he saw the smoke coming from the chimneys of Live Oak Corners.

"We win, Pepper," he said confidently.

He was wounded, but he did not worry about Luis and Francisco. By

strategy or force, or both, he could handle those two scoundrels.

Live Oak Corners would never know what it had escaped. It would have made a grand story, but the Rangers did not advertise.

Any time an hombre is lucky enough ter escape from Bud Jones, he oughter be thankful—an' stay that way. If he comes back, lookin' fer a chance ter git even with the Ranger, he's shore li'ble ter hub himself plenty trouble. Thet's what happened ter the Spider. Keep yore eyes peeled fer the next Bud Jones o' Texas story. It'll be out soon in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

## FLYING 5 FIVE

### THE FIDDLER'S LAST TUNE

WHEN dances in the West were fast and furious, and all the guests rode in on cow horses, a fiddler named Reynolds was a familiar figure at most of the rough-and-ready functions.

In May of this year, an Old Fiddlers' Contest was held at Boerne, Texas, and one of the old-timers showing his skill with the bow was B. T. Reynolds, seventy-six years old.

He knew every old tune that had ever been played where cowboys foregathered, for he had begun when he was very young. He was acquainted with all the boys, good and bad, and had among his friends successful ranchmen, top hands, ropers, bronchobusters, as well as desperadoes, rustlers, brand blotters, and horse thieves.

Reynolds was as fast with his gun as the rest of them, and could always take care of himself. Many times he was in the thick of a shoot-up at a dance, and it was said of him that he never lost his nerve or his head, but would go right on

fiddling while the differences between rivals were being settled in the usual way.

He had just finished playing his selection at the contest, and as the last note faded away, the old fiddler was seen to bend forward in his chair.

While the applause, long and loud, filled the hall, he fell to the floor, and when his friends rushed to his assistance, it was found that he was dead.

A big crowd had come from San Antonio for the occasion, as these fiddling contests are very popular. The young folks like them because here they hear the tunes that their gran'dads sang and danced to when they were dashing young cowboys, and the old folks enjoy them because they bring back many reminders of old times.

Fiddler Reynolds was popular, both in his youth and in his old age. His passing will be much regretted, for he was a much-loved link of the past to present-day Texans.



# The Gun Trail To Broken Wall

A "Silver Jack Steele" Novelette

By William F. Bragg

Author of "Cayuse Killers," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### TRAILIN' BANDITS.

**H**IGH up on the pine-topped rim of Broken Wall Basin, "Silver Jack" Steele made his secret night camp. A bit of grassy meadow offered grazing for his two picketed horses. A vast cleft in a granite wall would hide the red shine of his fire when darkness came.

Over the tiny, glimmering bed of coals he crouched after he had eaten

his meal of fried bacon, black coffee, and frying-pan bread. The young special officer believed at that moment that not a man within a hundred miles knew his whereabouts.

"Which is what I like," he mused. "If this Broken Wall gang should ever spot me ridin' this high country, I reckon my number would be up fer keeps."

Under the sun, these mountain stretches were beautiful with their miles of timber, snow-capped peaks, and clear trout streams. But when

night came on with all the mystery of moaning winds through the tree-tops, the far-away hoot of an owl, the weird song of the coyote pack, then a man could not be blamed if he kept close to his fire and rifle, suspicious of every sound in the dim forest.

For Steele knew that if a member of the Broken Wall gang could creep up on his hiding place, he would drive a bullet without mercy or warning.

So Steele brooded over his dying fire, carefully keeping within the shadow of the granite wall, right hand not far from the brown stock of a cocked Winchester carbine. And in the coals his narrowed gray eyes saw pictures—the blazing scenes of murder and robbery that had sent him riding the hidden outlaw trails two weeks before.

He saw masked men cut the express car off the Desert Limited at Sand Creek Siding, blast open the door with high explosive, shoot down a brave and defiant express messenger, loot the safe. Then followed the soft thunder of hoofs on bad-land gumbo as the Broken Wall gang pushed cayuses to the limit, roped fresh mounts, galloped on and on for over a hundred miles until they had reached the shelter of these frowning peaks where to-night a lonely officer fed his fire with bits of pitch pine.

“They got around forty thousand in currency in one package,” he muttered. “A consignment of money from the Caribou National Bank to the Stockmen’s State in Red Buttes. There was at least four in the gang. They headed this way, but blinded the main trail fifty miles below this country. An’ thar came the big split-up.”

That parting of lawful forces was what lay heaviest to-night on

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Steele’s mind. Riding with a large posse of railroad special agents and sheriff’s deputies, Steele had halted where the outlaw tracks ran into a gravel wash. This effectually hid all trail sign.

All the officers, excepting Steele, had agreed that the outlaws would not venture into rough mountain country. They would ride along the wash, keeping always in flats where they could find fresh horses. But Steele, disagreeing, had crossed the wash and picked his slow trail up the rolling benches until he had come out on the rim of Broken Wall Basin.

That long and laborious job of hunting elusive pony tracks had taken two weeks of riding. All that time he had been cut off from the world. He had lived like a coyote on the country, and pieced out his food with reserve rations from his pack.

“What’s got me feelin’ low to-night,” he growled, hunching his tall, rangy form over the fire, “is whether I was *right* or *wrong*. Supposin’, by this time, the main posse has closed on the gang. I’d be a laughin’stock all over the State. That’s what they told me when I hit this lone-wolf trail.”

But he had gambled on one fact at the gravel wash. The Desert Limited robbery wasn’t the first raid on the distant railroad. There had been several within the past twelve months. Each time, hard-riding posses had been blocked at the gravel wash.

“An’ each time, figurin’ on the bandits’ need of fresh hosses,” Jack reflected, “the posse didn’t hit fer the mountains. They kept travelin’ north.”

So Jack had gambled that the gang really lived in the mountains, worked most of the time as cow-

punchers for some of the outfits that summered among the peaks. That when the time came for a raid, they gathered under a leader, rode night and day to rob and return.

"They'd find plenty hosses the other side of the gravel wash," he decided, "an' between it an' these mountains, they could have relays of fresh cayuses staked out in the timber."

Then he stretched his lean arms and almost groaned. For, after all, he hadn't found a single concrete clew to prove his theory correct. And two weeks of hard riding, of vigilant spying on distant riders through high-powered field glasses hadn't revealed a suspicious move on the part of any high-country puncher.

"If I could spot jest *one thing* to back up my belief," he whispered, "my worries would be over."

He meant that, too. It never occurred to Steele, that if he traced the bandits, he would be forced to fight single-handed at least four hard-eyed gunmen and probably more. Men who had murdered with a laugh and robbed like wolves for the past year, defied the lawful forces of half Wyoming, escaped with loot valued in the thousands of dollars.

"Nothin'," Steele said between set teeth, "would give me greater pleasure than to find the gang all at home at onct."

His dusty slouch hat was off. The fire flickered up. And its fitful glow revealed a single strand of silvery hair that shone in Jack's dark thatch like the saddle mark on a pony. Buckshot from a dying bad man's shotgun had creased Steele's scalp as he rushed in to make an arrest.

An inch lower and Steele, that night, would be resting in some Boot

Hill. Instead, he had stayed upright long enough to handcuff the owner of the shotgun, and send him off to the nearest calaboose.

That desperate battle had given Steele a nickname and a reputation for cold nerve, although he was barely past the voting age in a region where hard men, just off the Texas trail, were inclined to laugh with pity at inexperienced youth.

"They've sort o' quit laughin' at me," Jack reflected, "when it comes to fightin'. But they shore will bust out loud if that posse rounds up the gang and leaves me sittin' here like a dang hoot owl on the top of this freezin' mountain."

Now the stiff wind that had been blowing all evening from the line of northern peaks died down. Steele was grateful, for the smoke from his fire no longer got in his eyes. And the sand had quit sifting into the spout of his coffeepot.

"That dang wind," he growled, "with its mournful whinin', was sort o' gittin' on my nerves. An' along with that, makin' my eyes water from smoke. I'm allus glad when the wind——"

The deep silence that had settled over the mountain country was broken. It wasn't a loud sound. Rather a dim, far-away thud. But the hair on the back of Steele's sun-baked neck stood up like the hackles of a fighting dog.

He came up on his knees. And as his gray eyes searched the night, a sinewy gun hand automatically caught the Winchester around the small of the stock and flipped the rifle up for quick action.

"That," Steele breathed, "was a gunshot I heard."

He sat there listening, every nerve tense, his eyes straining against the black night. There came no further sound, although he

crouched in readiness for what seemed hours.

Then, after carefully uncocking the rifle, he crept away from his fire and down toward the patch of bunch grass where his two ponies fed at the ends of long picket ropes.

"At night," he growled, "it takes a hoss to spot trouble."

But the hungry ponies were suffering from no nerve attacks. Both were digging spotted noses into the rich feed, eagerly stoking up for another day of hard trailing.

"Tough on 'em," Jack said with a grim smile. "I ride 'em all day. Then they got to stay awake all night, feedin' up fer another dose of ridin'."

But he knew that range horses needed little sleep or rest lying down. Two or three hours at the most, around three in the morning, would do for the average cayuse.

"At that," he decided, "they're sort of company. Wish I could tie 'em near the fire. Then, if anybody made a sneak, they'd stick up their ears, an' I'd be set pronto fer trouble."

Away from the glare of the fire, the night wasn't so black. Steele lingered near his ponies, carefully studying each ledge of rock, each tongue of black pines that might offer a hidden approach for an enemy.

He had looked the ground over by daylight. But he knew there is also such a thing as accustoming the eyes to the look of a range by night.

"Only two or three ways they could git within ten yards of my rocks," he decided, "an' it would take an Injun to turn the trick."

He laughed then, dismissed his fears, and started back to the camp.

"That gunshot," he reflected, "might have been some round-up cook shootin' a beef fer breakfast.

Gunshots ain't uncommon on the range."

But hard common sense checked his light laughter.

"No round-up cook," he whispered, "would kill a beef steer after dark. No, sir! A single shot like that would stampede a drive herd. An' as fer hunters—what hunter would be traipsin' over a range as black as a gambler's heart?"

So here was Jack, right back at the start of his speculations. The gunshot *had* indicated trouble. And try as he might, he was unable to argue against his belief.

"Somethin' loose to-night in the mountains," he whispered.

Now, from some headland hidden by night, a wild chorus echoed from the rims.

"Coyotes!" Jack Steele whispered. "They have scented a *kill*!"

A moment he waited, trying to follow the probable course of the little yellow wolves by their wailing song. Then a more distant yipping and barking answered the first.

"Another bunch has heard the fust," Steele said. "They're talkin' back an' forth, tellin' each other how to reach the meat fast."

For like most Westerners, Steele believed that coyotes had a language all their own—high-pitched signals that told of danger, of food, of strange doings by night on the range.

"Yuh can't fool a coyote," he said.

Down on the meadow, a horse suddenly snorted, then ran on the picket rope until the long line twanged. Steele whirled, spotted briefly some movement along the edge of the jack-pine clump just below his fire. Instantly he flattened out on the ground, rammed Winchester stock against the curve of his right shoulder, held back the

trigger, as he cocked his gun, to prevent a revealing click.

Then—alert and as stiff as a board—he lay waiting.

Nothing stirred in the jack pines. But now both ponies were nervous, and circling their picket pins.

"It ain't a strange hoss," Steele whispered, "or they'd whicker. Ain't a grizzly bear, or they'd plumb stampede. So it must be—"

Just above the pines ran a little rise of ground. Now something foreign to the grassy crest moved across. It was a man. He was crawling toward Steele's camp. Approaching as quietly as a wolf stealing up on a range herd.

"Figures I've gone to sleep," snarled Jack.

The dim form wasn't twenty yards away. Difficult to pick up, but at such close range, Steele believed he could drive a bullet with killing effect. He gathered himself for battle, took up the trigger slack. Then he spoke, for it was always Steve's custom to give any man a fighting chance:

"Hombre, I got you covered. One more move an' I kill yuh."

## CHAPTER II.

### WAR IN THE RIMS.

STEELE gripped his rifle, certain that a red blaze of gunfire would answer his challenge. For who but a foe, perhaps some spy of the Broken Wall gang, would crawl up afoot toward a hidden man's camp.

Except for the thud of hoofs as two nervous ponies circled on the meadow, there wasn't a sound in the mountains. Even the coyote chorus had died as abruptly as it had arisen.

"Is that hombre tryin' to out-guess me?" Steele rasped. "Does he figure that playin' possum will sink

my nerve, draw me out whar he can throw a slug through my brisket?"

He held the advantage of position. He could see the dim shape on the ridge that he knew was a crouching man. But not once did it move.

"I got you under my front sight," Jack called. "An' I'm not figurin' to take chances. Git up slow. Keep your hands in the air!"

But the shape didn't move. And now Steele frowned, for this was strange indeed. Few men, held under a gun at twenty yards' range, would boldly defy the man who had the cold drop. As Steele pondered whether it was some trick designed to draw him into the open, he heard another sound foreign to the mountains.

It was the slow and labored breathing of a man, almost like the broken gasping of a wind-broken horse after a hard gallop.

"I've heard men breathe that way before," whispered Jack. "It's when they are dead beat. Or shot through the lungs."

Then it flashed into his mind that here might be the victim of that mysterious gunshot he had heard earlier. Perhaps some wounded man, seeking aid and safety, had blindly crawled within range of his gun.

"I can't let the pore hombre lay out thar," Jack decided. "It may be jest a bluff to git me under a front sight, but I got to take the chance."

At a slow crawl, and dragging his rifle, he approached the crest. He was alert for any hostile movement on the part of the man who lay there breathing so painfully.

He was not five yards distant when he heard something that checked him more abruptly than if

he had run into a half dozen hostile rifles. He heard his own name:

"Steele! Jack Steele, is it you?"

The words were ground out between gasping pauses for breath. Now there was no mistaking the fact that this stranger was in distress.

Steele forgot his caution. He laid down his rifle, topped the ridge in a hurry. There, flat on his stomach in the grass, lay a slight figure. A head was raised as Jack's high-heeled boots crunched gravel.

Jack caught sight of a wisp of gray beard, of eyes deeply set in a thin face. Then he knelt, gently raised the suffering man in his strong arms, and said:

"You called the turn. It's me—Jack Steele!"

A quiver ran through the man's limp frame. He stirred in Jack's arms, spoke huskily. "I—I shore am glad to see yuh, Jack. Figured I'd never make it. They—they're huntin' me to-night."

This cold ridge offered no comfort to a weary, suffering human. Steele picked up his visitor, strode up the hill, and into the hidden shelter of his camp fire. He threw two or three bits of wood on the coals, fanned up a warming blaze with his hat. Then he turned to inspect the man who now lay stretched out on the blankets.

The firelight revealed that here was age overtaken by weariness. Deep lines were carved into the leathery face from the thin, straight nose down to blue lips half hidden by the tangle of gray mustache and whiskers.

The old man had lost his hat, and only a few wisps of hair white as cotton protected his pate from the cutting wind. He wore garments of faded buckskin, with beaded Indian moccasins on his feet.

There was a broad belt around his middle, but the six-gun holster was empty, and no knife showed in the rawhide scabbard slung down the left hip. Brush had ripped and slashed the tough leather leggings, and there were traces of black mud clinging to the buckskin fringe.

"Whoever yuh are," Steele muttered as he shoved over the coffee-pot to start it steaming, "you are in bad shape."

The old man roused as he heard Steele's voice. He tried to sit up, but his arms crumpled under him. Yet, as he lay gasping on the blanket, he managed to speak:

"Steele, there's *murder* abroad to-night on this range. Don't make any wrong moves."

Jack poured out a cup of black coffee and fed it to his tattered old guest. The coffee seemed to put a new strength into the grizzled wearer of buckskins. Now he at last got an arm under his body and half arose. And as Jack continued to dole out coffee, he spoke between swallows:

"Yo're wonderin' who I am an' whar I come from. My name's Abe Darcy. I got a cabin an' claim down on the head of Hoodoo Crick. I'm a hunter an' trapper. Been at it since the last Injuns quit this country. But—but gittin' a leetle old fer it."

"Aw, you'll be feelin' jake in a minute," Jack cheered him.

"Shore. I ain't hurt bad. But—but when human wolves chase an ol' man straight up the side of a mountain, it sort o' gits his wind."

"Where was yore hoss?"

"They stole him from the picket rope while I was cookin' supper."

"Picket rope? I thought you had a cabin an' claim. That would mean a pasture."

Old Abe shook his head. "I got

a cabin an' pasture, all right. But fer the last day or so I ain't dared tuh sleep at night in my own home. An' when they finally stole my hoss an' spotted my hide-out, I knew my only hope was to reach you. Fer yo're an officer of the law."

Now Steele sat alongside the old man with a frown on his face. Abe appeared genuine. But after all, how came it that he knew Steele by name and occupation?

The Broken Wall gang consisted of men not only fast with guns, but quick with their wits. If they could reach Steele through his feeling of pity for this old fellow, lure him away from his safe rock shelter, pump him full of lead in the darkness—

"It would shore be a pleasure to them," Steele growled.

His eyes roved over Abe. He could believe that bandits might steal a picketed horse. But if a man feared for his life, why had he lost his knife and six-gun, fled unarmed into the mountains?

Abe, rapidly recovering now under the urge of strong coffee, sat up like a lean old wolf. He had a pair of blue eyes that looked honest enough to Jack. But then Steele had long since quit judging men by the look in their eyes. Too often the guilty appeared innocent, and innocent guilty.

"Yo're afraid of a trap," Abe declared. "I don't blame yuh. But I'll try to set yuh right." He pawed a cocklebur out of his flowing beard. "You know a younker named Jerry Darcy?" he asked.

Steele nodded. "Jerry," he answered, "rode with me when I worked for the Two Bar Cross outfit west of Cheyenne. We rode an' slept an' fought together fer two or three years. Once Jerry dragged me away jest in time when a man-killin'

bronc had me down in the breakin' corral. He busted a leg doin' it. Risked his life. Yeah, I'll say I know Jerry. But I ain't seen him fer a long time."

"Jerry," Abe answered, "is my nephew. An' right this minute he ain't over five miles distant from this here hump."

"How come?"

"Thar's a big cattleman moved into this region recent. His name is Red Rube Garr. Seems tuh have plenty money. Laid his eye on my little homestead an' wanted tuh buy it. I didn't want to move, fer I had lived thar thirty years. I was satisfied. But Rube got more persistent. Said an ol' mossback like me was holdin' up progress, that with my homestead he figured to build up a dang good cow outfit."

"Why did he need yore homestead?"

"It controls the head of Hoodoo Crick, and I got a fust right to all the water. Also, there's a basin on my land that is a natural reservoir site. But Rube didn't tell me that. A surveyor who come pokin' through the hills wised me up. Rube made his final offer, an' I laughed at him. He went snarlin' mad. He swore if I didn't act reasonable he'd shore hang my hide on a fence."

"Yeah?"

"I'm old. Not many friends. An' Rube has money enough to keep plenty tough gun fighters on his pay roll. So I wrote to Jerry. An' ten days ago the boy rode into this section. He ain't let on he's related to me. He got a job helpin' to haze Rube's weak cattle down from the dry country. An' that way he could hear what Rube was sayin' an' pass the word to me. A day ago he met me in the timber and said I'd better

stay away from the cabin, that Rube had somethin' up his sleeve."

"How did you know about me bein' up here?"

"A couple days ago, while me an' Jerry was prowlin' around, we spotted you across a canyon. Thought at fust you was one of Rube's spies. But Jerry, when he looked through my glasses, he knew yuh. An' so, while I've been hidin' out in the hills, I've also been keepin' an' eye on you fer help in case of trouble. I'm callin' fer that help now. An' as an officer of the State, you got to offer it."

Steele frowned. If he aided this old man to defend his homestead, it meant abandoning his search for the Broken Wall gang. But there came the thought of a day when he lay helpless in the corral dust under the pounding feet of a red-eyed outlaw horse. That day a freckle-faced young puncher had stood between Jack Steele and death.

"Let 'em laugh," said Jack, thinking of the jeers that would rise if he failed to bring prisoners out of the mountains. "Let 'em laugh. I'd rather be called a clown than a pore sort who will turn down his friends."

Old Abe was pouring a third cup of java down his scrawny throat. Now his breath was back, and there was color in his face.

"By gravy," he drawled, "yore coffee is strong as sheep dip, but it shore warms up a man's innards! I tell yuh, Jack, I was about dead beat when yuh got to me. They jumped my camp so fast I had tuh bust into the bresh without a chance to pick up my six-gun an' knife. I had laid both down handy by my fire. But here come two or three gents on big hosses, whoopin' an' hollerin'. I hit fer the bresh like a scairt jack rabbit. I fell into the

crick, got bogged down, dang near busted a laig when night come on. Run out o' breath. Felt all my years when I got up to whar it was ten thousand feet above sea level. But I—I kept comin'."

"Why didn't you git help from Jerry?"

"They had me cut off from whar he's camped. An' besides, he's workin' fer Rube Garr. They'd kill him if they so much as suspected he was related to me."

Steele stood up, gray eyes flashing with the battle light.

"If you'll lead out when yo're able," he rasped, "I'd like nothin' better than tuh tangle with this same Rube Garr."

In his anger he had forgotten caution. But when he heard the high-pitched whinny of his saddle horse he ducked.

"Look out!" old Abe shouted.

And, weak as he was, the trapper lunged from the blanket, grabbed Steele just below the knees, dumped him to the ground.

Even as Jack crashed down, the roar of a gun deafened him. A bullet screamed over his head, slammed against the face of the granite wall.

But for the bawl of the horse, the alertness of Abe, Jack Steele would never have heard the soft-nosed slug. It would have driven into the back of his skull.

Now, flat on the ground, all mixed up as he was with Abe Darcy, Steele fought for the six-guns caught under his squirming body. He freed the right-hand Colt, half raised himself, thumbed the hammer as he cut down with the long barrel.

The blasting roar of the six-gun sent the echoes rolling back from the rims. Red blazed the answering report from the black fringe of jack pines.

"They picked up my trail!" Abe

Darcy was shouting. "The skunks have worked a surround."

Now Steele freed his left gun, tossed it toward Abe.

"Git busy!" he barked. "They may have picked up a trail. But by the livin', they ain't foller'd it clear to the finish."

### CHAPTER III.

#### UP THE WALL.

**B**ARRICADED in the grim rocks of the mountain divide, Steele prepared for a finish fight. There was no chance to crawl away from the cliff and down to where his horses were picketed. The hidden foe held the line of timber, thirty yards away. Nor could Steele discover their number, for the storm of lead kept him flattened out on the ground.

*Bram!* Old Abe, fast regaining his strength under the urge of battle, let go with Steele's six-gun.

The trapper had crawled up alongside Jack, and was stretched out behind a rock ledge.

"By gravy," he yipped as the Colt boomed, "runnin' up a mounting may git my wind, but when it comes tuh a pitched fight, I feel spry as a spring chicken!"

"How many do yuh think are jumpin' us?" Jack snapped.

"Hard tuh say. Must be at least three men. That many jumped my camp."

"You know any of 'em?"

"Looked like Rube's fancy gun fighters. A rat-faced knifer called 'Whitey' Rook, a lanky gun thrower named 'Bronc' Spotts, an' 'Deaf Dick' Diamond. Yuh want to look out fer Deaf Dick. He's a smart hombre."

"What do yuh mean?"

"Got a tricky way of pullin' a gun from an armpit holster agin' a

man who has the drop. Pertends he can't hear, yells 'Hey,' an' puts his hand to his ear. That gives him the chance tuh draw iron. He's a reg'lar——"

*Bram!* A rifle volley shut off the talk.

Now sounded the pop of ropes as horses broke away, and the boom of hoofs on the hollow mountain soil.

"Stampeded my hosses!" Steele groaned. "Set me afoot!"

Certainly this night's work was making a joke of the young officer. Without a mount, how could he hope to trail a bandit gang, even if he escaped from this trap?

Now came another disaster. In heating coffee for old Abe, he had put too much wood on his fire. Suddenly a chunk, oozing with pitch pine, blazed up like a torch. The shadows of Steele and the old man were outlined on the wall behind as if drawn in black chalk.

Clever gunmen could thus estimate the two battlers' positions and pitch bullets against the rock so that glancing slugs would drill into the trapped men.

*Wham!* A screaming bullet hit the wall, splattered into a chunk of whirling, jagged metal, whizzed back to bury itself in the gravel alongside Jack's ear.

Down in the timber, a gunman whooped his triumph!

"Figures he made a hit!" Steele snapped.

"By gravy," old Abe flared, "they'll fill us so full of holes we'll look like a fish net!"

"Got to put out that dang fire!" Jack growled.

To do that, he must leap up, expose his tall frame to speeding slugs as he kicked the blazing pine aside. But better to die standing up than get a mushroomed bullet through his backbone.

"Raise up!" he told Abe. "Elevate that Colt an' pump lead like a house afire. Keep 'em busy!"

Old Abe came up on his bony knees. His scant white hair flared in the wind. His blue eyes fairly bulged as he squinted down the Colt's gleaming barrel. It's rolling thunder rose to a deafening bellow.

In that moment of high-pitched battle, with both sides firing wildly, Steele leaped up, rushed to the fire, kicked the blaze to scattered bits of red embers.

*Bram!* A slug cut through the sleeve of his shirt. Another gouged a hole through the peak of his hat.

Defiant, fighting mad, he whirled and cracked back with his six-gun.

Down the slope, a man who had just risen to take better aim, flung up his arms, staggered backward, and fell over a log.

"Got one!" rasped Jack, and dived down beside old Abe.

The fight died for a spell. The raiders in the trees were apparently aiding their wounded comrade. The pause gave Jack time to take stock of his ammunition, talk things over with old Abe.

"There's a chance," the trapper explained, "that they'll sneak up on the rim. Then they can shoot down on us."

Steele frowned. "We must git the jump on 'em," he decided. "Git on the rim first. About two hundred yards along this divide there's a break in the wall where a man can climb up."

Abe laughed. "I can lay an' fight all right," he said, "but climbin' shore gits my wind. But if we gotta move, we better hop to it."

"If we fight 'em off until mornin'," we'll run out o' ca'ttridges. Then they can rush us easy. I only got a half belt full for my six-guns,

and about fifty rounds fer the carbine."

To creep the short distance along the base of the rim meant an exposure to killing gunfire. But they must take that chance. They would keep to the shadows under the rocks, move as silently as possible.

Steele looked over his guns, divided his six-gun ammunition with Abe, then pointed out a narrow opening between two large boulders.

"You first," he muttered, "I'll be the rear guard."

Before they started, they shook hands.

"Keep a stiff upper lip," Jack said grimly, "we'll beat these wolves yet."

"By gravy," snorted Abe, "long as I don't have tuh climb uphill, they'll have their troubles stoppin' this ol' root hawg."

Then, to hold the attention of the ambushers, Steele lined his Winchester and rattled out a string of lead while Abe wriggled between the boulders. Steele crammed fresh shells into the hot magazine, turned away from his barricade, pushed into the narrow gap which, in more peaceful times, served as a runway for woodchucks.

Emerging, he saw ahead an open space. Abe had crossed this in safety, due to Jack's hot gun action. But as the young officer went groping across on hands and knees, the black timber rang again with gunfire. They had spotted him, were attempting to cut him down.

"Come on, Jack!" Abe shouted.

And Steele heard the booming roar of the Colt as he leaped up and ran madly across the space toward the shelter of huge rocks. Bullets zipped and hissed past him. One struck a boot heel. The shock of

the blow almost knocked him down. But, recovering, he plunged ahead.

Down in the jack pines, men howled like hunting wolves.

"Got me sky-lined!" gasped Jack.

Two more lunges and he would be safe in shelter. But the loss of the heel had made him clumsy. An ankle gave as he stepped on a round rock. He went down. As he scrambled for balance, bullets sang past him.

"Firin' wild an' high," he panted, "but I won't stay lucky."

Old Abe dropped his six-gun, recklessly exposed his body as he leaned over a rock. He grasped Steele's extended right hand, gave a mighty jerk. Into it he put all his strength.

Jack lunged against the rock face, scrambled madly to get over it. A bullet whipped past his dangling legs. Then, out of breath, he dropped into shelter.

Old Abe lay on the ground, wheezing for breath.

"My—my pipes!" he gasped. "This here altitude shore gits 'em."

"By the livin'," Steele ripped out, "if it hadn't been fer you, they'd have bored me slick as a whistle."

"Can we go ahead? They know now we're tryin' to git away."

"We got to keep goin'."

"All right."

Again they started that slow and cautious crawl through the black shadows of the rims. Now there were few open spaces to cross. The hidden gunmen quit firing.

"Runnin' short of shells," Abe whispered as they paused for a breather.

"Either that," said Jack, "or figurin' some new trick. So far they've held the cards. Penned us up agin', a high wall, run away our hosses."

"What can they do?" Abe specu-

lated. "We're between them an' the top of the divide."

Jack didn't answer that. He feared that while some of Garr's gang flanked the wall, others might slip around and block the front for Jack and Abe.

"Here's that break in the wall," Jack said. "Can yuh climb it? You keep complainin' about yore pipes."

"By gravy," Abe said, "you'd be surprised how fast a breathless man kin climb when somebody's shootin' at him."

"You watch the rear," Jack ordered. "I'll shin up the slope. It's about twenty feet high. When I holler, you start climbin'."

The break had been made by a huge portion of rock caving off the rim in some winter storm. It was twenty feet of steep going, but a man could dig his toes and fingers into the loose gravel and worm his way to the top. Steele slung his carbine across his shoulders, rammed his six-gun into its holster. Then he started up. The going was black with shadow, but above gleamed the tiny opening against the horizon where the break joined the main rim.

Steele was halfway up when his clutching fingers sank into a depression recently made in the soft gravel.

"Feels like a bear or a mountain sheep made tracks here," he whispered.

He dared not strike a match. That would indicate to the men down the mountain that he was climbing up to the rim. With his hand, he traced out the mark. And the conviction grew that this was not a print made by a grizzly or a bighorn sheep.

"A man made that track," he said. "An' dang recent. Dug his

boot in deep here to keep from slidin'."

That meant that the top of the break was blocked. One man—perhaps several—were hidden up there, waiting for the first of the fugitives to appear on the sky line.

"They shore got me figurin' now," Steele pondered. "I can't turn back. An' it's a big gamble if I go ahead."

So he resorted to his first rule in life—that when two ways were open, to always go ahead. And silent as a high-country cougar, moving skillfully to avoid loose rocks that might plunge down the slope and warn the men above of his approach, Steele crept up to Broken Wall Rim.

Where the narrow slide cut through the wall, he lay for a moment to recover his breath. Now he was above the basin country. The stars were out. Far to the east, a dim glare indicated the rising moon. The echoes of gunfire had long since drifted away.

As Steele lay there, he heard again the wild chorus of the coyotes.

"They have finally got together," he whispered. "I wonder what they found."

There wasn't a sound near him. Apparently he had been mistaken about that boot mark on the slide. He stood up and stretched his cramped arms.

"Abe!" he called. "The way's clear! Start climbin'."

Even as he spoke, a huge figure lunged from the cover of the saw-toothed ledge. A thick arm crooked around Steele's neck. His head was dragged backward. A knife blade flashed under the stars as it drove straight down toward his throat.

"Got yuh!" the knifer shouted. "Got yuh, Mr. Jerry Darcy, yuh dang stool pigeon!"

## CHAPTER IV.

### COYOTE BAIT.

EVEN as Steele jerked away to avoid the slash of the bowie, the killer's words explained a lot to him. Garr's gang had somehow discovered that Jerry was the old man's nephew.

They had tracked the uncle up the mountain, believing he was seeking aid from Jerry. That meant that Jerry had, for some reason, fled from Garr's cattle camp.

"Ain't got me yet!" gasped Steele.

He had lunged backward to dodge the knife. His breath was cut off by the forearm hooked around his neck. But the keen steel missed a vital spot. It cut Steele's shirt front open from collar to belt buckle.

The knifer had braced himself with one leg behind Jack's writhing body. Now the special officer resorted to a desperate move to save his life. It might end in a broken neck. But it was his only hope.

He flung an arm around the knifer's thick waist, pulled the fellow toward him, and rolled back down the steep slide.

Down they tumbled in a shower of rocks and dust. The heavy body of the knifer almost crushed out Steele's life. Then the two lodged against a jagged sliver of rock, squirmed and fought there in savage, breathless action. All around was the darkness, relieved only by the flash of a bowie knife as Jack's assailant strove to make his kill.

"Git yuh yet!" he panted once, and that was all.

Then Steele, pitching like a broncho, squirmed from under the ponderous weight that lay across his chest. His head smacked against the granite sliver. That blow half dazed him, but if he lost his senses

here, the bowie would drive into his heart.

His right arm was free for a moment. With hard fist, he struck out blindly. The punch cracked against a whiskery chin. The big knifer slumped, then desperately seized Jack's fist.

But he had dropped the knife. And Jack's left hand was now free. The young special officer struck a second time—a blow that traveled a half dozen inches. It was a short, choppy uppercut. It won the fight for Steele.

The big man went limp, then started rolling down the slide. From below came a startled squawk. Steele, sitting up with back braced against the granite sliver, grinned and panted:

"By the livin', I didn't think about ol' Abe crawlin' up!"

The knifer's body, hurtling down the slide, had struck the old trapper, perhaps dislodged him. Steele turned around, gathered up the bowie knife, stuffed it into his belt, and prepared to go to Abe's help.

Then he heard a yelp: "By gravy, I jest dodged that moose! Stay whar yuh be, Jack!"

So, after a breathless spell of climbing, old Abe crawled up to where Jack perched on his rock. The trapper was gasping for breath, but game as an old silver-tip bear.

"Jest dodged that human landslide," he panted. "He went rollin' past at a mile a minute. Never even said 'Hello' when I asked whar he was goin'."

"Did yuh know him?"

"Too dark. Didn't hardly see him, he was goin' so fast."

"Let's finish this climb," Jack said. "An' let's hope he was the only man on top."

Reaching the top, they paused for rest.

"That big feller was the only man who figured on us crawlin' that slide," Jack decided.

"Was he big?"

"Say, when he hit me, I thought I had run into a brick barn. An' while he was cuttin' off my wind, he tried to reach my gizzard with this toothpick."

He passed over the bowie knife. Abe examined it with expert care.

"A dang good piece of steel," he commented. "Buckhorn haft. An' about an eight-inch blade. Say, I've seen this before!"

"Whar?"

"Onct when Red Rube Garr come to talk with me. Look here! See this mark on the handle. Burned in with wire. That's Rube's cattle brand—the Turkey Track."

"Do yuh figure it was Red Rube who wrastled me?"

"Danged if I know. But this is Rube's knife. An' Rube is about the biggest man in these diggings."

They stood up, and now, with Abe guiding, they worked their way down the ridge. The trapper pointed out that they would come to a hogback above the head of Hoodoo Canyon. By following it, they would eventually reach his homestead claim.

"If Rube ain't jumped the place an' run off my hosses from the pasture," Abe explained, "we can git mounts."

As Jack followed over the rough ground, he was puzzling out the strange doings of the night. The merciless attack on Abe, the desire to kill the old man's nephew, all indicated that Garr was playing a deep game.

"It's more than the homestead he's after," Jack decided.

Steele, in his official work, had come into contact with most well-known cattle outfits. He reflected

now that "Red Rube" Garr was a stranger, that the Turkey Track mark was not even registered in the State brand book.

"I've shore got to take a close look at Red Rube," he decided. "Somethin' dang peculiar about him."

They turned down the hogback above the black gorge of Hoodoo Canyon. Steele could hear the roar of the stream far below. Now the moon came up, and the grassy slopes were almost as bright as day.

Old Abe was following a dim game trail, where deer and elk had gone down into the canyon for water. Suddenly he halted, motioned to Jack.

"By gravy," he said as the young officer hastened up, "looks like all the coyotes in creation had held a convention here!"

The confused marks of countless footpads were plain in the trail dust.

"Runnin' around in a circle," Abe decided. "They found somethin'. Figured it was a meal. But all coyotes are plumb suspicious. That's why they're so hard to trap. They'll put in half the night jest circlin' around a dead hoss before they'll come near it."

They moved ahead, wondering what had stirred up the coyotes and caused two packs to join up. High above them loomed the rim of Broken Wall, where a few hours before they had been trapped by Red Rube's gang.

Abe led up to a little knoll that was bright under the moon. He stopped in his tracks, stood as if petrified. Then Steele heard his low cry:

"Here's what the coyotes circled!"

Steele ran forward. There on the knoll lay a man.

"Dead," whispered old Abe.

But as he spoke, the man stirred, tried to prop up on his arms.

"Dang near dead!" snapped Jack.

"That's why the coyotes didn't come near," said Abe. "They was waitin' fer him to die. Yuh can't fool coyotes."

Then both rushed forward, knelt beside the man, raised his sprawled body. He looked into Steele's face with glazing eyes, gestured weakly with his right hand.

"Cashin' in!" he said feebly. "Waited—waited fer a pal to come along. Nobody—nobody come but coyotes!"

"Take it easy," Jack said. "We'll hunt yuh up some cool water. Take keer of you."

In the fight on the rim, the knif-er's blade had cut open Steele's shirt. He had pinned his badge of office inside. The moonlight re-vealed the shield. The stricken man's dull eyes saw it. His mouth opened as he fought for breath.

"You—you a John Law?" he panted.

"Yeah. Name's Steele."

For after the fight, Steele believed that further hiding out would be useless. By dawn, Red Rube would know that an officer had aided Abe. A search of Jack's packs, deserted up there in the rim, would reveal his identity, for there were several letters from his chief among his ef-fects.

"Steele?" gasped the man in his arms. "Silver Jack?"

"Some folks call me that."

There came a brief smile to the man's face. He dropped his right hand, pawed at his belt buckle.

"Git—git the big red moose!" he whispered. "He—did me dirt. Me—that had always been his friend."

"Who's the big red moose?"

The man fought for breath. But his eyelids fluttered. His body went

limp. And old Abe shook his head and said:

"He won't talk no more. He's a goner."

Within a few moments the man's heart had quit beating. They laid the limp body out in the grass. And, seeking to find the cause of death, Jack stripped off a sodden shirt.

"Shot through the body," he whispered. "Close up."

"His life drained away," said Abe. "With help, he might have lived."

The killer had downed his victim and left him on the trail to die a slow death, while sneaking coyotes circled around, watching with green eyes.

"This feller," old Abe said after a look at the man's face, "is one of Red Rube's friends—the one known as 'Whitey' Rook. He was the Turkey Track foreman. Young Jerry said he was shore a tough man tuh ride fer."

Steele frowned. Had young Jerry Darcy, fleeing for his life, put a bullet through "Whitey" Rook?

"Unless he had good cause," Jack reflected, "he'd not beef a man an' let him lay here to die."

Now old Abe made another discovery. He pointed to a soft leather belt that was buckled around Whitey Rook's waist.

"A money belt," snapped Steele.

They examined it. Several of the compartments had been opened. All were empty. But Steele found a crumpled bit of paper in one. He uncreased it, and his eyes bulged.

It was the sort of paper used by banks to wrap around bundles of currency. On it was printed in black letters:

#### CARIBOU NATIONAL BANK.

Steele sat there speechless, gazing from the strip of paper to the quiet

form of Whitey Rook. Here was the first real clew to the whereabouts of the loot from the Desert Limited robbery. Some of the forty thousand dollars had been in Whitey Rook's belt not many hours before.

"It was there," Jack whispered, "when I heard that first gunshot, jest before the coyotes started howlin'. The man who killed Whitey did it to strip him of the money. But Whitey, who could have named the man, has cashed in."

#### CHAPTER V.

##### A BLOCKED TRAIL.

ON this lonely divide, Jack laid out the Turkey Track foreman and piled boulders over the limp body to protect it from prowling coyotes. As he finished the grim job, red streaks in the east indicated daybreak.

"It'll be easier travelin' down to my place," Abe said. "The canyon trail would be right dangerous in the dark."

Steele didn't answer. He was sitting on the pile of rocks that covered Whitey Rook. He was intently examining the paper currency wrapping and the money belt taken from Rook. He saw now that the killer and robber had worked so swiftly that he had torn off most of the metal snaps on the belt compartments.

"That killer was shore afeered of somethin'," Jack mused, "or in a powerful hurry."

Who had been in such a hurry that he would wound a man and then rush away, leaving his victim as a bait for coyotes?

Jack looked at Abe. The trapper stood gazing down over the broad green basin now becoming visible as dawn broke the darkness. He dared

not tell the old man what was in his mind: That he suspected young Jerry Darcy of killing Whitey Rook.

"But it looks that way," Jack growled, hating to believe in his own judgment. "Jerry was the only stranger in the Turkey Track outfit. They had discovered that he was Abe's nephew, and there to help his uncle. Supposin' Rook was trailin' Jerry, while the others was after Abe. They collided here. Jerry got in the fust shot. Mebbe he did bend down to see whar Whitey was hit. He discovered the money belt. The sight of so much money proved too much fer him. He took it an' run."

But the picture didn't shape up with Jack's former knowledge of the young puncher.

"Jerry ain't no thief," he said. "My mind finds him guilty, but my heart don't. No man brave enough tuh pull another from under a man-killin' hoss would be yaller enough to let a man die slow in the hills, like Whitey didc."

He stuffed the money belt into his chaps pocket. He had discovered that it was quite a fancy bit of work, made of the finest chamois leather, and that Rook's initials were stamped in gold on the buckle.

"We better be movin'," Abe called back. "Gittin' light. You kin see fer a long way in this country. Rube might spot us."

"How fur to yore homestead?" Jack asked.

"About a mile if we go down the crick trail."

"Lead out."

Steele's hope now was to get a saddle horse. This was rough country for a man afoot. And Steele, a horseman, wasn't accustomed to climbing. Also, the loss of the heel, knocked off his boot by a bullet, made him clumsy.

As Abe turned down a steep path

with the limber-kneed gait of a woodsman, Jack stumbled after, vainly hoping that the Hoodoo Canyon trail wouldn't be narrow and dangerous.

Within five minutes he discovered that mountain sheep had evidently made this pathway. It pitched down in a series of hairpin curves. In spots, it was not six inches to the outer rim where walls dropped down for hundreds of feet to the roaring stream.

"If a man dropped over here," Jack speculated, "he'd never stop fallin' until he hit the river."

At a sharp turn that overlooked the crooked stream, Abe pointed to a black tongue of timber.

"Them pines," he said, "shade my cabin. Out in front is a meadow that's jest right fer a big reservoir. That's why Rube wants the place. With plenty of water, he can run three thousand cattle on this basin."

"Rube must be a wealthy man an' own lots of stock to have sich large ambitions."

Abe frowned and pawed his mustache.

"By gravy," he declared, "that's the puzzlin' thing about Rube's outfit! Got Jerry guessin', too. Rube has a pile of men on his pay roll—six or seven top hands. But he ain't runnin' over a couple hundred head of cattle. I can't figure whar he's makin' any money that a way. One or two punchers could easy look after his present holdin's."

"Mebbe he is organizin' an outfit of men so that when he buys three thousand longhorns he'll have trained waddies to run 'em."

"It'll take a pile of cash to buy that many cattle."

Jack agreed to that. It would require sixty thousand dollars at present beef prices to stock the Hoodoo range.

"Mebbe Rube has credit with some bank," he decided.

Abe reached the last slope above the creek. Below a thick growth of brush hid the valley. Abe slipped along easily in his low heels, but Steele sized up one dangerous spot where a mountain spring ran across a blue-clay slide.

"If I hit that place with this crippled boot," Jack said, "I'm apt tuh start slippin' an' end up in the top of the tree."

Abe paused, but Jack waved him on as he sat down to pull off his boots.

"I'll be with yuh in a jiffy," he called.

So Abe went skating across the slide and down to the brush. Steele pulled off his boots, and used a bit of string to tie the tabs together. Then he slung them around his neck.

"Worse an' worse," he said with a grim smile. "Came into these hills with two good hosses, a camp outfit, thirty-dollar boots on my feet, and a ten-dollar hat. Now I've lost my hosses, thar's a bullet hole through my hat, an' finally I'm walkin' barefooted."

Nor had he walked a dozen steps before he trod on a prickly pear.

"Ouch!" he yelped.

He sat down to dig out the sticker with his knife. The sun was rising, and the canyon would soon be hot as a bake oven.

"I wish," Jack groaned, "that I was out of this dang Hoodoo country."

*Bram!* From down in the brush there resounded the crash of a gun.

As he leaped up, forgetting the cactus in his foot, he heard Abe's wailing yell:

"Help! They're killin' me!"

Another six-gun cracked. And, following its thunder, sounded the

hoarse shouts of men calling on Abe to surrender.

Down the steep path, Steele went on the lope. His boots pounded his broad chest. He lost his hat. When he reached the clay slide, his feet slid as though he were racing across glare ice.

But not even the chance of a fall over a rim a hundred feet high could stop Steele. For now he heard old Abe shouting a second time for help. Then the roll of guns cut off the trapper's yell.

"The wolves!" Steele snarled. His gray eyes were blazing. "They must 'a' spotted us while we were buryin' Whitey, slipped down into the canyon, laid an ambush in the brush."

If he hadn't delayed to take off his boots, he, too, would have walked into the trap. Now he was fifty feet above the brush. The deafening roar of Hoodoo Creek beat against his ears.

He saw a tall man slip out from a patch of quaking asp, flip up a rifle, and line on the rim-rock trail.

*Bang!* A bullet dug up the gravel just below Steele.

He swerved like a range horse dodging a lariat.

Another slug whined past him.

"He's raisin' the sights," Jack growled, and dodged behind a rock on the edge of the cliff. As he hit the gravel, a third bullet spattered against the boulder.

Now Steele shoved the six-gun he had been carrying back into its holster. He swung his carbine around, ducked his head through the sling, pumped a shell into the breech, and lined on the nervy marksman below.

*Wham!* Dust spurted up between the man's widely spaced boots.

"Finer bead," snarled Steele, kneeling behind his rock with car-

bine stock tight against his shoulder.

His second shot was such as a hunter makes at a running deer. For now his target was backing rapidly toward the shelter of the thicket.

"Fifty yards," Steele breathed, "hold hard on his belt buckle."

The marksman wore a belt slung bandolier fashion over his right shoulder. The rising sun made the brass heads of the cartridges in the loops gleam like gold.

*Bang!* Steele's stubby carbine barked.

His target jerked backward, dropped a rifle from which blue smoke trailed, clawed at the front of his shirt. As he staggered there, a horseman crashed into view. He whirled his buckskin pony across the open space to cover the reeling marksman.

"You up there!" he roared. "If yuh don't stop shootin', we'll shore make yore uncle suffer!"

So they still believed that Jack was old Abe's nephew.

"As I remember him," Jack said, "Jerry had bright-red hair. If they spot me, they'll know I ain't Jerry."

There was some advantage to be gained in making the gang believe they were trailing two instead of three men. So Steele hid his top-knot behind the rock.

"Listen," he shouted. "If you try any tricks on Uncle Abe, I'll beef yuh both."

The man on the horse—a giant with a bushy red beard that glinted in the sunlight—flung back his huge head. He roared with harsh laughter.

"You dang stool pigeon," he rasped. "You got lots of time to tell me what to do. You sittin' up thar like a gopher in the rocks. An' us down here with ol' Abe tied to a

tree. Now if you'll take my advice—"

Steele dared not ask for the man's name. That would, of course, indicate that he wasn't Jerry Darcy. But as he studied the horseman and recalled the nickname of the Turkey Track boss, the conviction grew that he faced Red Rube Garr. And if Rube had captured old Abe, then Steele's work was cut out.

While they faced each other, the wounded man dropped to all fours and crawled into the brush like a suffering dog.

"That's the second of my men you've bored," Rube roared. "An' I kin tell yuh that I'll make yuh suffer fer it."

"Yuh red-muzzled bully!" Steele cried. "What right you got to chase an ol' man an' his nephew all over the mountains like they was wolves?"

Red Rube planted his big hands on his saddle horn.

"You are wolves!" he snarled. "An' if the State officers knew as much about yuh as I do, there would be twenty men after yuh instead of my half dozen."

"What yuh drivin' at?"

"Don't act so dang innocent, as if you had never heard of the Broken Wall Basin gang or the Desert Limited stick-up."

Steele snapped to attention. There it was again; another tip-off on the mysterious gang of hard-riding bandits. But this Red Rube was accusing Abe and his nephew of being robbers.

"Can't believe it," Steele muttered.

But the old man had said that he knew these mountains, and had lived here for years. What better hide-out than his homestead for a bunch of train robbers?

"An' young Jerry," Jack Steele

groaned. "I've been out o' touch with him since I quit punchin' cows. Mebbe he went to the wild bunch."

Plenty of young fellows, wild as colts on the cow range, got off on the wrong foot. The venturesome life of banditry appealed to them. There was a gamble to whip up the blood in the stopping of some fast train, the pitched battles with posses.

But Steele knew, as did all his fellow officers, that the gamble was not worth the payment. He had seen many of these kids shot off their horses, lynched in frontier towns, sent to State prison in chains.

"Never a one," he growled, "makes a *win* of it."

But if Red Rube were telling the truth, then Steele must seek out and arrest a youngster who had broken a leg to save his life.

"I got to clean this thing up pronto," growled Jack, "jest for my peace of mind."

There was no longer a question of the State's laughing at him for following a blind trail. He was in the heart of the bandit range. But the path of duty loomed as darkly as a cloud-burst rolling across the hills.

"You better put up yore hands!" shouted Red Rube. "You got no chance."

"What do yuh mean?"

*Bang!* As Red Rube raised a mighty right arm in signal, a rifle cracked high above Steele.

A slug whizzed past him. Then he understood. Some of Rube's gang were hidden up on the divide. Gunmen barred any advance or retreat for Jack Steele. He must lay down his guns or take a slug through his spine.

"Better come down!" Red Rube advised.

The Turkey Track owner was evidently a fearless man. Contempts-

ous of Steele's guns, he sat calmly on his big buckskin pony with both hands resting on the saddle horn.

"He's bluffin'," Steele decided. "Knows I'm afraid to take a shot at him because they've trapped ol' Abe."

"If you don't come down fast," Rube shouted, "we'll shore stretch yuh out on that wall tuh dry. We'll have yuh lookin' like jerked beef directly. I'll give yuh a minute tuh decide."

Steele made cautious inspection of his surroundings. Just below his rock, the slope fell away sharply, but at least it wasn't a sheer wall.

"About a fifty-foot roll," Jack growled. "I tumbled twenty feet on the rim dodgin' a bowie. I reckon I can go fifty feet to duck a bullet."

He looked around his barricade.

"I'm comin' down," he called to Red Rube, "an' comin' fast."

Rube grinned and pawed his whiskers.

"Yo're a good boy," he taunted. "I can see yo're right fond of yore uncle. Come ahead."

"All right," shouted Steele, and he rolled over the rim.

## CHAPTER VI.

### BARE TRACKS.

AS Jack struck the slope, he saw Red Rube throw the spurs into his pony. And as the young officer went rolling and tossing downhill in a cloud of dust and gravel, speeding bullets paced him.

Before starting this life-and-death tumble, he had been forced to drop his boots and rifle. These articles would interfere with free action and undoubtedly would have been damaged or lost in the wild slide down through the rocks.

But Steele clung grimly to his six-

gun. If he did arrive at the foot of the Hoodoo Canyon wall, he might need that big Colt, and right badly.

His feet, covered only by torn wool socks, helped to check the speed of his flight. There were tiny cups where rocks had been ripped away by spring floods. The depressions had filled with sand and gravel. At such places, Steele dug in his toes, and thus, for a moment, could lessen his speed.

Nevertheless, it was a breathless, bone-racking slide. What remained of his outer shirt was worn to a frazzle consisting of collar and cuffs. Spiny tops of service-berry brush whipped his face and hands. Jagged rocks tore his flesh and bruised his ribs.

"Wuss," gasped Jack, "than ridin' a red-eyed bronc."

*Crash!* He flung out his long, saddle-warped legs as he hit the base of the slope.

His toes rammed into a bed of sand. Just ahead stood a patch of tall rye grass. And on beyond he saw the fringe of brush along Hoodoo Creek.

As he lay in the shade, fighting for breath, and striving to clear his dizzy brain, Red Rube broke through the rye grass with buckskin pony running at full gallop. The big man sat half turned in his saddle. His hands no longer rested on the horn. Both were filled with gleaming six-guns.

"Yowie!" he whooped. "Yuh side-hill rounder! I'll cut down yore climbin' speed!"

But as he chopped down to fire on Steele, his marksman on the top rim tried again with a rifle. The slug pitched over Jack and creased the shoulder of the buckskin pony.

It was only a slight wound, but it stung the buckskin like the bite

of a bald-faced hornet. Buck bawled, bogged a wicked head, and popped into the air in a spasm of high-and-lofty bucking.

Red Rube's six-guns roared, but the slugs dug into the ground. For the Turkey Track chief had no time now to kill a man. His pony forced him to ride with whip and spur to stay in leather.

With a laugh, Jack Steele leaped up. He was barefooted, half clothed, but in his right mind. And how thankful he felt toward the man on the rim who had nicked Rube's pony.

"I'll bet," Jack laughed as he scuttled for shelter along the creek, "that Rube will shore make that gent hard to catch."

It would have been easy for Steele to have shot Rube off the pitching pony. The rider was unable to defend himself, for this buckskin was indeed a top bucker. It fairly stood on its spotted nose, then rose on hind legs and pawed at the sun.

Rube lost his hat. His red beard whipped in the wind. He yelled and swore. But the grunting, bawling pony bore him up the creek, never turning aside for clumps of brush that lashed the rider like whips.

"I'll take Rube on," Jack said as he dived into the thicket, "when I don't have to shoot him through the back."

Just now Steele was intent on rescuing old Abe. The brush was thick, but by bending down he could follow trails made by deer as they forced passages to the stream.

One of these led Steele to a clearing that had been trampled down by the feet of horses. Here he reckoned they had waited for Abe and then captured him. But though Steele cast around like a hunting dog, he saw no further sign of men.

"Not even that wounded gent," he decided. "While me an' Rube was talkin', the rest of his gang took Abe and went down the canyon."

That would bring them out in the timber back of the trapper's cabin. Steele wasted no more time searching this bit of brush. He took to the banks of the creek, where travel for a sore-footed man was easier on the wet sand in the shallows.

He made fairly rapid progress, for now, nearing the basin, the stream was widening out and slower of current. Once or twice Jack slid off a muddy bank into a big pool where beavers had dammed up the creek. But each time he held his six-gun high above his head to keep the working action clear of clogging mud.

"I ain't so shore of the shells in my belt," he puffed as he crawled out of an icy pool, "but I'll be sartain of the five in my old gun when I tangle with the gents that have got Abe."

His gray-haired chief in Cheyenne would never have recognized his generally spruce-looking young officer in the red-eyed figure galloping down Hoodoo Valley.

What remained of Jack's shirt was now plastered with mud. The wool socks had worn away to frazzled bands around his ankles. The roll down the canyon slope had cut and slashed the whang leather of Jack's chaps until his bare knees stuck out into the mountain breeze.

But he had made sure of preserving one article before he undertook his job of outrolling a rifle. He had unpinned his badge of office and stowed it away in his chaps pocket, along with the money belt taken from Whitey Rook. That pocket was of horsehide, and of double thickness. It had survived the day's affairs thus far.

"But if this thing keeps up much longer," Jack growled, "I'll have nothin' much left on me exceptin' that pocket."

Well, unless he wore out his right hand, he would also retain one .45-caliber Colt six-gun. And while he retained that, Steele considered himself a match for one man or a half dozen. So, rather chilly at times, but blithe of spirit for the most part, Steele rambled down Hoodoo Creek.

For about the sixth time, in attempting to keep on the bank of the stream, he stepped on a beaver slide. Both feet went out from under. With a loud splash he slid into the water. Only his head and gun arm remained above the surface.

As he floundered there, striving for balance, a horseman came into sight up the valley. The sun flashed on raking spurs as the rider put his cayuse to full gallop. For he had sighted Steele in the creek.

It wasn't Red Rube. This man was smaller, and he topped a brown pony. He came on at a hard run, believing that a man in a beaver pool would not put up much of a fight.

"That's the gent," Steele sputtered, "who was shootin' at me from the rim. Got off an' led his hoss down the trail that Abe showed me."

Slanting to the side, the man whipped up a gun.

*Bram!* A bullet threw water in Steele's eyes as it went kicking across the shining surface.

"What that gent don't know," Jack rasped, "is that I'm on my feet this minute. An' got a good gun in my mitt!"

The speed of the brown pony carried the rider past Jack. Thirty paces down the creek, the gunman laid back on his reins, turned his mount on the space of a dime, and

came circling back for a second shot. Never once had he called on Steele to put up his hands.

"Figures I'm helpless," the officer raged. "Gittin' a lot o' fun out of it. Waal, here's whar I sit in."

As the brown horse spurted past, broadside to Steele, the young officer jerked down his right arm that had so far been held high above the water.

*Bram!* The Colt roared.

The buck-toothed grin froze on the face of the opposing gunman. He lost both stirrups, reached out with a fluttering hand for the horn, missed it. Then, as he lost both rawhide reins, he pitched from the saddle, bounced as he struck the ground, and lay sprawled and limp.

The brown pony, galloping on, came to a quivering halt as long reins snapped around its front legs.

"A whip-broke hoss," Steele judged.

He emerged from the beaver pool, sloppy wet, and masked with a coating of rich black mud. But it couldn't hide the wide grin on his face.

"A hoss," he said, "an'"—he paused by the limp gunman—"a pair of boots."

But it wasn't his lucky day. The boots were a size too small.

"Dang it," growled Jack. "I'll have tuh keep workin' on Rube's gang until I hit *my* size."

But, boots or no boots, he could top a horse. The brown tried a few buck jumps, but Steele slapped him down the off hind leg, and the cayuse came out of his fit of terror.

They trotted back to where the pony's late master lay in the grass. Jack slid down and made a swift search of the dusty clothing. He found nothing of interest except the round bullet hole just above the man's middle shirt button.

"If I git time," Jack decided as he boarded the brown, "I *may* come an' throw a few rocks on this gent."

But he wasn't worrying much about that. Any horseman who would fire on an apparently helpless man deserved small attention, alive or dead.

"Let Red Rube bury his own stiffs," growled Jack. "It may give him a few new ideas on this midnight-assassin stuff."

As he set the brown to a gallop, Steele wondered what had become of Rube, but decided that the bucking pony had stampeded far up the canyon. And that Rube would have trouble to turn the animal in such narrow going.

Ahead loomed the first pines of the timber above Abe's cabin. Steele saw a plainly marked stock trail that ran across a grassy clearing and into this bit of forest.

"The way they took Abe," he decided.

As the brown pushed through the first fringe of young evergreens, a crackle of gunfire broke out toward the front. That checked Steele.

"I'm danged," he gasped. "I figured they had Abe. But he must 'a' got free. Otherwise, what or who are they gunnin' fer?"

He slid from his saddle, went cautiously ahead. He came to the lower edge of the timber.

Below him lay a log cabin with pole corral and horse shelter in the rear. From the front of the house there rolled away a noble expanse of rich meadow land. And on beyond the line of fence built by Abe were the rounded hills of Hoodoo Basin where three thousand head of longhorns could fatten for market almost within sight of the cabin.

"Wuth fightin' for," Steele sighed, for as a cattleman he loved the sight of a spot so ideally suited to the

manufacturing of beefsteak on the hoof. "No wonder Red Rube would kill fer it, an' ol' Abe and his nevvy scrap tuh hold it."

They were fighting now. Smoke wreathed the front of the shack. And down in the meadow, Jack saw the spit and flash of guns held by hidden marksmen.

## CHAPTER VII.

### BOOTS THAT FITTED.

IT looks," he judged, "like the show-down. Abe has got loose, an' he's in the shack, puttin' up a finish fight. Thinks, mebbe, that they downed me on the canyon trail." He frowned, and wished that he had a rifle. "Long range," he went on, staring at the circle of hidden riflemen. "Can't reach 'em with a Colt."

As he lay behind a convenient log, taking in this grim picture of battle against its peaceful background of green grass and blue timber, he saw a ragged line of men jump into sight. They came racing across the meadow. It was a charge on the cabin.

If there had been gun music before, now the iron chorus fairly rose to a deafening clamor. Steele saw a man on the right flank pitch over. Another dropped to his knees, then went crawling behind a rock. The remainder wheeled hastily and scuttled for shelter.

"Waal," Jack said, smiling grimly, "ol' Abe did some right purty shootin'. I reckon his pipes have come unclogged."

It wasn't Steele's habit to lay behind a log while other men tasted of war. Nor was he heedless enough to dare a half dozen rifles with only his six-gun. Carefully he studied the rear of the cabin, seeking some avenue of approach.

"They won't expect anybody from that direction," he said. "Or they'd have put men in this timber."

A stream had plowed a ditch down toward the corral. Tall grass grew along the banks. Steele hated to forsake the brown horse. But a mounted man could never reach the shack. So he took to the ditch.

On hands and knees, he slipped along it, quiet as a weasel approaching a hencoop. Where it rounded the corral, he crept into the open. Now the cabin hid him from the gunmen in the meadow.

So he came to the back door of Abe's cabin. And with a grin, he tried the latch. The door was bolted. But alongside was a single window covered with dirty glass.

Jack edged over, peered through. The dirt on the glass, and the blue smoke that filled the cabin's interior, blurred the figure of the busy defender. But Steele could hear the rapid crash of a rifle, and he knew the man was putting up a fast and nervy fight.

"Old Abe," he laughed, "has shore got to steppin' around right chipper."

Then he raised his six-gun, and with the front sight crashed out the glass. He threw a long leg over the sill, raised a gleeful whoop:

"Hello, Abe! How's tricks?"

*Blam!* A gun blazed in his face.

Steele dodged, flipped up his six-gun, saw a man rushing him. As his right thumb slipped off the hammer, Jack saw that this man had bright-red hair. And, just in time, he dropped his barrel, and the bullet intended to kill bored into the floor.

"Jerry!" Steele yelled. "Jerry Darcy! Don't yuh know me?"

Jerry Darcy, blue eyes hard as agate behind narrowed lids, halted

his charge. He stared at the lanky, muddy gun fighter there in the window.

"Steele!" he choked out. "Jack Steele! But say, yuh can't blame me fer tryin' tuh kill yuh. Yore own mother wouldn't reco'nize yuh, Jack."

"Say," rasped Jack, "can I come in? I may catch my death of cold out here."

"Come in," said Jerry, "but you'll shore take yore chances on gittin' out."

Jack crawled through the window, coughed as thick powder fumes bit into his lungs.

"You can easy git away," he said. "I jest crawled down that ditch back of the corral."

Jerry Darcy wiped a smudge of black powder off his freckled face.

"I wasn't figurin' on gittin' away," he said. "I came here before daybreak to hold down this cabin. An' I'm holdin' it so far."

Then he told Steele how he had heard Rube's plan to seize the homestead by force. He had ridden to warn his uncle, but Rube's men had already rushed the old man's hide-out.

"It was dark, then," Jerry concluded, "so I stayed in the timber until daybreak. Then I slipped into the cabin. When the gang rode up, bold as grass, I started throwin' lead."

Steele peered through a front window. The body of the man who had fallen in the last charge marked the high tide of Red Rube's advance. The gunman lay not fifty yards distant.

"But fifty yards is fifty yards," said Steele, "when they are bumpin' into Jerry Darcy."

The young puncher was shoving fresh cartridges through the loading gate of his Winchester.

"I'm gittin' right short on ammunition," he told Jack, "but with you here, I feel some better."

"I'm sorry," Jack said dolefully, "but, along with my boots an' shirt, I've mislaid my carbine. All I got is this six-gun. An' I've used one of the five loads on a gent up the crick."

"You got a belt on yuh?"

Steele shook his head. "I don't trust shells that has been soaked up in a half dozen beaver dams. But while these four live loads hold out, Jerry, I'll try tuh hold up my end in this fight."

Then he paused and framed a question that he hated to ask.

"Boy," he said finally, "mebbe yo're smart enough to figure why I'm in this country."

Jerry grinned. "My home range is in the southern section of the State," he replied. "I've heard tell of a bunch of train robberies an' bank raids. Puttin' two an' two together, I'd say mebbe you was trailin' the gents responsible."

"You'd be about right. An' I'm dead sartain that the gang hangs out right here in this Hoodoo country. The last job they pulled was the stick-up of the Desert Limited."

"I hadn't heard of that."

"Happened after you rode up here to help yore uncle. Anyway, they got away with a bunch of money sent by the Caribou National Bank, an'—"

Jerry Darcy's blue eyes blazed. "The Caribou National? Say, I've heard mention of that bank around the Turkey Track fire. Whitey Rook, the foreman, was speakin' jest the other day about it to Red Rube."

"Whitey Rook?" Steele's gray eyes narrowed. He raked out the money belt, flung it down under Jerry's gaze. The gold initials on

the buckle were in plain sight. And as Jerry gazed, rather wonderingly, Steele ripped out his question. "Jerry, did *you* fight it out last night with Rook? Did you meet him up thar on a high divide?"

Jerry stepped back. "Rook?" he cried. "Say, last time I saw Rook he was sittin' by the camp fire, drinkin' coffee, last evenin'. It was then I heard Red Rube give him orders to jump my uncle. It was then I started for this cabin. That's the last time I saw Whitey Rook."

Steele stared, then he laughed a great laugh. And he slapped Jerry on the back.

"Boy," he shouted, "you've took a load off my mind! I didn't care if yuh killed Rook. But to kill a man dirty, to let him lay helpless for coyote bait—I couldn't picture you as that sort of a killer, Jerry. An' I'm glad that fer once my mind was wrong an' my heart was right."

"I can't figure what yo're talkin' about," Jerry laughed, "but you don't sound hostile. An' that's enough fer me. I'll ask no more questions."

"Jerry," Jack snapped. "Along with takin' a load off my mind, you've put me on the right trail. Now I can figure what happened to Whitey Rook. He went up there to kill yore uncle. He was alone. He missed connections with the ol' man. Red Rube came along. They got into a quarrel over it. Red Rube put a bullet through his foreman. But, Jerry, he didn't kill Rook because the man had failed to get Abe. He killed Rook because Rook was his right-hand man in the bandit gang, and had a money belt heavy with Desert Limited money under his shirt."

"You mean Rube's the boss of that stick-up gang?"

"I'll bet my next pair of boots—

if I live tuh pull 'em on—that it lines up that way. Rook saw my star. With his dyin' breath, he asked me to git the big red moose that downed him. He knew me, Jerry. Knew I was an officer. But I never thought that Red Rube would kill his pal that way an' leave him fer coyote bait. All the signs pointed to a killin' by a deadly enemy. For only a deadly enemy would lay a man out fer varmint bait."

Jerry frowned. "Red Rube wants to run a big cattle outfit. Money an' power mean more to him than friendship. So he killed Rook to git some of the money he needed fer the buyin' of three thousand long-horns."

The firing had died down in the meadow. But now there sounded a volley. And Jerry dragged Jack to the floor.

"Logs are right thick," he explained, "but a few bullets will drift in the winder. Let's take a peck."

They crawled up to the window, blew away the smoke, and surveyed the field of battle. They saw a rifle barrel protruding above a rock. A white rag fluttered from it.

"Somebody," Jerry said, laughing, "don't care any more fer his shirt than you do, Jack."

"Shirt?" said Jack. "That's a flag of truce."

"Flag of truce? What they got on their mind?"

"I hate to say it, Jerry. But I'm guessin' that—"

They heard a wild bull roar.

"I'd know that voice anywhar," sighed Jerry. "Red Rube has j'ined up."

"I reckon he finally got that hoss turned around," growled Jack.

Red Rube bellowed his threat: "If yuh don't come outa that cabin,

I'll throw a hunk of lead into ol' Abe's brisket."

Jerry turned white under his tan. He looked at Steele.

"I didn't know they had caught Uncle Abe," he choked out.

"I hated to tell you," said Jack, "but they did."

And rapidly he told Jerry of the adventure on the canyon wall. As he finished, he heard Jerry groan. And, peering through the window, he saw that they had pushed Abe into the open. The trapper was blindfolded. His hands were tied behind him.

"Come out," roared Red Rube, "or I'll kill him before yore eyes."

Jerry shivered, half raised his rifle.

"Don't," Steele commanded. "A bullet won't help now. We got to think fast."

"Jack, you think. I—I'm up Salt Crick right now, without a paddle."

"Keep up yore nerve, boy. I'm gittin' an idea."

There in that room that reeked with powder fumes, Steele crouched beside the chalky-faced young puncher and did the hardest thinking of his life in record time.

"Jerry," he asked, "do you trust me?"

"To the limit, Jack."

"Will you do what I say?"

"Yeah."

"Then, boy, tell Rube yo're layin' down yore guns. That you'll wait fer 'em at the cabin door."

Jerry Darcy gritted his teeth. "You ask a hard thing, Jack. I've never quit in my life."

"You ain't quittin'. We're out to save yore uncle, to outwit a pack of human wolves led by a red-muzzled killer. Jerry, trust me."

"But you, Jack? When they come up to the cabin, they'll find you."

Jack Steele grinned. And now his gray eyes blazed with that peculiar fighting light that was like the flash of a bowie blade.

"I'm hopin'," he rasped. "That they *will* come to this cabin."

Jerry Darcy looked deep into Steele's eyes. Then he reached out a hand that was black with the back-spit of powder smoke. There, as they looked through a bullet-pocked window, they shook hands until knuckle bones cracked.

"Jack," Jerry said softly, "I'll do what yuh say."

And he propped up on his elbows and hailed Red Rube.

"I'm layin' down my guns. I'm comin' out."

And as Red Rube roared his triumph, young Jerry stepped boldly through the front door of the shack he had battled to save.

"Red Rube doesn't know I'm here," Jack reflected. "For I didn't do any shootin' from the shack. Likely he never spotted that gunman I dropped. He was in too much of a hurry to reach this homestead."

Steele slipped over and stood just inside the doorway, where the shadows would conceal him. He saw Red Rube and his gang approach in strutting triumph. Ahead staggered old Abe with a rifle jabbing his backbone.

"Rube," Jack counted, "an' four men with him." He frowned. "An' me with only four bullets."

There was no time to search the cabin for ammunition. They were almost upon young Jerry, who stood like a statue with hands in the air. Red Rube halted a dozen paces to the front, grinned all over his whiskered face, and bawled:

"Yuh dang stool pigeon! I've put in a night roundin' up you an'

yore uncle. Waal, I got yuh both. An' so—"

"I laid down my guns," said Jerry, "on condition that you'd turn the ol' man loose."

Red Rube laughed. "If you could live to learn, you'd never ag'in trust a man like me who is gamblin' fer a big stake. Why, yuh dang young sprout, with you an' yore uncle outa the way, I'll have a chance to organize the biggest beef outfit in northern Wyoming!"

"You are gittin' rich fast," snapped Jerry. "Dang fast. On money that don't belong to you, but to the *Caribou National Bank*."

Red Rube's bold eyes bulged. Then anger flushed his beefy face. With an oath he shoved old Abe aside. He lunged toward Jerry, rakin' out a six-gun as he came in.

"You know too much!" he roared. "I'll shut yore mouth fer keeps."

Jack Steele stepped through the doorway. There was just the trace of a smile on his face, but not a mirthful smile.

When he spoke, he spoke softly. But it checked Red Rube as if he had walked into a barbed-wire fence.

"Just a minute, Rube," drawled Steele. "Just a minute. I want you for murder an' train robbery."

But he knew, as he spoke, that Red Rube would never be taken alive. And Steele was glad of that. For he was thinking of a wounded man surrounded by sneaking coyotes. And although that man was a thief and a killer, he had deserved a better death.

Red Rube fired from the hip. His first bullet cut splinters from the door frame. But Steele wasn't standing there. He had leaped down the steps. And as he rushed Red Rube, his six-gun roared once.

Once—for he couldn't waste bul-

lets. But it was enough. The slug jolted the red-bearded bandit. He crashed to the ground, and he didn't get up.

Poor old Abe rushed wildly away from the line of fire. For now Rube's four men, recovering from their amazement, charged Steele. But Jack was happy now. This was a fight at close quarters. They were carrying rifles—clumsy because of their long barrels.

One cleared a six-gun. Steele shot away the gun with his second bullet. Two men were left. Jerry Darcy got into the battle. He wasn't carrying a gun. But his freckled fist was good enough to stretch his opponent out alongside Red Rube.

One man remained. And at Steele's crisp order, this fellow slowly raised his arms.

"Higher!" rasped Jack, advancing swiftly to search for hidden weapons.

"Hey?" the man shouted. And his right hand dropped toward his ear.

Just in time, old Abe's weak cry warned Jack. This was Deaf Dick, who resorted to this little trick to reach a six-gun in an armpit holster.

"Hey, yourself!" snapped Jack, and he put his third bullet past Dick's ear. "See if that'll clear up yore hearin'?" he drawled. And then: "I got one slug left, ef yuh can't quite understand what I mean."

Deaf Dick understood. And he shook with fear when young Jerry informed him that the man behind the mask of beaver-dam mud and powder grime was Silver Jack Steele.

After Steele had rapped out the account of the heartless shooting of Whitey Rook, Deaf Dick became

furiously angry. He kicked the sprawled form of his late chief.

"They had split that Desert Limited cash," he confessed. "Told us it would be safer in their charge. We trusted 'em both. But it was jest this wolf's way of gittin' his hands on all the money."

"I reckon," Jack drawled, "that after he had got it, he would have busted up his late gang with several well-placed bullets an' become the owner of a danged good cow outfit."

He knelt beside Red Rube. "He don't deserve any favors," he drawled, "but I'll not bury him with his boots on."

"Aw, bury the skunk like he is," urged Jerry.

Silver Jack Steele grinned as he knelt down and jerked off Red Rube Garr's big right boot.

"Nothin' doin'," he said. "I aimed to take Rube back fer trial. But if I can't take *him*, I'll shore take his boots. They're jest about my size."



#### THE WEST'S FASTEST GUNMAN

THERE was trouble at Fort Hays, Kansas, between boisterous cowboys and turbulent citizens, and some of the soldiers at the fort were acquiring the habit of taking sides with one faction or the other.

When "Wild Bill" Hickok was sent to Fort Hays from Abilene, having made that town so peaceful and orderly that it no longer required his attention, Custer's Seventh Cavalry was stationed at the fort.

One night, four of the soldiers—a sergeant and three privates—made the rounds of the saloons, filling up with strong red liquor and making it known that they were out to "get" Wild Bill before the night was over.

This news was passed from bar to bar until it reached the prospective victim. On hearing it, he looked over his guns and went to his favorite saloon.

Taking a seat at the far end, from where he could see all those who came and went, Wild Bill remarked with a smile:

"Now, if they want me, they'll find me right here."

After a while, the soldiers, headed by the sergeant, all well armed and "lit up," and eager for battle, marched into the saloon. The object of their wrath was seated with his chair tilted back against the wall, the brim of his hat pulled down over his eyes. He looked peaceful and half asleep.

As the soldiers stamped into the room with military fierceness, the sergeant saw his man, drew his gun and fired. In a flash, so quick that the eye couldn't follow the motion, Wild Bill had dived forward, face down, to the floor, and the roar of his two long six-guns shook the building.

Although the sergeant's bullet had entered his shoulder, it hadn't cramped his style or checked his speed. Without wasting any ammunition, he laid all four soldiers on the floor dead. It took him a little less than two seconds of time to kill the enemy and end the fight.



# Gambler's Frame-up

A "Shootin' Fool" Story

By Houston Irvine

Author of "The Cavvy From Flying W," etc.

WITH widening blue eyes, the young deputy watched the skilled fingers of the gambler. The latter shuffled the cards swiftly and offered them to the rancher at his right to cut.

The cattleman—a short, heavy-set man, with a wrinkled, leathery skin and a short gray goatee—divided the pasteboards into two heaps. And the dealer deftly piled them together just as they had been.

"Dog-gone!" the deputy gasped silently.

Although it was long after midnight, the Maverick Saloon was crowded. Men in high-heeled boots climbed on chairs, tables, and even

the bar, to see over the peaked sombreros of those in front. Yet, it was a tense, silent group.

Word had got around that old Jason Lake was "being taken to a cleaning" in the biggest poker game Cotulla had ever seen. Lake was unpopular, chiefly because he was tight-fisted.

He owned the Star L Ranch, the largest, best-watered, and finest improved outfit along that part of the Nueces River. So every man in the county who could get there was on hand to watch the skinflint's defeat.

The game had started with five players holding chips. Two had dropped out when the bets got high. So only old Jason, the hawk-faced

gambler, "Ace" Kenyon, and his slit-eyed little pal, "Squint" Stevens, remained in the game.

No doubt, the rancher would have liked to quit. But he wasn't the kind who would take a loss of several thousand dollars, without trying to get it back. Poker was his only vice, and he usually won in a fair game.

Deputy Sheriff Lucius Carey, better known as the "Shootin' Fool," saw the crooked cut, whether any one else noticed it, or not. The intention of the gambler was plain. He had the deck stacked, probably with the best cards on the bottom, from which he could deal them to his pal with the unseen sureness of a sleight-of-hand artist.

Squint Stevens was the big winner. Practically every chip on the table was in front of him, together with a lot of cash, and a pile of Jason Lake's I O U's. With a smile on his pinched face, the little gambler hunched his runty form over the wealth, like a hungry crow protecting its brood.

Later, Lucius Carey guessed, Ace and Squint would split the winnings. One did all the crooked dealing, while the other was a willing partner, whose job was to rake in the money.

"It isn't my game, and I suppose I haven't any business butting in," thought the deputy. "But I can't stand by and simply let them rob a man, like they're doing that rancher."

Ace struck a match on the edge of the table and lighted a cigarette. He inhaled deeply. Then letting a cloud of smoke drift through the thin nostrils of his beaked nose, he dealt the cards rapidly. By the slightest lowering of an eyelid, he winked at Squint.

The Shootin' Fool saw the signal,

too. It settled things in his troubled mind. His smooth cheeks, that the sun and wind could not tan, flushed angrily. His long, strong features set in lines of grim determination. Pushing a lock of long, unruly yellow hair back under his mountainous, cream-colored sombrero, he stepped forward.

"Beg pardon!" He tapped Ace's thin shoulder.

The gambler turned, a wolfish snarl baring his white teeth. His narrow green eyes swept the deputy's gangling form, taking in his yellow cowhide boots and silver-ornamented chaps, his gaudy pink shirt and blue neckerchief. "What yuh want, dude?"

Lucius flushed redder. The fact that strangers in the prickly-pear country usually took him for a greenhorn did not make the insult any easier to bear. His hands dropped toward his twin pearl-handled .45s, in tied-down holsters on his slender thighs.

But he stopped before he touched his six-guns. His quarrel with Ace was not a personal one.

"I've got something to say to you!" he snapped, with his blue eyes flashing. "Better step back in the corner with me, unless you want every one else to hear it!"

"Yeah?" With a sneer, the gambler was about to refuse. But something he read in the deputy's grim face must have made him change his mind.

Tossing down the cards in a scattered pile, he stood up, facing Lucius. Although the latter was tall, the other beat him by an inch. But Ace was skinny and narrow-shouldered, with a sickly, pale color.

Jason Lake and Squint Stevens looked more startled than the tall gambler.

"The house is pinched!" He

laughed at them. "Don't worry. I'll see what this upstart deputy wants an' be back in a minute."

Grinding his cigarette under foot, he followed the Shootin' Fool out of earshot of the curious crowd. His slender right hand reached inside the front of the long, black coat that he wore.

Lucius did not miss the gesture. He supposed Ace was reaching for a derringer in a shoulder holster.

"Waal?" The gambler leered.

"I saw your last crooked cut." The deputy went right to the point. "I'm warning you that tinhorn and crooked dealing doesn't go in this town. If you're not willing to play poker fair—"

"Yuh ain't got nothin' on me!" snarled Ace. "How do yuh know the cut wasn't accidental?"

"I don't," the Shootin' Fool had to admit. "But it's plain you and your pal are robbing Jason Lake. If you—"

"Are yuh accusin' me of robbin' anybody?" the gambler growled. "I'll kill yuh fer them words!"

While he had been prepared for the possibility that Ace might pull a gun from a shoulder holster, Lucius was startled by the abrupt, blazing fury of the card sharper. With amazing speed, faster than any man could draw a .45, the gambler jerked his hand out from beneath his long black coat.

Something glittered in the lamp-light for an instant. Something whirled through the air at the deputy, with a silvery flash of light and a whirring sound.

The Shootin' Fool instinctively dodged to the right, as his hands dropped toward his twin six-guns. He felt a sharp jab on the outer side of his left arm. But the knife, intended for his heart, did little more than scratch him. Quivering,

the razor-keen blade buried its point in the wall at the deputy's back.

*R-r-rip!* Lucius flipped his .45s from his holsters, but as his left arm jerked, he heard the sleeve of his pink silk shirt tear. The cloth had been pinned to the wood by the knife.

"Hands up, you!" A little paler than usual at the closeness that death had come, the Shootin' Fool thumbed back the hammers of his six-guns. But both his actions and his words were interrupted unexpectedly.

"Hold on!" A medium-sized, middle-aged man, with a broad, friendly face, shoved between the deputy and the gambler.

Lucius Carey recognized Sheriff Alcorn and flushed crimson.

"What's goin' on hyar?" Alcorn blustered importantly, taking off his gray Stetson and brushing at the few stiff red hairs that hedged his otherwise bald and shining head.

"Why—er—uh—" The Shootin' Fool started stammering.

"This young whippersnapper accused me of cheatin'," Ace cut in growlingly. "Thet's fightin' talk, in any language."

The sheriff nodded solemnly. "Kin yuh prove this feller was dealin' off the bottom of the deck or anything crooked like that?" he asked Lucius.

The deputy shook his head dumbly. His flush deepened. Although he was satisfied in his own mind that he had seen the gambler's crooked cut, he knew there was no way to prove it.

"Yo're lucky I didn't kill yuh." Ace leered at the embarrassed deputy. "Both I an' my pal carry knives jest like this one. The next time yuh butt in, one o' the blades will git buried cl'ar up to the handle in yore carcass."

"I'll bet it will be in my back then," the Shootin' Fool retorted.

"Hyar, hyar!" Sheriff Alcorn grunted. "Cut out all the fightin' talk. Thar ain't goin' to be no next time. Ace, yuh take yore knife an' go back to yore game, but see that yuh keep it straight. Looshis, yuh try to show a little sense fer a change."

With a mocking grin on his thin face, the gambler stepped closer to the deputy, to pull the blade from the wall. Driven into the wood with great force, it first refused to budge. Ace gripped the hilt with both of his long, slender hands, twisting and turning the knife as he pulled. Then it jerked free. The gambler thrust it back inside his black coat, and strode to the poker table.

Still blushing, Lucius Carey holstered his pearl-handled .45s and started to move away. But something still tugged at his sleeve, torn and stained by a bit of crimson. Glancing down, the deputy saw a glittering sliver of steel still fast in the wall.

Ace Kenyon's knife had broken lengthwise. But the gambler had not noticed it. And no doubt, the loss of the tiny bit of edge would make slight difference in the death-dealing quality of the blade.

The Shootin' Fool did not think much about the fact that the knife was broken then, either. Without bothering to dig the sliver of steel from the wood, he pulled his torn sleeve free, and walked glumly toward the table, where Ace already was dealing the cards.

## II.

The breaking of Jason Lake was a swift process after that. Although before, Ace Kenyon and Squint Stevens had let the rancher

win an occasional small hand, they now showed no mercy. The old cattleman lost pot after pot, and the stack of I O U's in front of the smaller gambler grew.

When he should have quit and gone home, Jason stubbornly resorted to the tactics that so many losers use—doubling his bets each time, in a desperate effort to regain his money.

Ace dealt sneeringly, and seemingly with greater precision. As carefully as Lucius Carey watched, he could not catch the gambler in any crookedness again, although he felt sure it was going on.

The tall card sharper again winked at his pard. The Shootin' Fool tensed, not knowing what the signal meant. But he soon found out.

"Beg yore pardon, Lake!" Squint thumbed the stack of I O U's. "But I'm goin' ter pull out o' this game, unless—"

"Unless what?" The rancher sprang from his chair, with his gray goatee bristling. "Yo're a heck of a fine sport. Yuh take my money, an' then don't give me a chance to git it back."

"Thet's the trouble." The rat-faced gambler patted the promises to pay. "These hyar ain't money. I'm gittin' tired o' playin' against my own dinero. If yuh can't pay up these I O U's, I'm quittin'. Thet's final."

"Are yuh doubtin' my word?" Jason looked as if he was going to grab for his holstered six-gun. "Any promise I make is kept, whether I got my name signed on a little piece o' paper, or not. I own the biggest spread in this part o' Texas. I can pay ten times that number of I O U's. Course, I can't git the money until the bank opens in the mornin', but—"

"Mebbe I can help yuh out," Ace cut in smoothly, pulling a big bundle of currency out of his pocket. "I ain't scared ter play against my own money. How much do them I O U's amount to?"

"About fifteen thousand dollars," Squint answered promptly.

"I'll loan yuh twenty thousand." The tall gambler peeled off twenty thousand-dollar bills and held them toward the rancher. "Yuh can take up the I O U's, an' still have five thousand dollars left ter play on."

Jason Lake reached for the money greedily. Just as quickly, Ace pulled it out of his reach.

"Wait a minute!" The gambler's green eyes flickered. "Thar's a little matter o' business ter be attended to fust."

"What yuh mean?" The rancher scowled.

"I got ter have a mortgage on yore ranch, if I loan yuh the cash," replied Ace. "A mortgage payable in six months, at eight per cent interest."

"What?" Jason snorted. "Thet's plain robbery. My place ain't never had a plaster on it."

"Take it or leave it, then." The gambler sneered. "Them's my terms."

The old rancher was desperate. He looked around at the crowd and saw few friendly faces.

Lucius Carey would have liked to step forward with an offer of help. But the young deputy did not have twenty cents in his pockets, let alone twenty thousand dollars.

"Give me a piece o' paper and an indelible pencil." Jason Lake stroked his goatee nervously. "I'll write out the mortgage, yuh danged skunk. But if yuh think I won't take up thet plaster to-night or in the mornin', yo're crazy."

Ace Kenyon laughed. "I allus

thought it would be nice ter own a big ranch like yore's," he said.

The cattleman shot him a look of intense hatred, but said nothing. In a few minutes, the mortgage, short but legal enough, was made out and signed. Two other ranchers signed as witnesses.

Jason angrily took up his I O Us and bought chips with the money he had left. The game went on.

The rancher's hopes of recovering his losses with his new stake were quickly shattered. He lost steadily and faster than ever. With Ace dealing and Squint taking in the money, they cleaned Jason like wolves picking a bone.

The rancher got down to his last few hundred dollars. His leathery face was pale then. His eyes gleamed savagely. But his goatee pushed forward in grim determination.

Ace dealt the cards. The players discarded and drew. Jason took two on the draw, looked at them, and suddenly shoved every chip in front of him into the center of the table.

"Bet it all!" he growled. "Show down!"

With a shrug, Ace refused the bet and tossed his hand into the discards. Before he even looked at the two cards he had drawn, the other gambler met the bet.

"I call yuh. Let's see what yuh got."

The rancher triumphantly laid down four kings. He even started to rake in the pot.

"Wait a minute!" Squint barked. He threw down three cards—three aces. Then slowly, he flipped over the two pasteboards he had got on the draw and not even bothered to pick up. The first was the deuce of diamonds. The other—the fourth ace.

"Heh-heh-heh!" The little gambler pulled the chips toward him.

For a moment, Jason Lake sat as if frozen in his chair. His eyes bulged at the four aces. Then an angry flush swept up over the part of his face that was not hidden by his goatee.

"Yuh cheated me!" Suddenly springing to his feet, he hurled himself at Squint. "Yuh low-down sharper! Yore pal's got a mortgage on my place. But it won't do neither of yuh no good. I'll git yuh! I'll——"

The rancher was jerking his six-gun from its holster. A wild, insane fury burned in his eyes. For the moment, he must have been partially crazed by his losses.

Both Ace and Squint were reaching for the knives they carried beneath their black coats. In another second, the floor of the Maverick Saloon would have been stained crimson.

"Cut it out!" With a long leap, Lucius Carey reached Jason's side, gripped his wrist, and twisted his arm behind his back. The gun fell unfired to the floor.

At almost the same instant, Sheriff Alcorn stopped Ace's knife draw. And Hank Rogers, the lanky, black-mustached veteran deputy, who had not been in the saloon during the earlier trouble, took Squint in hand.

"Easy now!" bellowed the sheriff, pushing his gray Stetson back on his bald head. "Wouldn't it be a crazy stunt to kill each other over a cyard game?"

"I allow"—Hank spat a stream of tobacco juice on the floor and wiped the back of one horny hand across his drooping mustache—"thet more killin's has been caused by gamblin' than by most anything else. If I was yuh, I'd send this pair a-kitin'."

"I can't order 'em out o' Cotulla,  
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less'n I prove their game is crooked." Alcorn patted his shining head thoughtfully.

"I saw——" The Shootin' Fool was going to tell about the unfair cut that he had witnessed.

"Keep out o' this." Alcorn glared. "Yuh purty nigh got a knife in yore heart, a while ago, an' didn't prove nothin'."

The deputy did not reply. The sheriff looked at Jason Lake, who suddenly had become as calm as he had been excited.

"Hadn't yuh better go home?" Alcorn asked, in a kindly tone.

"Yeah." The rancher nodded. Lucius released him, and he strode directly to the swinging doors. He was pushing through them, when he turned and stared at the gamblers. "I'll git yuh," he snarled, "in my own way an' time."

Then he was gone. For several seconds, not a man in the Maverick Saloon moved. Every one was as tense as if looking at death. Then some one stepped closer to the bar. The movement instantly grew into a stampede. Only the three officers and the two gamblers failed to join the rush.

"Maybe we shouldn't have let Jason Lake go when he was so mad," said Lucius Carey, shaking a lock of yellow hair out of his blue eyes.

"Aw, heck!" Hank Rogers spat disgustedly. "Thet old coot's threats don't mean nothin'."

"Naw," Sheriff Alcorn agreed. "He even left his smoke-pole layin' thar on the floor."

"Waal!" Squint Stevens rubbed his eyes. "Reckon I'll go down ter my room an' grab some shut-eye."

He left at once, patting his money-filled pockets as he went out. Ace Kenyon waited a few minutes, buying a drink of whisky. Then he took his departure, too.

## III.

The crowd at the bar drank heavily. But there was no more excitement. And Lucius Carey felt a keen lack of companionship.

He yawned and decided he might as well go to his room. It was dawn when he stepped out of the saloon.

For a block, he walked rapidly, his high heels clicking on the wooden sidewalk. Then, turning a corner into a side street, he halted, with a startled exclamation. Bringing up so sharply as almost to overbalance himself, he stared, with popping eyes, at a corpse at his feet.

He recognized the body instantly as that of Squint Stevens. Although the little gambler had fallen forward, his head was twisted around so that his ratlike features were visible.

Out of the back of his long black coat stuck the handle of a knife, like the one that had missed Lucius Carey's heart so narrowly a few hours earlier. The knife and the cloth around it were stained with crimson, and a red pool was on the wooden sidewalk.

"Dog-gone!" Recovering from his first shock, the deputy stooped to pull the murderer's blade out of its victim's back.

But he checked himself. He decided to leave everything just as it was until Sheriff Alcorn and Hank Rogers had viewed the scene. As fast as his long legs could move, he raced back toward the Maverick Saloon.

"Hey! A man's murdered—that little gambler—right up the street a block!" Shouting his news, he burst through the swinging doors breathlessly.

A few moments later, the saloon was deserted. The sheriff and his deputies barely beat the crowd to

the spot where the murdered gambler was stretched.

"Ah!" Alcorn grunted, pulling the knife out from under the victim's left shoulder blade. "He was murdered, all right. No hombre could stick a blade in his own back that hard."

"His pockets is empty, too," Hank pointed out, patting Squint's clothes. "The killer took all the dinero the little feller walked out o' the saloon with."

"Who yuh reckon done it?" some one in the crowd asked.

"Let me look at the knife a minute, sheriff," demanded Lucius. But his words went unheeded.

"Who yuh reckon done it?" The crowd insisted on an answer.

"I don't know." Alcorn plucked at his few red hairs worriedly. "But by gum, I'll find out. I'll—"

"Thet knife was his own." Ace Kenyon interrupted, suddenly appearing and pushing his way through the crowd. "Squint an' me allus carried knives jest alike. See!" He opened his own coat for an instant, to show a blade sheathed inside. That satisfied the sheriff.

"I reckon thet cl'ars yuh," he grunted.

The gambler stared at his slain pal without any evidence of intense sorrow. Rather, the Shootin' Fool thought, his thin face wore the semblance of a smirk. And his green eyes glittered.

"Since Squint couldn't very well stick his own knife in his back, it ought ter be easy enough ter figure who did do it," Ace declared.

"Meanin' who?" Alcorn frowned puzzled.

"Why, Jason Lake, of course." The gambler gave a harsh laugh. "Don't yuh remember how he threatened he was goin' ter git us, in his own way an' time?"

"If he done it, he shore pushed the time up," growled the sheriff.

"I don't think Jason Lake did this," Lucius cut in, and drew a reprobating look.

"I don't either," Hank Rogers drawled, chewing tobacco vigorously. "I've knowed Jason Lake a long time. I don't like him no better than most folks do. But I respect him as a man. Even if he was plumb crazy, I don't allow he would sneak up behind a feller an' stick a knife in his back. If he wanted to kill a man, I reckon he'd do it square, with a six-gun."

"Yeah?" Ace sneered. "Who do yuh suspect murdered my pal with his own knife, then?"

"I ain't got no suspicion," the veteran deputy admitted, tugging at the ends of his mustache.

"Sheriff, I demand that yuh arrest Jason Lake," snarled the gambler.

"But—but"—Alcorn appeared uncertain—"it ain't no ways proved that he's guilty."

"I thought the trial came after the arrest." Ace leered. "Yuh can arrest the rancher as a suspect, can't yuh?"

"I can't hold him long without a warrant," replied the sheriff.

"Don't worry about that," the gambler retorted. "I'll swear ter the warrant, chargin' Lake with the murder, when it's necessary. Meantime, if yo're smart as I think yuh are, yo'll go git yore man 'fore he has a chance ter skip the country or figure out an alibi. If yuh don't go after him, I will!" Ace drew the knife from the sheath beneath his coat meaningly. The polished steel glittered in the light of the rising sun.

The Shootin' Fool had just a glimpse of the blade. But that was enough to set him thinking.

"Sheriff, let me see the knife that was in Squint's back," he demanded again.

If Alcorn heard the young deputy, he paid no attention. Pulling his gray Stetson down on his bald head firmly, the sheriff made up his mind what he should do.

"Thar ain't nobody else but Jason Lake I got any reason to suspect," he grumbled. "Come on, Hank! We'll go out an' bring him in."

Alcorn wiped some of the gore off the murder knife and thrust it in his boot top, where he would not be apt to lose it, and where it would not be liable to cut him seriously. It was evidence that had to be saved.

"Let me look at the knife," Lucius Carey asked hopelessly.

The sheriff paid no attention to the request, so engrossed was he in other worries.

"Looshis!" he barked. "Yo'll stay in town an' sort o' look after things. I an' Hank ought to be back with our prisoner a little bit after noon."

"Don't yuh want a posse?" Ace Kenyon cut in, with a smile that might mean anything.

"Yuh would jest be in the way," Alcorn replied. "I an' Hank will be able to bring Jason Lake in alone, I imagine."

"Thet suits me." The gambler rubbed his long hands together. "I was jest offerin' my help if yuh needed it. Pussonally, I'd a heap ruther go down ter the Maverick an' git a drink." He turned to the crowd. "Come on, all yuh fellers! I'll buy the drinks fer the whole gang."

Such an invitation could have but one result. The crowd trooped merrily in the direction of the saloon. In a few moments, Sheriff Alcorn, Hank Rogers and Lucius Carey were left standing alone be-

side the corpse of the murdered gambler.

"Let me see——" The Shootin' Fool started a last desperate effort to see the murder knife.

"Yuh take good care o' things in town," Alcorn cut in, like a father admonishing his son. "I an' Hank will be——"

"Back shortly after noon." The young deputy sighed wearily. "Don't worry. The town will still be here."

"So long!" Hank Rogers started down the street toward the livery stable, where all three officers kept their horses.

"Git the coroner to take care o' the body," ordered the sheriff, over his shoulder, as he followed the lank veteran deputy down the street.

"All right," Lucius Carey replied. But to himself, silently, he said: "So! I'm not even good enough to go out with you to arrest your suspect. I'm supposed to stay here and keep the town straight. I'll do it. But you are liable to be plenty surprised when you get back with Jason Lake."

#### IV.

The Shootin' Fool did all that was necessary—and a little more. The bartender at the Maverick Saloon thought he was crazy when he borrowed a knife and dug out a section of the wall.

Then because he wanted to wait till Sheriff Alcorn got back before he made any further move, he went over to the office across the street. Dropping into the sheriff's personal swivel chair and hoisting his feet on the spur-scarred desk, he was soon asleep.

He awakened with a jerk several hours later. Men were shouting in the street. Boots tramped heavily

along the wooden sidewalks. Some one fired a six-gun in celebration.

"Hank the skunk!" a man yelled. "The only trouble is, it seems a shame to waste good rope on the neck of a feller who would stick a knife in another hombre's back!"

"Hurry up an' git the job over with!" came the voice of Ace Kenyon. "He murdered my pal. And by gosh, he's goin' ter pay fer it!"

Lucius Carey tipped over the swivel chair getting out of it. He guessed immediately what had happened. Rushing to the front door, he stared at the crowd in the street. It was the same crowd that had been in the Maverick Saloon all night, suddenly turned into a mob by the leadership of one man.

"Come on! Let's hang him pronto!" shouted Ace Kenyon. "He knifed my pal, an' he don't deserve no mercy!"

The Shootin' Fool saw Sheriff Alcorn and Hank Rogers, sitting on their horses, with Jason Lake handcuffed between them. Both of the veteran officers had their hands raised in the air. It was easy to guess that they had been surprised, bringing their prisoner in to jail.

Inflamed by liquor, and urged on by the words of Ace Kenyon, the mob was wild, unreasoning.

"I didn't kill that rat, Squint. I was on my way home at the time he got it." Jason Lake's pleas of innocence fell on deaf ears.

A dozen pairs of hands dragged him from his saddle. His own lariat was looped around his neck.

"Men, yo're makin' a terrible mistake!" Sheriff Alcorn cried. "It ain't no ways proved that Jason is guilty."

"I'm willin' to bet he ain't." Hank Rogers tried to draw a six-gun, but had it knocked out of his hand.

"He's plenty guilty enough fer

us," howled the mob leaders, with their hands on the rope. "Come on, fellers! String him up on that cottonwood tree in front of the saloon."

Jason Lake proved himself a brave man then, at least. When the killers would not listen to his pleas of innocence, he did not whimper. Even when the rope was tossed over a limb, and the noose began to tighten around his neck, he maintained a calm dignity. His gray goatee jutted out fiercely, as the crowd started to haul him into the air.

Ace Kenyon stood a little to one side. He was taking no part in the actual lynching, though his words had aroused the mob spirit. His hawkish face wore a smile of satisfaction. And his green eyes glittered greedily.

Lucius Carey knew that the rancher was innocent. And he knew he was the only person who could prove him so.

Ducking back into the sheriff's office, the young deputy picked up the section of wall he had dug out of the Maverick Saloon. Then with that in his hand, he raced across the street to where the mob was pulling Jason Lake into the tree.

"Stop!" yelled the Shootin' Fool. "You're hanging an innocent man!"

"Mebbe yuh can prove that, yuh crazy idiot," Ace Kenyon sneered.

"I can!" The deputy's smooth cheeks crimsoned. "And I don't reckon it'll be to your satisfaction, either."

"Meanin'?" The gambler made a motion toward the inside of his coat.

"Go ahead and draw the knife from your sheath," Lucius taunted. "I want the crowd to see it, anyway."

"What yuh drivin' at?" Sheriff Alcorn again assumed control of the situation.

"For the forty 'leventh time, I ask you to let me see the knife you took out of the murdered man's back," replied the Shootin' Fool.

"Hyar it is." The sheriff puzzledly drew the weapon from his boot top and handed it over.

One quick glance at the blade was enough for Lucius Carey.

"It's just as I thought." The deputy shook a long lock of yellow hair out of his blue eyes. "That knife wasn't Squint's. It's Ace Kenyon's. See how the edge of the blade is broken off on one side. Ace did that when he tried to kill me in the saloon. Here's proof of that."

The Shootin' Fool held out the section of wall, containing the sliver of steel, upon which his shirt sleeve once had caught.

"I don't see—" Alcorn pushed back his Stetson and rubbed his bald head.

"You'll see it all in a minute," Lucius replied. "Ace didn't want to split his big winnings with his pal, so he sneaked up behind him and killed him. Then Ace left his knife sticking in the wound and took Squint's. Both knives were exactly alike, except for this little piece of steel that Ace broke off without knowing it. Ace got the money his pard carried out of the saloon, and he wanted to see Jason Lake hang, because his chance of foreclosing his mortgage on the Star L Ranch would be a lot better with Jason dead."

"Yo're purty smart about knives, ain't yuh?" The tall gambler's snarl was almost equal to a confession itself. Tearing his hand out of his coat, a steel blade gleamed in it. "I reckon this will teach yuh some more!" he hissed.

Some men might have been caught off guard. But the Shootin'

Fool was expecting Ace to reach for his knife when cornered.

While the young deputy's left hand held the objects of evidence, his right was free. And it moved, with a speed too fast for any one to see, to the pearl-handled .45 holstered on his slender right hip.

*Wham!* The gun flamed as its muzzle cleared the top of the leather.

With a scream of pain, Ace Kenyon stared at his shattered wrist. Crimson dripped from his fingers. His knife dropped point downward, to stick, quivering, in the street.

Cheated of one victim, the mob quickly turned toward the real murderer.

"String the dirty skunk up!" The crowd surged toward the gambler.

"No, you don't!" Letting his evidence fall to the ground, the Shootin' Fool tore his second six-gun from its holster. "I reckon the coyote will get his neck stretched, all right. But it'll be done legal."

"But—" one of the mob leaders started to argue.

"Shut up!" Lucius Carey's blue eyes narrowed. "And stand back, all of you! If any one lays a hand on the gambler, I'll shoot—and not aim to miss, either!"

Looking at the grim set of the

deputy's jaw, there was no doubt that he meant just what he said. And after all, no one in the mob cared to risk getting shot. With much grumbling, the crowd dissolved, most of the men drifting back toward the Maverick Saloon.

"Kid!" Jason Lake felt tenderly of his throat, about which the rope had been. "I don't know how I'll ever repay yuh fer savin' my life."

"Don't try." Lucius grinned, collaring the real murderer and starting him toward the jail.

"Yuh shore did save the day fer us, though," Sheriff Aleorn praised.

"Yeah." Hank Rogers spat at a fly sitting on the wooden sidewalk. "I an' the sheriff was caught clean off our guard. If it hadn't been fer yuh—"

"Forget it." The Shootin' Fool sighed wearily. "After this, when I see a gambler dealing crooked, maybe you'll believe me."

Mebbe they will—an' then ag'in, mebbe they won't. Seems like nobody never takes Looshis serious, until hot lead begins ter fly in a show-down thet, likely as not, the Shootin' Fool's forced. If only folks'd fergit thet lookin' like a greenhorn don't make a man one, Looshis would git the consideration he ought ter. But he'll still keep his job, an' there'll be another story about him in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.





# Kid Wolf and the Branded Riders

By Ward M. Stevens

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## CHAPTER I.

### AMBUSHED!

IT happened as quick as a flash, at the fork in the trail. "Kid" Wolf had no time to reach for his guns, and even if he had, he would have had no chance. The riders, four of them, came plunging from the dense brush, and they had him covered with Colts and Winchesters.

"Git 'em up in the air, hombre!" came the curt command. "This is as fer as yo're goin' fer a while."

With his big white horse still rearing, Kid Wolf lifted his hands. If he was fearful of those leveled guns,

he didn't show it. His lean, bronzed face betrayed no more emotion than a mask.

"If this is a holdup," he said in a quiet Texas drawl, "I'm afeard yo'-all will be disappointed, cabaleros."

He was hardly surprised at being ambushed. In the desolate Death Angel Mountain country almost anything could, and did, happen.

For two days, now, he'd been traveling through this wilderness and had found it to be one of the most lawless and mysterious lands he'd ever seen. These hard-faced hombres were typical of many others who had crossed his trail.

At least, three of them were. They were rough, unshaven customers—gunmen through and through. Two of them carried heavy-caliber rifles as well as six-guns, and the third had a wicked-looking knife in his belt, Mexican fashion.

The fourth man, though, was so different from the others that it was evident he was the leader. He was a big man, so ponderously fat that his paunch bulged over his saddle horn. The wide leather belt that was buckled around his waist must have measured fifty inches.

His face was round with puffy, drink-reddened cheeks. His small, round eyes seemed almost buried in rolls of unwholesome flesh.

While his companions kept the Kid covered, the fat hombre holstered his ivory-butted Colt and spoke wheezingly.

"We wouldn't rob yuh, stranger, fer worlds," he said with a disagreeable little chuckle. "All we want to do is give yuh the once-over. No stallin' feller. I reckon yuh know me, all right."

"I can't say I do, sah," drawled the Kid.

"My name," said the fat man, watching Kid Wolf narrowly, "is Jeffray."

"Now, does thet mean anything to yuh?" leered one of the other ambushers. "Don't deny it—won't do yuh no good."

"It means even less than nothing," Kid Wolf said coolly.

Kid Wolf was as different from his slouchy captors as Blizzard, his powerful, snow-white horse, was different from their shaggy, unkempt mounts. He was a tall, slim-waisted young hombre with wide shoulders and deep chest. He was dressed in soft, fringed buckskins, touched off with warm color; a wide sombrero

was on his head, and he wore silver-spurred boots which bore the Lone Star of Texas, worked in shining studs.

The Kid wore two guns—a pair of matched .45 single-actions of the "Peacemaker" pattern—and he wore them low on his muscular thighs. Brass cartridges glistened in his belts—twin rows of them.

"What's yore name?" wheezed the paunchy-waisted Jeffray, after a tense pause.

"My name, sah, is Kid Wolf," said the Texan, "and I reckon bushwhackahs like yo'-all hadbettah call me by mah last one."

"All right, Wolf," Jeffray sneered. "Answer my questions and answer 'em fast and straight. Whar yuh from? And whar are yuh headed toward?"

"I don't see by what right yo' ah so cu'ious, sah, but I don't mind tellin' yo' that I'm from Texas, just passin' through and headin' south," replied the Kid mildly.

Jeffray jerked his bloated head toward the junction of the trails. A fairly well-traveled road twisted off to the west through the thick cedars.

"Are yuh shore yuh wasn't aimin' to take the right-hand road—into Lynchtown—to snoop around?" he asked cunningly.

"I've nevah heard of the place," said the Texan briefly.

One of the gunmen—a beetle-browed desperado with his Winchester rifle leveled at the Texan from the hip—spoke up with an impatient snarl:

"Come on, we might as well blast him out of his saddle and git it over with!"

The Kid's muscles tensed under his buckskin shirt. If they were going to start shooting, he wanted to get at least one of the three, anyway, before he went down. But

Jeffray's next words gave him a breathing spell, anyhow.

"Reckon we'll do jist that," he said with his evil little laugh. "But thar's no great hurry—I want to catch him, fust, in his leetle lie. Roll up yore sleeve, Wolf! Yore left one—to the elbow."

The Texan stared at them in surprise, wondering what they were driving at. But he lowered his arms gingerly and did as he was told, baring his left forearm.

The fat hombre blinked and looked disappointed. There were mutterings from the others.

"He ain't got it chief," growled one of them.

"No, but jist the same," began the crestfallen leader of the quartet, "we oughtn't to take any chances about—"

His voice rose to a shrill cry of warning and alarm. But it was drowned out by the terrific explosion of a six-gun, fired at close range.

As quick as lightning, Kid Wolf's lowered hands had darted to his thighs and up again with a pair of Colt .45s. Both of them had roared flame and smoke.

Two Winchester rifles clattered into the trail unfired. One of them had been splintered at the stock, and the shoulder of the man who had held the other was spurting crimson. The third hombre dropped the Colt he was holding as if it had burned him, and with a yell of terror jerked his hands upward.

It was all over in less than five seconds. As for Jeffray, he never even attempted to draw his gun. His cayuse had reared and plunged, and it was all the fat hombre could do to keep his unwieldy body in the saddle.

And Kid Wolf's big Peacemak-

ers, still uncurling ribbons of pale-blue smoke, had them *all* covered.

## CHAPTER II.

### JEFFRAY MAKES AN OFFER.

IT was the Texan's turn now to have the drop. One of the desperadoes dug in his spurs and raced for the brush, bent low over his saddle horn. The Texan smiled grimly as he vanished, making no attempt to shoot, though he could easily have killed the rascal if he'd wished.

"The rest of yo' dry-gulchahs had bettah follow his example," he told Jeffray and the others. "Get on back to that Lynchtown yo' were talkin' about. Get goin' pronto! I don't want any trouble, but theah's sho' goin' to be some if theah's any mo' foolishness."

Two of the gunmen hastened to take his advice before he changed his mind. With one amazed glance backward over their shoulders, they urged their broncs down the trail and out of sight, leaving their weapons on the ground where they had fallen.

Jeffray, however, remained behind. He had been as terror-stricken as his henchmen at the Kid's deadly exhibition of gun play, but now the color began to ooze back into his moonlike face.

He saw that Kid Wolf didn't intend to kill any one, and a fawning expression came into his piggish little eyes. As he quieted his horse, he drew alongside the Kid, his thick lips widening in a grin meant to be friendly.

"All a mistake—all a mistake, Mr. Wolf," he wheezed. "We had yuh wrong, that's all. We took yuh fer somebody else. It was just an error on our part."

"It came very neah," drawled the Texan, "bein' a plumb fatal errah

—fo' yo'. Yo' had bettah get goin' with yo' pahdnahs, hombre."

"I jist wanted to explain about why I wanted yuh to roll up yore sleeve," said the fat hombre.

The Kid holstered one gun, eased himself in his saddle, and began rolling a brown cigarette with his free hand.

"*Bueno.* I'd be glad to heah yo' explanation, if yo' have one, sah."

"We was lookin' fer a brand," Jeffray said quickly.

The Kid's eyes narrowed a bit. A brand?

"Do I resemble a steeah or something?" he drawled. "Sorry, but I'm just a maverick."

"First of all, I'll tell yuh who I am—what I am," said the big hombre. "Yuh see, the settlement o' Lynchtown over yonder is the only one within more'n a hundred miles. I own the big store and saloon thar, and I got an interest in all of the other businesses. In fact, I practically control all the country yereabouts. If I do say it myself, I represent law, order, and progress." Jeffray swelled his chest pridefully.

"That's a big ordah," said the Kid dryly. "I suppose that's why yo' have to bushwhack to do it. Ah yo' the sheriff, or somethin'?"

"Not exactly," admitted Jeffray. "Yuh see, this is too big and raw a country to have any reg'lar organization. But I told yuh what I stand fer. I got the interests o' the country at heart."

"What's that got to do with a brand?"

"For the last few months," said Jeffray slowly, weighing his words deliberately, "Lynchtown has been plagued by a band of ruffians—raided time and ag'in. They want to kill me, I reckon, and rob me o' my property. I know who some o' 'em are, but I don't know 'em all—

only one thing. Me and my men have killed two or three of them riders, and every time we've found a brand on their left arm, a reg'lar brand, burned thar! It's allus a mark like the letter 'V.' I dunno what it stands fer."

"The lettah 'V,'" repeated the Texan thoughtfully. "So that's what yo' thought I'd have on mah ahm?"

"Yes." Jeffray nodded earnestly. "Sorry it all happened. Now, the reason I'm tellin' yuh all this, Wolf, is because I can shore use a gun-man of yore ability. I—well, I never did see anybody quite so fast with a pair o' Colts—unless it'd be my right-hand man, Deak Falk."

"I don't suppose," drawled the Texan, with a slight shrug. "thet Deak Falk was among those jaspahs who just lit out fo' the tail tules?"

"Oh, now—he's on another assignment," said Jeffray. "It would have been a different story if he'd been with us, but I reckon I'm just as glad it turned out the way it did. Because I want to hire yuh. I'll pay yuh a hundred dollars a day fer three days' work."

"Yo' don't expect the wohk to last long, then?" asked the Kid politely.

An expression of hate twisted the bloated face of the Lynchtown boss. He spat angrily into the sand.

"Naw," he snarled. "Them branded riders are as good as through! I've got the low-down on most of 'em, and my men are ready fer the big show-down! Come on over this way, Wolf—I want to show yuh somethin'!"

Kid Wolf didn't have to pretend the interest he felt. He was on his guard, but very curious. He walked Blizzard, his big cayuse, along after Jeffray, who rode his horse into the brush and up a hill-

side. He disappeared into a little clump of cedars, then reappeared again, waving his arm. The Kid followed him into a little clearing in the center of which a tall pine was growing.

"Yere's a sample o' what we do, Wolf, when we catch 'em!" cried Jeffray gloatingly.

At the sight of the thing hanging from the pine tree, the Texan felt his veins grow cold.

It had once been a man, a man of thirty, possibly. Flies buzzed around him in a swarm. He had been cruelly beaten, hanged, and then riddled with bullets. There must have been fifty or more bullet wounds in the dangling body, the feet of which were almost dragging the ground.

The victim had been choked, slowly strangled. There had been no merciful breaking of the neck. The Kid could imagine the torture the man had gone through.

He had been dead for at least several days, and the face was blackened and swollen. The Kid could see that he'd had blue eyes—they were open and bulging—and he noticed a straw-colored mustache. That was about all.

The Texan turned away from the gruesome spectacle, sickened by the everlasting drone of the flies.

"See what he had on his left arm!" Jeffray pointed out triumphantly.

The Texan turned and saw a V-shaped mark branded on the dead man's forearm. If the Kid had had such a brand on *his* arm, a few minutes before, and if he hadn't been quick enough on the draw—well, he'd probably be hanging alongside this dead hombre by this time. The

Kid set his teeth on the surge of anger he felt.

"A hundred dollars a day, and I'll

pay in advance," urged the boss of Lynchtown. "What do yuh say?"

"I don't like yo' methods," said the Kid softly.

"But I represent law, order, and progress, and—"

"I repeat that I don't like yo' methods," said the Texan, and then his fiery temper got the better of him, and his voice rose almost to a shout: "Now yo' get goin'! I don't evah want to see yo' ugly face again, sah! Vamose!" The hammer of his Colt clicked back. "If yo' ah not gone from heah by the time I've counted three— One—two—"

There was a yell of dismay from the fat hombre, followed by a clatter of hoofs. Bouncing in his saddle like a great bag of meal, he galloped frantically out of the clearing and crashed into the cedars.

The Texan saw Jeffray again a little later. He had stopped just within shouting distance, had turned in his saddle, and was shaking his fist in the Kid's direction.

"Yuh'd better not let us catch yuh around Lynchtown!" the Kid heard indistinctly. "We'll serve yuh worse than what yuh jist saw."

Just as a hint, Kid Wolf sent a bullet wailing a few inches over Jeffray's wagging head. The fat man yelped again, whirled his cayuse with awkward haste, and was gone.

### CHAPTER III.

#### O'HARA CLEANS A GUN.

AT nightfall, three hours later, Kid Wolf found himself in a lonelier country than ever. To make things even more unpleasant, it had begun to rain in a cold and steady drizzle. There would be no moon and no stars.

As the mournful twilight closed in, the Kid took a last look at his surroundings. He was in a higher,

much rougher region now, deep in the gloomy canyons of the Death Angel Mountains.

Peaks rose on almost every side, bullet-shaped and of the same leaden color. He could hear the moan of watercourses somewhere in the distance, and little gusts of wind shook the jack pines, spattering him with icy drops. A bad night to be on the trail.

"I don't suppose theah's much chance of us findin' sheltah, eithah, Blizzahd," he said aloud. "We'll have to make us some soht of camp right pronto."

The big white cayuse tossed its head and jingled its bit chain. Its master, the Texas "Soldier of Misfortune," had taken it over many a bitter trail in the course of his wanderings, and by this time the big animal was used to it. Horse and master shared hardships alike.

After night fell, as black—as fully as wet—as ink, the Kid couldn't tell if he was still on the trail or not. But he rode on, trusting to Blizzard's instincts more than to his own.

To cheer himself, and because he knew that Blizzard liked the sound of his voice, the Kid sang a stanza of his favorite tune, "The Rio," his only accompaniment being the sob and chant of the wind and the splash of his cayuse's hoofs:

"Oh the days ah bright on the Rio Grande,  
the Rio!

At night the moon sails high,  
I'd give all that I own to be ridin' at home,  
Undah that smilin' sky."

And then the Texan thought his eyes were deceiving him. Faintly, far ahead through the blackness, he made out the blurred glimmer of yellow lamplight.

"We ah sho' in luck to-night.

Blizzahd pahd," he chuckled, increasing his mount's pace.

Sure enough, there was a little ranch house ahead, so nearly hidden by trees on the north side that it was a wonder that he'd seen the lamplight at all. A few minutes later, he was riding into the little yard, passing by the ghostly outlines of a corral and nearly blundering into an old wagon.

"Hello, the house!" he shouted cheerily, trying to make himself heard above the steady patter of rain and the dreary whooping of the wind. "What's the chance fo'—"

The door opened suddenly, and a white-haired old hombre appeared in the opening, holding a tin kerosene lamp in his hand, carefully guarding it from the rain. He peered out blinking into the darkness, trying to see who had called. The Texan splashed up close and dismounted.

"Are yuh lost, stranger?" the old man asked hospitably. He could see the Texan fairly well now and seemed reassured at the sight of him. His leathery face crinkled humorously. "Yuh can lead yore brone into the shed over thar—the lean-to. Thar's feed thar. I'd help yuh, only I've got my boots off, and my socks are dryin' by the stove. Think yuh kin find yore way, or shall I light a lantern fer yuh?"

"No; I'll make out fine, sah," chuckled the Texan gladly. "Thank yo' kindly."

The old rancher turned to speak to some one inside the house.

"Warm up some supper, Marthy—we got company," the Kid heard him say before he closed the door.

"Ouh luck's even bettah than I thought," the Kid whispered as he led Blizzard into the shelter of the shed. It was snug and warm and smelled deliciously of native hay.

The horse nickered softly while the Kid took care of it. Neither horse nor rider had expected such good fortune on this dismal night. Kid Wolf didn't feel so bad, now, about being so far from the Rio Grande.

In a few minutes, he was knocking at the door of the house, which was quickly opened. A motherly little old lady was bustling about the table and kitchen stove, and at the sight of her the Kid took off his soaked Stetson bashfully, beginning to apologize for bringing water into her tidy kitchen.

Her welcome, though, was as warm as her husband's had been, and the Texan already felt himself at home.

"My handle is O'Hara—John O'Hara," said the old man, lighting his pipe. "It ain't often anybody drops in fer supper, and we're right glad to have yuh. Shore a bad night, ain't it?"

"I'm Kid Wolf," said the Texan, nodding, "but mah friends always use mah first name. That cookin' sho' smells good, ma'am." He smiled at Mrs. O'Hara.

O'Hara nodded. "Marthy's a good cook—none better," he said. "I've already ate, but I think I'll join yuh, Wolf—or Kid, I mean—just to be sociable."

He followed the Texan to the washpan, starting to roll up his sleeves. He was just unbuttoning the left cuff of his shirt when he stopped, suddenly, just as the Kid turned to say something. A strange look had come into O'Hara's kindly eyes. He turned away abruptly instead of washing his hands.

"I reckon I cain't eat no more," he said, with a short laugh. "I'll jist sit down by yuh and talk, Kid."

Mrs. O'Hara began to talk to the Kid in a kindly way, and the Texan

thought no more of the incident, but drew a chair up to the table and began to eat.

The old rancher went to the window and peered out. "The rain might turn to snow afore mornin'," he observed. "If it does, the huntin' will be good, and I might kill some fresh meat."

"Lots of game up this way, sah?" asked the Texan, already putting away the appetizing food the ranch woman was serving him. Warmed over as it was, the meal was the most delicious he'd tasted for many a day.

O'Hara laid down his pipe. "Yuh'll find quite a bit o' game, youngster, if yuh want to hunt," he said. "Only sometimes it's hard to get." He took a Winchester .45-70 from its rack on the wall, then fumbled on a shelf and found a bottle of oil and some gun rags. The woman smiled at the Kid kindly and cut more bread.

"Where is your home?" she asked the Kid.

"In Texas," said the young hombre in buckskins. "I'm headin' down in that general direction now, ma'am."

"So you're expectin' to go home?" grunted the old rancher, sitting on a chair near the Kid and beginning to work on his rifle barrel.

"I'm shore hopin' so—if nothin' happens," laughed the Kid, reaching out for a cup of coffee.

"Well," said O'Hara, his voice suddenly ringing out loudly, "some-thing's has shore happened! Lift yore hands!"

Aimed from the hip, that Winchester was lined on Kid Wolf's heart! Its mechanism snapped sharply.

If the roof had fallen in on him, the Texan wouldn't have been more amazed or bewildered. Almost

stunned with surprise, he hesitated, sure that the old man was joking. Then, seeing the light in O'Hara's eyes, he knew that he wasn't.

That rifle was being held in hands that didn't waver. Slowly, the Kid put up his hands and rose from his chair.

"Take his guns out of them holsters, Marthy," O'Hara told his wife in a steady voice. "Keerful now—that's it. Now put 'em over in the fer corner of the room, easylike."

Trembling, the old lady obeyed. Her face had grown white, but she said nothing, though her lips moved. In her eyes the Kid read alarm and sympathy.

"Would yo' mind tellin' me the meanin' of this, sah?" asked the Texan, when he could recover his voice.

"You know the meanin' of it, you spy!" O'Hara rapped out in a hard voice. "Yuh came yere to find out if I belonged to the Branded Riders, didn't yuh?" He allowed his unbuttoned sleeve to slide up on his left arm without shifting the aim of the rifle. On it was a red, V-shaped burn. "I belong to the outfit, savvy?" cried the rancher savagely. "But yuh ain't goin' to live to carry the information back to Lynchtown! Never in this world!"

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### THE BRANDED BROTHERHOOD.

**KID WOLF** saw through it all now, but when he opened his mouth to explain himself, O'Hara cut him off with an exclamation of angry indignation.

"Don't make it wuss by lyin'," he growled. "What's the matter—are yuh afraed to die, Wolf?"

"Not afraid, especially, sah," said the quiet-spoken Texan, "but I certainlly object to doin' it by mistake.

And that's what this is. I'm no friend of Jeffray's, if that's what yo' think."

"A stranger—yet yuh know his name," shrugged the white-haired rancher grimly. Without turning his head, he gave further instructions to Mrs. O'Hara: "Take the lamp, Marthy—the east window."

She gave a little choked cry of horror. "But he mustn't die—he's so young, John," she pleaded in a quavering whisper. "Let him go quietly. Will you, if he promises not to tell—"

"Do as I told yuh," said the old man in a stern voice. "I can't let this spy live—it wouldn't be fair to the others or to myself. Anyways, a Jeffray man ain't fit. The window—the same signal!"

The old woman took up the lamp and went to the window with it. This one was shaded, but she drew up the blind and held the lamp there for a moment, then drew it down quickly. She repeated this three times, so that three separate flashes of lamplight went out into the night.

"Good!" O'Hara grunted. "All right, Wolf, I guess yuh kin put yore hands down now. Sit in thet chair and don't move. Yuh'll have a few minutes to wait, but I reckon the time won't hang heavy on yore hands none."

"May I smoke?" asked the Kid quietly, trying to think this bewildering thing out.

"Shore, but no tricks. This trigger's got a mighty light pull," warned the rancher, his eyes never shifting from his prisoner.

The Texan rolled a cigarette and lighted it over the chimney of the lamp, which had been placed back on the table. Surely, he'd be able to convince O'Hara he had nothing to do with that Lynchtown gang.

But could he? The Branded

Riders meant business; they were in deadly earnest, no question about that. Whatever the organization was, it wouldn't trifle with an hombre they believed to be a spy. The Kid felt his pulses racing fast, in spite of his outward composure.

Whatever was behind all this, he was sure that enemies of the Jeffray faction, whoever they might be, were in the right. Jeffray's enemies, if they would only understand it, were *his* friends. He was sure that old O'Hara was an honest man.

What did the "V" stand for? Vigilantes, perhaps? But why were they branded in such a way?

He was still thinking about it, listening to the weird singing of the wind over the cabin chimney, when three sharp raps sounded on the door.

"Come on in, men," said O'Hara grimly, not shifting his eyes from Kid Wolf.

Four men shouldered in—bleak-faced men of varying ages. One could not have been more than eighteen; the oldest was fully as old as O'Hara. One hombre had a flaming red beard and fierce eyebrows of the same hue.

All were heavily armed and resolute. They stared hard at the Kid with expressionless faces, showing no surprise.

"Why, that's the jasper I seen talkin' with Jeffray at Trail Fork this afternoon," said the youngest man, after a pause. "It's him, shore enough. I was watchin' from across the hill."

"Thet settles it!" cried O'Hara triumphantly. "Now do yuh still try to deny that yo're a spy, Wolf?"

"I do deny it, amigos."

"Don't call us yore amigos, yuh low-down sidewinder!" cried O'Hara furiously. "Marthy, you go on into

the other room—and shut the door behind yuh."

"What—what are you going to do?" she breathed.

"Mrs. O'Hara, yuh'd better go," said the red-whiskered man in a low voice.

The ranch woman gave them one pleading look, then tottered into the cabin's other room, sobbing softly.

"Jeffray's plenty smart, anyhow," said the oldest of the newcomers, loosening his gun in its holster and looking coldly at Kid Wolf. "He knows enough to import outside gunmen—men we don't know—to do his dirty work. Have yuh got anything to say, hombre? We all belong to the Brotherhood of Vengeance, and yuh've only got a minute or two left to yuh."

"So that's what the 'V' brand means," said the Kid quietly. "Before yo'-all kill me—if yo'ah goin' to—I would like to say a few words." And he began by telling them of the dead body Jeffray had shown him, describing him as best he could. He was interrupted by an ejaculation of grief and anger from the red-bearded hombre.

"Why, that was my nephew, Riggs Mardon!" he exclaimed fiercely. "He's been missin' fer four days, but I thought—" He turned swiftly on the Kid, his eyes as fiery as the close-set brows over them. "Yuh've got nerve, yuh rattle, tellin' us that! Boastin', eh? I'll show—" He jerked at his gun.

"I'll tell yo' how Jeffray happened to show me that body, sah," said the Kid earnestly, "if yo' give me a chance."

"Well, speak up then—yo're time's short," growled O'Hara.

"This aftahnoon at the crossroads," Kid Wolf began, "foah hombres—"

He never finished. There was a sharp, echoing report, followed by the tinkle of falling glass, and mingled with the sound was the *chug-g-g* of a bullet slapping into human flesh!

"I'm——" choked the red-bearded hombre. "It's the——"

He turned slowly around on his feet, groped with outstretched hands, and fell heavily.

"The light—quick!" cried another of the Branded Brotherhood. He turned and fired almost point-blank at Kid Wolf, who fell to the floor. "It's yore friends, but I'll fix yuh fust!" he shouted, just as the lamp was extinguished.

The pitch darkness of the cabin was instantly lighted by spangles of winking scarlet flame, and the room moved back and forth as if on rockers as the thunder of gunshots pounded the air, both outside and within.

Bullets came pouring in on the trapped men through the windows—buckshot, charge after charge, along with deadly sprays of .45 slugs! The O'Hara house had become an inferno of noise and fire, pierced through by the shrieks of dying men.

Kid Wolf hadn't been hit by the bullet O'Hara's friend had fired at him. He had dropped just in time, and it had zinged over his head. He was on the floor now, rolling over and over, trying desperately to find his guns.

The door burst inward, and he could see the dim outline of men's forms looming there in the openings—forms that seemed to take fire. They were emptying their guns inside, and so fast that the flashes of their weapons made a blanket of billowing flame.

"The Wolf hombre's in thar with

him—git him, too!" shrilled a voice over the gunfire.

"We'll git 'em *all!*"

*Br-r-rang! Bang! Cr-r-rash!* Splinters stung the Kid's face as he flattened to the floor.

Rolling over again, he touched a wet, still face in the dark. Another man fell almost upon him. Judging from his voice as he cried out, it was old O'Hara. It was no fight—it was a slaughter pen.

"Turn off the smoke," said a voice from the doorway; "they're all down."

"Give 'em another dose to make shore."

Another frightful burst of gunfire swept the floor. The Kid set his teeth as a slug ripped through the flesh of his shoulder, but he made no outcry. His hand had closed over the butt of one of his Colt Peacemakers. He waited.

The shooting ceased, there was a pause, broken only by the fitful squalling of the wind, and then a sulphur match sputtered in the doorway. The Kid's .45 crashed—once—twice!

The match went out, and the life of a killer went out with it. A body thudded across the threshold, and there was a wild scampering of booted feet away from the door.

Then another volley came, this time through the windows. The Kid heard the slugs ripping into the boards all around him.

After that, the raiding gang called it a day—or rather a night. Evidently they thought they'd killed the last survivor. At any rate, they seemed none too anxious to strike more matches to find out.

The Kid heard the plunging of horses' hoofs, a sound that drummed away into silence. Judging from the noise they made, there were at least a half dozen of the murderers.

For several minutes, Kid Wolf lay sprawled on the floor, listening. All was black in the cabin and thick with acrid powder fumes. He thought he heard the sound of faint breathing near him, but he could not be sure. Had all been killed?

Suddenly he thought of Mrs. O'Hara, and, throwing all caution aside, he staggered to his feet and struck a match, fumbling for the knob of the inner door. With the flame held high, he entered.

"Ah yo' all right, ma'am?"

With an exclamation, he lurched forward and bent over the huddled form of the ranch woman, hoping that she had only fainted. But she was dead. A stray bullet had found a mark and an innocent victim.

Grim-faced, the Kid returned to the kitchen, lighting another match. The lamp had rolled to the floor. By some miracle, it was unbroken, and he took the risk of lighting it.

Of the five men in the room, four were out of the feud forever. Some of the bodies had been literally ridddled, and the place was a shambles.

The young hombre, however, was still breathing, and the Texan examined his wounds. None seemed serious, provided they were eared for at once.

A bullet had skimmed his lower ribs, another had given him a flesh wound in the thigh, and there was a shallow groove alongside his skull where a slug had grazed it. The Kid bound up his hurts as best he could, then got water from the bucket and tried to revive him.

It took a long time, and hours passed before the youth was fully conscious. At last, his eyelids fluttered open in the lamplight.

"Better, *compadre*?"

"Yes. But the others—"

"Theah's just yo' and me now," the Kid said quietly.

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"We had yuh wrong," the wounded hombre whispered, weakly grasping the Texan's hand. "I heard 'em yell out tuh git yuh. Did we—do all that shootin' without gittin' a single one of them coyotes?"

The Kid nodded his head toward the doorway. A motionless figure was sprawled half in and half out, the chin resting on the threshold, the eyes wide open and staring. A broad grin was frozen on his face, a ghastly smile that would be there until the earth covered it. In the dead man's hand was clutched a burned match.

"I'm afraid he's the only one," said the Soldier of Misfortune. "He's one of the hombres who tried to dry-gulch me this aftahnoon. If I'd known then what I know now, amigo, he'd be layin' a good many miles from heah."

"Well, my name's Tim Rogers," said the wounded youth. "I want to thank—"

"Nevah mind that," said the Kid. "Tell me, Tim, how many mo' of yo' Branded Ridahs ah theah? How many fightin' men left?"

"Only about a dozen, I reckon," said Rogers bitterly. "We're whipped. The rest of us might as well clear out o' the country."

"Why so?"

"Red McRays—that red-whiskered hombre a-layin' thar—was our leader," muttered Tim Rogers. "We cain't do nothin' without him, especially after what's jist happened."

"Well, I don't know whethah I can fill the bill or not, *compañero*, but I'll help," Kid Wolf said crisply. "Aftah what's just happened, I don't see that theah's anything else I can do. I'm with yo' to the last ditch!"

"Do yuh mean it?" Tim questioned doubtfully.

For answer, Kid Wolf gripped his hand.

"We'll make ouh plans now, and when daylight comes we'll put 'em into effect," he drawled.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE WHIRL-A-GIG MURDER.

AT the first glimmerings of dawn, Kid Wolf and Tim Rogers were riding. It was their plan now to get the rest of the Branded Riders together as quickly as possible. It had ceased raining.

Tim had told the Texan a great deal about the conflict that had been raging for months between the Vengeance Brotherhood and Jeffray's gang. It was a grim story, and much of it had been written in flame and smoke.

Jeffray had spoken truly when he had told the Kid of being the boss of Lynchtown. Not only that, but he'd reached his greedy hands into most of the surrounding ranch land, making life misery and more than misery for the settlers.

Murders had been committed over the past year—more than twenty, according to Tim—and his hired slayers had ruled the country in a reign of terror.

At last, some of the bolder men among the ranchers revolted, swearing to avenge themselves on the fat ruler of Lynchtown or die in the attempt. To keep weaklings out of their organization, it was a requirement that each member should be branded on the left arm with the Brand of Vengeance.

"It's a sort of reminder, too, never to forget what we swore we'd do," said Tim, rolling up his sleeve to display the livid scar.

The Texan could certainly sympathize. He knew how desperate these downtrodden ranchers had be-

come, and how much they'd suffered at Jeffray's hands.

"What I don't savvy, though, Kid," said Tim, "is why yuh want to help us. Yuh've everything to lose and nothin' at all to gain—unless yuh call it a gain to git yoreself shot to pieces."

"I've always fought fo' the undah dawg, amigo," said the Soldier of Misfortune. "And I like to fight." His white teeth gleamed in a smile. "Nobody enjoys a fight mo' than I do, when I'm on the right side—the side of justice. Blizzahd and me ah just a pain of rollin' stones, but we usually find plenty fo' us to do. But one thing's puzzlin' me about last night, Tim. How did yo' and the othahs happen to be on the spot when O'Hara's wife gave the signal?"

"My older brother and me live in a shack just up the hill from the O'Haras," Tim explained. "O'Hara knowed that Red and the others was thar with me. We've been expectin' a show-down fer a week now."

"Then why didn't we ride up to yore shack and get yo' brothah?"

"Nobody home. Wes—that's my bud—he's down at the tradin' post at Injun Springs to get a load o' supplies. It's sixty mile from us, but we ain't aimin' to trade with Jeffray's store. An' that's how all this trouble started. Wes ought ter be home any day now, though, with the wagon."

For several miles they followed a ridge of the Death Angel Mountains, seeing no one, but keeping a sharp lookout for trouble. Then they descended along a narrow trail that hugged the side of an abrupt cliff for mile after mile.

Directly across were other canyon walls, not so steep. From time to time they had glimpses of a little-used road opposite, sometimes a

half mile from them and sometimes less than half that distance.

"It ain't so fur now to the Stubblefield ranch. Thar's five men thar, all Branded Riders," said Tim Rogers. "We'll gather them up and swing back toward Lynchtown. All the rest of our bunch live right in line the way we're headin', and we'll soon git 'em gathered up. Then, Kid, it will be up to yuh to—"

"Quiet! Look across!" urged the Kid, drawing Blizzard to a quick halt on the narrow ledge.

As Tim took in the sight his brown eyes dilated. Drawn up at the edge of a long, steep descent was a wagon, the team unhitched. It was a big spring affair, with huge wheels, and Tim recognized it.

"Wes's wagon!" he cried.

"Who ah those men gathaled around it?" the Kid asked grimly.

"They're some of the Jeffray bunch! And they've got Wes! What—what are they doin' with him?" Tim's voice shook with horror.

Kid Wolf's face, too, had gone a shade whiter under its coating of tan, and his gray-blue eyes widened angrily.

"We've got to get ovah theah! Isn't theah a way?"

"Thar's no way down from the cliff fer two miles," young Rogers groaned. "Cain't we—"

The Texan measured the distance between the two sides of the canyon and shook his head. His practised eye told him that the far side of the dizzy gorge was too distant—it was much beyond six-gun range.

"Don't look, Tim, old man," said the Kid with a sharp intake of breath. "We can't save him, but buck up, amigo."

If the Kid hadn't seized the bridle of Rogers's bronc, the boy would

have spurred his animal madly over the rim into the gulch. He was beside himself with grief and fury, and no wonder. Kid Wolf himself was sickened at what was about to take place.

Wes Rogers, struggling wildly but helpless, was spread-eagled to one of the big rear wheels of the wagon, his wrists and ankles bound tightly to the spokes. With his legs and arms outstretched, his body resembled a letter "X." The wagon was balanced on the very edge of a dizzy, boulder-dotted slope, and the gang was pushing it over.

"If we'd only brought a Winchestah with us!" groaned Kid Wolf in horror. "With a rifle I could do something! But I didn't want to be weighted down with one!"

Heedless of any consequences to himself, he whipped out his .45s and opened a hot fire. But it was of no use. The gang looked up, stopped what they were doing for a minute, but when they saw the Kid's slugs tearing up dirt and gravel far below them, they returned to their dreadful work, hurrying faster than before.

With a frightful rumble, the wagon suddenly went over the brink! Faintly, the two horrified watchers heard the victim's last screams.

Down plunged the big, heavily laden vehicle, gathering speed. It struck boulders but kept going. Clouds of dust whirled up behind it, and Wes Rogers's body began to spin faster and faster. At last it became a blur.

Crash after crash echoed through the canyon. The wagon bounced higher at every impact. The vehicle seemed like a thing alive, hurtling to its doom. It hit a clump of aspen trees and sailed through them like so many spears of grass.

Down and down it plunged, scattering its cargo behind it.

Then, with a last dreadful *boom*, the wagon dropped the final fifty feet onto the boulders below. The wheel to which Tim's brother was tied came off, a splintered wreck of a thing, and sailed skyward.

It seemed to sail to a tremendous height, but the Kid did not look again. The victim was dead long before that. At least, the Kid hoped so with all his heart.

*Whan-n-n-gg! Z-z-z-zing!* A slug glanced from the rocks hardly a yard from Tim and the Texan.

A tall, powerfully built desperado across the canyon had opened up with a Winchester, taking pot shots. He was firing languidly, as if not caring much if he landed or not, but the Kid knew the danger of that far-carrying rifle.

"Theah shootin' at us, Tim—let's go!" he warned his companion.

"I don't keer whether they git me or not," gasped Rogers.

"I know it's tough, *amigo mio*," said the Kid, "but we've got wohk to do—mo' now than evah."

Rogers came to himself, nodded dumbly, and they went charging along the trail and around the next curve, out of gun range.

"Thet hombre with the long gun jist now," sobbed Tim bitterly, "is Deak Falk—the fastest gunman an' wust stingaree in Jeffray's outfit!"

"And let's hope," said Kid Wolf, "that we meet him again!"

## CHAPTER VI.

### LYNCHTOWN.

BY noon, Kid Wolf and Tim Rogers had gathered all the Branded Riders together and had taken up a concealed position in the thickly timbered hills overlooking the little settlement of Lynchtown.

Still, the Kid gave no orders to attack. He was looking things over carefully, and he wanted to be sure that all of the Jeffray gang, or most of it, at least, was in the bag before he started to pull the drawstrings tight.

Three o'clock came—three thirty—before a look of interest began to shine in the Texan's cool gray eyes. A little band of six riders—the same bunch that had performed the terrible wagon murder—came riding in at a canter and halted their broncs outside Jeffray's big store. They went inside.

"They're most all there now, if my count's right," said Tim, who had been intently watching the town's single street through a spyglass belonging to one of the Branded Riders. "When do we start, Kid?"

Kid Wolf had divided his band of eleven fighting men into three separate parties, and they had the town pretty well surrounded. Each man knew what he was to do. They had known the Kid only a few hours, but instinctively they relied on the Texan's leadership and tactics. Moreover, they liked him.

On the opposite hill, concealed under cover of the cedars, were five of them, led by a bald-headed, grinning hombre named Pat Shane—a fighter if there ever was one, the Kid had decided at first glance.

Another little party waited beyond the town, watching for the Kid's signal, the wave of a shirt. When the time came, the Kid would go into Lynchtown ahead, with Tim and two others at his back. Five minutes later, the other divisions would follow.

Kid Wolf wanted to do a little preliminary—cleaning up before tackling the desperado stronghold, which was Jeffray's combined store and saloon.

At the lower end of the settlement were several other small saloons and stores, and the Kid wanted to clean these out first, to make sure that their enemies would all be in one place. So far as he could judge, the gunmen were all drinking at Jeffray's, celebrating their recent successes.

"Cain't I wave the shirt now, Kid?" pleaded Tim, still perched in a tree with the spyglass.

Kid Wolf had been humming "The Rio" under his breath. Nodding, he swung onto Blizzard's back.

"Give the other boys the signal, amigo." He smiled. "Let's go. Take it easy now, remembah. Let's keep out of sight fo' as long as possible."

The men rode single-file down through the trees and into a ravine that brought them out at the lower end of Lynchtown. All was quiet, though there were faint sounds of revelry farther up in the direction of Jeffray's store—drunken laughter and boisterous shoutings.

At the first little barroom, the Kid and his three friends dismounted leisurely at the hitch rail, crossed the sidewalk, and strolled in through the swinging green doors. Several men were drinking at the counter. They turned and stared, their faces blank and questioning, at the newcomers' arrival.

"Do any of Mistah Jeffray's friends happen to be heah?" the Kid drawled coolly.

There was no answer.

"I'm glad to heah it." The Texan smiled. "I'll put anothah question. How many of yo' would be willin' to help clean up this town and put Jeffray out of business?"

"Who—who says so?" demanded a dumpy hombre in chaparajos, swearing in amazement.

"The Branded Ridahs, sah," said the Kid.

A whisky glass fell and smashed on the floor. The customers jumped nervously. It would have been hard to say which outfit they feared most, just then—the Branded Brotherhood or the dreaded and powerful town gang.

There was a silence, and then several of the drinkers started quietly for the rear door. They were neutral—they wanted none of it.

"*Bueno, just keep low while we ah busy,*" the Kid advised, showing his white teeth in a smile. "But if we see any of yo' tryin' to sneak to Jeffray, we'll shoot yo' on sight."

"Well, I'm blasted!" cried the runty cowboy. "I don't know who yuh are, hombre, but I'm with yuh!"

"So am I," cried another. "I don't think we got a chance, but if Jeffray can be chased out of this country, I'm shore for it! He's got by with too much fer too long."

"Come with us!" said the Texan, gripping their hands quickly.

At the next saloon, the Kid got another recruit; at the third and last place, two more. All this help would count in the desperate show-down that was coming.

They were ready now to strike, and as they approached the big store building from one direction, the rest of the Branded Riders came cantering in from two other sides. They had the place surrounded before the Jeffray faction realized what was taking place.

Then the shattering report of a carbine broke the afternoon's calmness. A pair of Jeffray men, lounging in front of the store, had discovered what was going on and had given the alarm.

They rushed into the store and out on the porch again with a half dozen others. After exchanging a

few shots with the Branded Riders, they retreated back into the building and shut and barred the massive front doors.

"Draw back a bit, amigos," the Texan ordered, "and everybody dismount—things will staht in a minute. Get yo' hosses to sheltah. We'll make ouh attack on the weakest spot—the back of the buildin'."

Without bothering to answer the brisk fire that came from the store windows, the Branded Riders coolly followed instructions, concentrating on the rear of the store.

The building was a two-story structure of frame with a high foundation of adobe and stone in the front. At the back was a livery stable, connected with the store by a fenced yard.

Inside this corral were a couple of light wagons and the wheels and running gear of a larger one. A pair of upper-story windows looked out on this space, and below them was the door the Kid planned to force.

"Why not set fire to the store and shoot the skunks as they run out?" suggested a fierce-eyed hombre.

"No; I think we can win by fightin' clean, sah," said the soft-spoken Texan. "I've got men posted in front to give us the alahm if they try to get out that way. What we've got to do is break in through the back do'. Some of us," he added in a matter-of-fact tone, "ah goin' to have to die."

"All we want is a chance to die a-fightin'," Tim Rogers muttered.

The attacking party had ducked along the side of the board fence for shelter; it was pretty flimsy, and already one of them had been wounded. Several of the desperadoes were sharpshooting from the upper windows that overlooked the yard.

"What about them gunnies up

thar, Kid?" asked the bald-headed Pat Shane through clenched teeth. "If we try to cross that corral, they'll wipe us out afore we kin reach the door."

"Heah's the plan," said the Kid, nodding toward the nearest wagon. "We'll push that toward the do', keepin' undah and behind it as much as we can. It will protect us from the wo'st of the gunfiah, and at the same time we can use it as a bat-tahin'-ram to break in the do'."

It was worth trying, anyway, and the Kid's men tensed themselves for action. In the meantime, the shots from the windows came steadily. The brutal face of "Deak" Falk appeared there for a moment, long enough to shout tauntingly:

"Come on, yuh loco fools! We're goin' to kill yuh all! And you, Wolf! I'll powder-burn them buckskins off yore yellar back!"

"Let's go, *compadres!*" said the Texan quietly.

With a cheer, the attackers dashed for the wagon, ducking under and behind it. There was no confusion, for each hombre had been told in advance just what he was to do.

The movement took the Jeffray bunch by surprise. They had expected the Kid's forces to make a direct rush across the bare yard for the rear door. Only one man was killed in reaching the comparative shelter of the wagon, and in a jiffy it had begun to roll toward the store, pushed slowly and steadily by nearly a dozen men.

A deadly fire opened up from above! One of the Branded Riders, badly wounded, went down between the wheels, and the Kid dragged him out. The wagon rolled on, being guided with difficulty.

Slugs ripped into it, sending up showers of splinters. A lanky hombre next to the Kid sobbed and fell

sprawling, his head shattered by a bullet.

The desperado who had fired the shot leaned out just a bit too far to celebrate his success. The Kid's .45 roared, and the grinning killer, shot in the mouth, lost his balance and fell from the window with a screech.

The wagon was almost at the door now—the protruding tongue, with all the weight of the vehicle and the men behind it, was only a few yards from it.

"Smash it!" the Texan sang out. "Let's give it all we've got! This is the show-down!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE BATTLE AT JEFFRAY'S.

IT would have taken a door as strong as the gate of a fortress to resist the mighty impact of Kid Wolf's improvised battering-ram. With a terrific crash, the wagon tongue ripped through it like paper, tearing it from its hinges and crushing it inward, though it had been strongly barricaded by heavy boxes and bales piled against it on the inside. A moment later, the Branded Riders were storming in!

The fight would be desperate—the Kid knew that! The Jeffray gang were battling for their lives, for they realized that they could expect no mercy from the men who had vowed vengeance. The two forces were almost evenly matched, with a slight advantage in Jeffray's favor.

The thunderous roar of six-guns was pounding now at the Kid's eardrums. Leading the attack, his big Peacemakers streaming flame and smoke, the Texan hurdled the sagging bodies of the first line of defense and on into the room!

Two men—three of them—dropped before the spitting fury of

those avenging .45s. He was shooting from the hips, his lithe body bent in a weaving crouch.

"Kill thet Texas Wolf—drop him!" shrilled the voice of Jeffray.

The Kid didn't see the fat schemer or he would have done some dropping on his own account. Jeffray was keeping back, letting his crew of gunmen do the fighting.

The room they were fighting to take possession of was the storage room, filled with barrels, boxes, and kegs. The gang had taken refuge behind some of these, but in spite of that they were slowly and surely being beaten back into the next room—the main store and saloon.

Four or five Branded Riders had been killed, but those lost lives were being paid for with interest. Pat Shane, his bald head bobbing in the smoke, had a blazing six-gun in each hand, and his yells rang out even over the terrific detonations of the guns.

"We got 'em cornered boys!" he shouted. "We got 'em whar we want 'em now! Give those polecats their medicine!"

Fighting like caged rats every inch of the way, the Jeffray desperadoes were pushed back into the barroom. They attempted to hold the door, but the Branded Riders took it at a rush.

The big room of the store was free from smoke at first, but it didn't stay that way long. The shooting became even faster and more deadly. Mirrors crashed, shattered by bullets. Some of the Jeffray men ducked behind the long bar that lined one side, opening a hot fire. Others took refuge behind the low counter opposite. The din became deafening.

The Jeffray bunch were being beaten, and they realized it at last. Between the roars of shots, Jeffray's

babbling, terrified voice could be heard, urging his men on. But it was no use. The odds were all against the murder gang now. They were dropping fast.

Through the smoke swirls, just as most of the desperadoes were throwing up their hands in token of surrender, the Kid saw Jeffray and his henchman, Deak Falk, slipping around the bar toward a small door that led into another room. The Texan, his face grim and set, sprinted after them.

"Hold on, yo' killahs!" the Kid's voice rang out.

One jump took him through the door, and he found himself in a small empty room. The fat legs of Jeffray were just disappearing on the stairway that led to the upper story. Deak Falk, who had been about to follow his chief, whirled at the sound of the Kid's voice and blocked off the foot of the stairs. A big six-gun was in his right hand.

"I've been wantin' to git yuh face to face with me, Wolf man!" he rasped between clenched teeth.

The face of Deak Falk was a mask of fury. His smoke-stained skin was livid with hate, and his eyes were like red coals.

Kid Wolf pulled both triggers—with no result. There was only a click and a faint report. One gun was empty, and quick as a flash the Texan realized what had happened to the other.

The gun hammer had dropped on a defective cartridge. Only the primer had exploded, wedging the bullet halfway down the barrel and rendering the gun useless!

Deak Falk, too, understood, and his wide, thin-lipped mouth expanded into a grin of devilish triumph when he saw the Kid hurl the useless weapons from him.

But he held his fire—he wanted

to see the Texan squirm before he drove the fatal slugs into his body, wanted to break down his nerve.

"Do yuh want it on yore knees, Wolf, or standin' up?" he laughed sneeringly. "Or mebbe in the back? I told yuh, hombre, that I'd burn that buckskin shirt offn yore carcass! An now, I reckon, I—"

Deak Falk waited just a split instant too long! He didn't know the hombre he was dealing with.

With a speed that was almost too rapid for the eye to follow, Kid Wolf's right hand went behind his ear, swept down again. Something streaked through the air like a thunderbolt of silver. A flash, and then a queer thud.

It was Kid Wolf's hole card—a big Texas bowie knife that he always carried in a concealed sheath sewed to the inside of his shirt collar! He had hurled the blade at Deak Falk with the speed and accuracy of a pistol shot!

"Ah-r-r-r-r-r!" sighed the big killer, lurching forward and dropping his unfired gun.

It was Deak Falk, and not the Kid, who dropped to his knees. For he had been struck full in the throat. The bowie had buried itself almost to the guard. Clawing at it, the dying desperado fell over on his face and lay still.

Kid Wolf jumped over him and went leaping up the stairs. Jeffray was up there—the evil mind behind all the death and violence that had come to Lynchtown.

Without even stopping to think that he had no gun, the Texan went after him. The Kid's gray eyes were like flint and steel.

"Jeffray! Yo' ah wanted!"

There was an answer—an answer in a voice shaking with crazy fear and desperation:

"We die together, Wolf!"

Kid Wolf stopped in midstride at the top of the steps. Standing over an open keg of gunpowder, a flaming match in his hand, was Jeffray!

"Here's where I blow us both to kingdom come!" shrilled the boss of Lynchtown.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE BRAND.

There was only a split second, if that match was dropped, between life and eternity. There was enough explosive in that keg to wipe out most of Lynchtown. It would be a devilish revenge for Jeffray—he would die himself, but he'd take all his enemies with him!

Jeffray's fat, bloated body was shaking like an aspen leaf. His face was gray and only the whites of his eyes were showing. His mouth had sagged open, and his yellowed teeth were clicking together like castanets.

The slow-burning sulphur match in his trembling fingers still burned, only a foot above the powder keg.

"Go ahead and drop the match, sah." Kid Wolf smiled coldly. "Yo' haven't got the nerve."

"I—I'll blow us all—"

Jeffray's hand was shaking violently, but he kept a death grip on the flaming match.

"Go ahead, yo' cowahd, and drop it!" the Texan repeated, calmly walking toward him.

The fat ruffian could endure the strain no longer. What little courage he had oozed out of his fluttering heart at the sight of Kid Wolf's cool and smiling face. With a feeble yell, Jeffray threw the match away, lifting his flabby hands shoulder-high in abject surrender.

"I—I can't go through with it," moaned Jeffray weakly. "Will they—hang me?"

"That's up to them, not me," said the Texan grimly. "If they do, it would be no mo' than yo' deserve, sah. Come with me!"

The fight was over. The survivors of the gang—only four men besides Jeffray—were lined up against the wall downstairs, disarmed and cringing like whipped curs. A great yell went up from the Branded Riders when they caught sight of the Kid and his quailing prisoner.

"Thar he is! Thar's the man!" shouted Pat Shane.

Jeffray would have fainted if the Kid hadn't held up his fat and quivering body. The Texan had never seen a worse exhibition of cowardice. No one could feel any sympathy for him, only contempt.

The Lynchtown boss was face to face at last with the Branded Riders, the grim organization that, with Kid Wolf's help, had crushed him and found vengeance for all the wrongs that had been done them.

The trial was held quickly—a fair but relentless vigilante court. The prisoners were all taken into the yard at the rear of the store, their hands bound behind them.

Only a little handful of the Branded Riders remained alive, but the Kid was overjoyed to see that his friend Tim Rogers was among them. In the fury of the fight the Kid had lost track of him.

"Yo' brother is avenged now, Tim," he told him quietly. "Deak Falk will nevah commit any mo' whihih-a-gig murdahs. He got mixed up with a little Texas steel, a while ago."

"Thanks, Kid," Tim whispered.

After a consultation, the judges who had been appointed from among the Branded Riders announced the punishment that would be meted out to the guilty. When he heard the sentence, the Kid knew he

hadn't been mistaken in them. They could have been cruel; but, now that they had gained what they had fought for, they were not only just, but merciful.

"We figure there's been about enough killin' in Lynchtown to-day," said the bald-headed Pat Shane, turning to the prisoners. "Yuh ought to be jailed, but we ain't got no place to put yuh. After all, yo're not the worst of the bunch—they're dead, thank heavens. We've decided to banish yuh. Clear out of the country, and if yuh ever show yore dirty faces yere again, yuh'll be shot on sight! Thet's all! Yuh agree?"

The prisoners, who had expected death, were eager to promise. Jeffray gave a little chirp of joy.

Shane grinned at him.

"Thet don't go fer *you*, hombre," he said. "We're goin' to string yuh up, right now! Git a rope, boys!"

There was a wail of awful fear from Jeffray, and he began to sweat and plead. His lamentations were dreadful to hear. He gibbered and slavered incoherently.

"Give me the same chance as the others! I'll promise anything! Don't hang me! Don't!"

Shane relented a bit and turned to the Kid.

"What do *you* think, Kid?" he asked. "We'll leave it to you."

The Texan shook his head. "He sho' deserves the rope," he drawled, "but as fah as doin' any mo' hahm heah, he's through. Yo' ah the ones he's wronged, though, and it's up to the Branded Ridahs to decide."

The committee put their heads together for a minute, then Shane ordered some of the others to build a fire.

"Well, we won't hang yuh, Jeffray," he told the trembling fat

hombre. "We've decided on some-thin' else, instead."

"Anything—anything but hangin'," moaned the former king of Lynchtown.

"Bring the fat hawg over to the fire," said Shane grimly. "One of yuh bring the iron. This won't take but a minute."

What followed was probably more painful to Jeffray than hanging would have been. The Kid saw him struggling feebly at the edge of the fire, then heard a horrible, drawn-out yell. To his nostrils came the odor of hot iron and seared flesh.

"Thet's it, boys," Shane said. "Hold it—burn it deeper. *Bueno!* Turn him loose. The letter 'V'—not on the arm, but right in the middle of his forehead! What do yuh think of our brand, Jeffray?"

There was another frenzied shriek, and Kid Wolf turned away, not caring to see.

Twilight was deepening when Kid Wolf swung aboard his big white cayuse. Already new trails were calling, and Blizzard, pawing the ground anxiously, seemed as eager as his master for the road of high adventure. Their work was done here, and, like tumbleweeds, they must drift on.

"Adios, Tim amigo," the Texan said, reaching down to grasp young Rogers's hand. "Lynchtown is cleaned up now, and I hope yo' will do yo' best to keep it that way."

"I wish yuh wasn't goin' so soon," said Rogers gloomily. "Thet ranch o' mine—— Won't yuh go in with me as pardners? My brother's gone, and it'll be lonesome. We could make money—lots of it, now that the Lynchtown gang's busted up."

"Yo' make the money fo' yo-self, *compadre*," said the Kid with a far-

away look in his eyes. "I'm interested in othah things, I'm afraid. Some day I'll be back and see how yo' ah gettin' on. Good luck, Tim!"

Rogers called good-by, and a chorus of warm farewells were shouted out by the other Branded Riders as the Texan drummed away at a fast canter. Blizzard's mane and tail streamed in the air like white silk. Then dust swallowed horse and rider

as they hammered down the main street.

The Kid's voice, uplifted in the Texan's favorite song, came drifting back:

"Oh, we ah bound again fo' the Texas sand,  
The Rio!

It's the land wheah the Brazos stahts!  
The Lone Stah brand,  
Is ouah only brand,  
And we carry it in ouah hearts!"



### ANCIENT VILLAGE REMAINS A MYSTERY

OVER fifty years ago, two brothers, William and James Tingey, traveled in a Red River oxcart to a then unnamed wilderness in northwest Canada. The section where they settled is now known as the Marionton District.

When the Tingey brothers arrived, there were no inhabitants, either Indian or white, in the whole stretch of wild country. After deciding on a location, they began to clear the land. They had brought with them some live stock, a substantial supply of provisions, and seeds, which they planted.

The land was rich and fertile, well watered and timbered, and the pioneers, who were young, hardy, and ambitious, were happy and contented, in spite of the fact that they were the only human beings for many miles around. There were no Indians in the vicinity.

They took long rides through the country, and one time they came upon objects that were evidently the remains of a village. Only fireplaces and chimneys were standing. These were made of mud, but they proved that some white persons must have dwelt in the village, as

Indians of those days knew nothing of such commodities.

It has been thought by some that it might have been a fur-trading post of the Hudson's Bay Company, but there are no records of such a post in that region.

Cellar excavations showed that at least ten buildings had been erected and occupied. On hills near by a number of graves were found, and from these it has been judged that Indians, or half-breeds had occupied the village, with perhaps some white fur hunters to account for the fireplaces and chimneys.

There were plots where gardens had been planted. Lilac trees and everlasting onions were still growing, and were able to stand transplanting by the pioneers who removed them to their own home-stead. The lilac bushes are vigorous to this day and bear beautiful large blossoms.

But who built the village and lived in this vast stretch of wilderness has never been discovered. The ruins have disappeared, and all that remains to-day of the old settlement is a few lilac bushes and the graves on the hillsides.



# No Reward!

A True Story of the Wild West

By Kent Bennett

Author of "No Surrender Blair," etc.

THE big, loud-mouthed hombre downed another drink of the fiery, rotgut whisky and slammed his big fist upon the flimsy bar with a smash that made glasses and bottles bounce. With an insulting leer on his broad flat face, he turned and hooked a boot heel upon the bar rail and stared at the small crowd of Mexicans and cowboys who were loafing in the old saloon.

"Take a good look at me, you fellers," he snarled from the corner of his loose mouth. "You're now lookin' at an hombre that's bad. You don't want to forgit it, either. I'm a real killer, I am, an' I don't

never stand fer no foolishness—out of nobody."

Without taking his close-set, pigish eyes from the silent crowd, the fellow deliberately spat on the floor near their feet and sneered. He then glared around at the old bartender's expressionless face and helped himself to another glass of whisky.

"An' still another thing," he growled, wiping his thick lips with the back of one hand. "I'm here to stay. If you know of any good outlaws, you can send 'em around. I'm goin' to organize me a band, an' I can use a few of 'em in my business. Savvy?"

Just then, a faint clink of spur rowels sounded from outside. There came a light, brisk tap of boot heels on the porch, and a slender, wiry-built young cowboy stood framed in the doorway.

The newcomer was scarcely more than a boy, but a pair of heavy, businesslike Colt .45s sagged his crisscrossed cartridge belts in thong-tied holsters. A wisp of blond hair stuck from under his old sombrero. His thin lips were parted in a friendly grin, and he was whistling tunelessly between his prominent buckteeth.

As the youthful stranger caught the insulting look on the bully's drink-flushed face and noticed the hush that had fallen over the crowd, he paused at the door. The smile died on his lips, and he stopped whistling.

He looked closer at the bullying hombre who now stood with both elbows on the bar and the empty whisky glass still clutched in his right hand. The fellow was dressed in the garb of a cowboy, but a single glance told the newcomer that the hombre was no puncher.

"Hello, Billy," a cowboy near the stove called quietly.

"Billy, huh?" the bully sneered inquiringly, then chuckled coarsely. "They tell me there's another Billy around here, an' I'd admire to meet up with 'im. They call 'im 'Billy the Kid.'"

The youthful stranger's face slowly hardened, and a thoughtful glint crept into his eyes. He stared straight at the big fellow for a moment without replying. His inquiring gaze finally swung to the crowd, then came back to rest on the bully's heavy figure.

"Can't you talk, sonny?" the big hombre sneered. "Maybe the cat's

got yore tongue? Speak up! I won't let nobody hurt yuh."

The young cowboy's eyes instantly glinted like points of blue flame, and his lips came together. He darted one piercing glance at the hombre's belted guns, then the look of anger slowly left his face, and he again began grinning, as if he had just thought of something funny.

"Yuh say yuh'd like to meet up with Billy the Kid?" he inquired, eyes now twinkling.

"That was what I said, wasn't it?" the fellow roared, glaring. "Do you know where I can find 'im? Don't stand there whistlin' through them teeth an' grinnin' at me. Talk up!"

"Don't rush me, mister," the young cowboy chuckled. "Yo're liable to git me all excited. Yuh almost made me forgit my name. Yuh see, I happen to be Billy the Kid, myself. What did yuh want to see me about?"

The bully's elbows came down off the bar instantly, and he spat an angry oath. He glared suspiciously at the crowd, as if daring them to laugh, then he hurled his whisky glass to the floor and scowled at the Kid.

"Tryin' to be funny, are you?" he snarled. "Listen! If you wasn't such a little whippersnapper, I'd turn you across my knee an' give you a good spankin'! I asked you if you knowed where I could find Billy the Kid, an' I'm warnin' you I want a civil answer!"

Billy burst out laughing, and he winked at the crowd. Many of them knew him, and they, too, laughed with relief because they now knew they were in no further danger from the bullying bad man.

The Kid shrugged his wiry shoulders and hitched his heavy guns slightly higher on his slender hips.

Still chuckling, he strode carelessly over to the bar and leaned on it with one elbow.

"So yuh won't believe I'm Billy the Kid, huh?" he laughed good-humoredly. "Well, I guess I'll have to prove it to yuh. Ask this bartender or them hombres there in the crowd. If that don't satisfy yuh, I'll maybe be obliged to prove it with my guns."

With an angry oath, the fellow leaped out from the bar. The expressions on the faces of men in the crowd had evidently told him he was facing the real Billy the Kid, but he was too thick-skulled or tough to be awed by the appearance of the youthful gun fighter.

Snarling through his clenched teeth, he whirled and snapped his big hands to his Colt butts. He glared down at Billy the Kid's slim, boyish figure for a moment; then a sneer of contempt slowly twisted his unshaven lips, and he burst into a peal of jeering laughter.

"So you're this Billy the Kid I been hearin' about," he gibed, whooping noisily. "Why, I could break a little runt like you in two with my bare hands. The very idea of men bein' afraid of a little whippersnapper like you. Why—"

"Pard!" the bartender cut in warningly. "Listen, mister! No offense, but I'd advise yuh to chop out that line o' talk. I don't crave no killin's hyar in my place, an' I'd suggest fer yuh to cut out that suicide speech yo're makin' while yuh got time."

With a furious oath, the fellow kicked a cuspidor out of his way and strode closer to the Kid. He started to grab Billy's arm, but he got a glimpse of Billy's eyes and leaped back, pawing at his guns.

Billy was still smiling, but it was

no longer a friendly smile. With his buckteeth showing in the lamp-light, it was more like the white-fanged snarl of a killer wolf, and his slitted eyes were like twin points of white-hot steel.

"Why—what—" the bully ejaculated, hands now gripping his holstered guns. "Why, you little killer, I got a good notion tuh riddle yore body with these—"

"Yuh'd better not try it, mister!" Billy the Kid interrupted sharply. "Don't try to drag them irons. I don't want to kill yuh; but, if yuh try to draw, I'll about have to. Don't make me. I've killed men enough, an' I want to stop—if hombres like you'll only let me."

The bully had by this time recovered his shaken nerve. He drew back his head in a roaring laugh, but he kept his eyes on the Kid.

"Huh!" he whooped. "An' you really think you could draw an' down me before I could rip a bullet through you, do you? You think so, an' me with my hands already on my guns? Why—"

His words ended in a startled grunt as Billy's left hand blurred down, then up, and a Colt muzzle prodded him roughly in the stomach before he could drag either of his weapons clear of his holsters. Billy's gun was cocked, and his finger curled around the trigger.

"Uh—ah—d-don't shoot!" the hombre managed to stammer. "H—hold on! I—"

Billy smiled coldly. With eyes gleaming, he shoved his Colt muzzle deeper into the fellow's paunch and backed him against the bar.

"D-don't, Billy! D-don't sh-shoot me!" he begged hoarsely. "I was— Listen: I was just tryin' you out to s-see if you really was as

g-game as men said you are. I w-was jokin' with you. D-don't kill me!"

Billy stared at him for a minute without speaking. Finally he nodded curtly and holstered his gun.

"Just foolin', huh?" he snapped grimly. "Feller, thet's the kind of foolin' thet gets men killed, an' me in trouble fer killin' 'em."

The hombre started to say something, but Billy stopped him. He then bored the fellow with a steely glance until the man's eyes wavered and dropped to the floor.

"An' another thing, mister," Billy went on, "yuh don't belong in this country. Yuh ain't no cowboy, in spite of them fancy chaps and clothes yuh got on. My advice to yuh is to cut out yore fightin' talk an' keep a civil tongue in yore head around here. If yuh don't, yo're liable to git shot. Savvy?"

With a warning nod, Billy deliberately turned his back on the man and walked out of the saloon. In a few minutes, he was seated at a battered table in the back of a pool hall, and was enjoying a friendly game of pitch with a couple of cowboys who were loafing in town.

## II.

Nearly an hour passed. Billy and his friends had stopped playing cards and were laughing and joking when two muffled shots blasted from down the street.

*Bang-bang!* Two more shots thundered, then there came a sound of running feet.

In scarcely a moment, a Mexican constable threw open the door and jumped into the pool hall.

He paused for a moment in the glare of the lamps to mop the sweat from his face, then darted a hasty

look around him. As his eyes fell upon Billy the Kid, he darted a quick glance behind him at the door, then hurried across the room.

"What's happenin', Juan?" Billy inquired carelessly, as the Mexican officer stopped beside him. "Somebody take a shot at yuh? Yuh look like yuh been runnin'."

"Meester Beelly," the hombre panted, "would you come out where I can speak weeth you? Queerck! Eet ees important! Thees bad man een those other saloon, he say he goin' keel you, an' I want to tell you about heem."

The Kid's face hardened, and he frowned with annoyance. Jerking his feet from the table, he got up and went outside with the constable.

"Ieesten, Beelly!" the hombre said, stopping him in the light of the windows. "Thees bad man have been drinkin' some more, an' he now swear he goin' to keel you on sight."

With a muttered remark, Billy dropped his left hand to a gun butt and glanced down the street. He would have started away, but the Mexican caught his arm.

"Look at thees first, Beelly," the hombre whispered. "Thees ees a want notice I get a few days ago een the mail. I theenk thees bad man ees the one I want, but I am afraid for try to arrest heem. Read thees an' see eef you do not theenk he ees the man eet describe."

As he talked, the Mexican drew a crumpled "wanted" notice from a pocket of his coat and passed it across. Billy hastily unfolded it and read:

All officers are warned to be on the watch for a murderer who goes by the name of Jake Merkel. We do not know his correct name, but this is the one he goes by. He is a robber and cutthroat of the most villainous type, and he killed an entire family

of nesters in this locality for some money he hoped to steal. Watch out for him and arrest him if possible. Take no chances with him as he is a treacherous murderer of the most brutal kind. You will find a picture of him inclosed. If you get him, notify the sheriff of Brazos City.

As Billy stopped reading, the Mexican constable handed him a faded picture. The Kid hastily snatched it and held it closer to the window.

"Why, the dirty, rotten skunk!" he snapped, as he looked at it. "Juan, yo're right as rain! Thet bad hombre is the very jasper we want. He's the very killer that's mentioned in that want bill!"

The Mexican nodded grimly. "I theenk so, too, Beelly, but I want to know for sure," he said, shoving the bill and picture back in his pocket. "Now I theenk I go geet me a sawed-off shotgun."

Billy frowned thoughtfully and shook his head. As another thudding shot echoed down the street, he jerked a thumb in the direction of the uproar and winked.

"No, Juan, yuh won't need any shotgun to handle that hombre," he said. "I'll handle 'im fer yuh. Yuh said he was makin' war talk about me, an' braggin' he was goin' to kill me on sight, so I think I'm the feller to go after 'im. Come on!"

With the Mexican officer hurrying along beside him, Billy headed back down the street toward the saloon where he could hear occasional shots and loud whoops from the bad hombre. He knew that the fellow was doubtless amusing himself by shooting holes in the saloon roof or pictures from the wall.

As they reached the narrow porch which ran along the front of the saloon, the Kid motioned the Mexican to a halt and peered through one of the dingy windows.

The bad hombre was standing at the end of the long bar. His shirt was open at the front, and his face was red and glistening with sweat from the whisky he had been drinking. He was shoving fresh cartridges into one of his guns and staring, bleary-eyed, at a picture on the wall that he had already riddled with bullets.

As Billy watched the hombre, he thought he noticed the bulge of a hide-out gun under the fellow's flannel shirt. A closer look showed he was correct, and he also decided that the man was not nearly as drunk as he was pretending to be.

"Ee-yahoo!" came a piercing yell from the fellow, then two roaring shots made the windows rattle. "I'm a ring-tailed wolf from the bad lands, an' this is my night to howl! Bring on yore Billy the Kid! I'll show 'im what a real old he bad man looks like!"

As the hombre gave another wild howl and dropped his gun in his holster to pour himself another glass of whisky, Billy gripped the Mexican constable's arm and leaned closer.

"Yuh stay outside here," he whispered. "Thet jasper is plumb spoilin' fer trouble, an' he'd like nothin' better than to git a chance to shoot me, so's he can brag that he is the hombre that killed Billy the Kid. Well, I'll show 'im. Stay here where yuh won't git hurt. I'll handle *him*!"

With that, Billy stepped softly to the door. He paused there to pull his guns around on his hips and loosen them in his holsters, then he stepped into the saloon.

At sight of him, the bad hombre jerked erect. With a growled oath, he hastily set his glass of whisky on the bar.

"Hello, Merkel," Billy barked, calling him by the name given on the want notice. "I see yo're still here. I noticed the gate to Boot Hill Cemetery had been left open, an' I thought maybe they'd been out to bury *yuh*."

The bad hombre glowered savagely. He wrinkled his low forehead and spat against the bar rail before replying.

"How'd you happen to call me by that name?" he snarled. "Who told you who I am?"

Billy laughed dangerously. "I seen it on a wanted bill, Merkel," he snapped. "Accordin' to what that notice said, yo're one bad hombre. Yo're supposed to be a real killer—the kind that likes to kill—an' *yuh*'d kill a woman or an old man as quick as *yuh*'d shoot anybody else. Yo're one of them treacherous back-shootin' hombres."

Merkel gave a snarl of fury. Glaring wickedly, he snatched up the bottle at his elbow and sloshed a huge drink into his glass. He muttered an oath and downed the whisky at a gulp, then he hurled his empty glass to the floor and glared across at the slender Kid.

"Yeah, I'm bad!" he roared. "Yeah, you bet you, an' the sheriff ain't yet been born that can arrest me. I kill sheriffs on sight!"

Billy laughed dryly. "Yeah?" he inquired, eyes dancing. "Well, feller, I see that there's one sheriff *yuh* ain't met yet. If *yuh* ever run afoul of a sheriff by the name of Pat Garrett, yo're goin' to change *yore* tune. Pat would just about shoot the pants off of *yuh*. He'd take *yore* guns away from *yuh* an' wrap 'em around *yore* neck, *yuh* imitation bad man!"

At this, the killer gave a bellow of fury. He started to make a grab

at his guns, but jerked his hands hastily away and gritted an oath.

Still grinning, Billy sauntered toward him. He looked Merkel up and down from head to feet, then chuckled and began whistling thoughtfully through his teeth.

"Blast you!" Merkel roared. "Cut out that dang fool whistlin'! I'll—"

He did not finish what he started to say. Instead, he leaned against the bar, and his right hand fumbled with a button on his shirt front.

The Kid's face hardened instantly, and he stiffened for a lightning draw. He had again noticed the unmistakable swell of the hidden gun under Jake Merkel's left armpit, and he knew the fellow was fumbling at that shirt button in order to get his hand in position to use it.

Merkel glared for a moment. Suddenly a crafty look gleamed in his piggish eyes, and his thick lips twisted in a knowing leer. He chuckled throatily and dropped both hands on the bar.

"Huh!" he finally grunted, then he chuckled again. "Billy, what's the use of me an' you fallin' out an' shootin' each other up? Me an' you is both killers. We're bad hombres. We ought to be partners."

Billy frowned, and his lips curled in disgust. He stared straight at the whisky-soaked ruffian without replying.

"Maybe you don't think I'm fast with a gun, too," Merkel growled. "I'll tell you what. I'll make you a bet that I kill me a man 'fore you do. Come on! We'll each put up twenty dollars with this bartender, an' the first one of us that kills a man collects. What do you say?"

The Kid's eyes narrowed. He was not fooled by Merkel's offer of friendship. He knew that the ruffian was merely making a crafty

play in order to throw him off of his guard long enough to kill him.

"I'll take that bet, Merkel," he finally said. "Put up yore twenty. Here's mine!"

Billy pulled a few crumpled bills from his pants pocket. He selected two tens and tossed them on the bar, and Merkel slid a twenty-dollar gold piece beside them.

"I wonder where yuh stole that twenty, Merkel?" the Kid snapped. "But never mind. Let me see yore guns. Yuh got 'em both loaded fer business?"

With a flourish, the ruffian laid his twin Colts on the bar. Billy glanced at them and saw that their cylinders were fully loaded, then shoved them back.

He had thought that in giving the fellow a chance to get hold of his weapons, Merkel would attempt to use them on him. He was ready for one of his lightning draws in case the hombre tried to shoot.

"Yeah, yuh got a good pair of sixes, Merkel," Billy said carelessly. "They're plumb ready to start throwin' lead, too."

Merkel nodded and chuckled. He had pulled his sombrero low on his forehead, and his close-set eyes were gleaming murderously from the shadow of its floppy brim.

Making a great show of sudden pretended friendliness, Merkel suggested a game of cards. Billy nodded, and they sat down at a table near the stove.

### III.

They played for a time as if their minds were only on the game, but each watched the other with the wary deadliness of a stalking cougar. Time after time, the Kid caught Merkel fumbling with a shirt button, and he knew that the fellow was only waiting for a chance to flash

his hide-out from its spring holster and shoot him down.

Except for the lone bartender, they had the saloon to themselves. The crowd had melted away into the night, but Billy knew that many pairs of eyes were watching through the windows and cracks in the doors.

He glanced over Merkel's shoulder at the bartender. The fellow was drumming worriedly on the bar with his fingers, and he was taking a drink every few minutes to steady his nerves.

Again Billy caught Merkel making a treacherous attempt to reach his hidden gun. Billy merely looked at him and laughed coldly.

Merkel started to deal the cards. He licked his thumbs, then leaned forward with his left elbow against the edge of the table. He dealt rapidly and threw the cards down harder than was necessary.

Suddenly one of Billy's cards slid clear across the table and dropped to the floor. Merkel scowled after it and grunted.

"Seuse me, Kid," he growled. "Pick that one up, will you? I need a basket to handle these things in. My fingers is all thumbs to-night."

Billy leaned down in his chair. As he reached for the card, he saw Merkel's right hand stab with the sudden speed of a darting snake toward his open shirt front.

*Bang!* The thundering crash of the murderer's gun almost deafened the Kid, but the ruffian's bullet only tore a shower of adobe from the wall across the room.

The Kid ducked as he saw the gun. With his left shoulder under the edge of the table, he lunged erect, hurled the table against Merkel's chest, and drew a gun with his right hand.

*Bang-bang! Bang!* Three roar-

ing shots bellowed, and a shower of splinters stung the Kid's face as Merkel fired through the flimsy table top in a frantic effort to down his slender antagonist.

But the Kid was not touched by the fellow's bullets. Leaping aside and around the upturned table, he fired only a single shot, and the murderer spun half around.

"Ahhh!" Merkel gurgled hoarsely, clutching at his chest where a bullet had torn through his body. "Uh—"

His hide-out gun slipped from his nerveless fingers and thudded to the floor as he swayed against a pool table. He clawed dazedly to keep from falling, then pitched forward on his face and lay twitching.

"Watch 'im, Kid!" the bartender called sharply. "Watch 'im close, Kid! He may be shammin' to git yuh off yore guard!"

Billy shook his head and smiled grimly. "Not him!" he snapped. "Thet dirty back-shootin' coyote is through."

At that instant, the front door crashed open, and the Mexican constable leaped into the saloon with

drawn guns. At sight of Merkel's crumpled body, he lowered his weapons and strode forward.

"You got heem, Beelly!" he barked. "Now there should be a reward for you for thees. Thees man he was wanted bad."

Billy shrugged his wiry shoulders and turned away. "Don't want no reward, Juan," he snapped. "I never make no charge fer wipin' out varmints where it's plumb necessary. If there's any reward, you kin have it. All I want is that twenty me an' him wasbettin'."

Billy helped the bartender set the table upright. This done, he re-loaded the empty chamber of his gun and walked out of the saloon without even glancing at the dead killer's stiffening body.

NOTE: It has been said that Billy the Kid once shot down a harmless cowboy in a saloon row, and that he did not even give the drunken puncher a chance for his life. This story was told the writer by an old-timer, and the author believes it to be the real version of that affair. Though he was given only the facts as this old-timer had heard them, he has attempted to picture it as it might have happened. Whether absolutely true or not, no one will ever really know.

—Editor.

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**STREET & SMITH'S**  
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# A Haunted Water Hole

A WATER hole in Texas was the scene of a tragedy some seventy years ago, when a young woman and her child were murdered near it. The murderer was never caught, and for some time after the crime was committed, it was said that the ghost of the slain woman made frequent visits to the place of her death, and was seen on several occasions by citizens of the neighborhood.

McDow Hole, as it was named, is on Green Creek, near Stephenville. A big pecan tree grew close to the hole, and its spreading branches made a cool, shady resting place for the men who came here to slake their thirst and water their horses.

About ten years after the woman and child had been killed near the water hole, a gruesome act of wild West justice was enacted on the same spot.

Seven rustlers were surprised by ranchers as they were driving off a big herd of stolen cattle. They were immediately seized and taken to McDow Hole by their angry captors, who proceeded without delay, to hang all seven in a row on a huge limb of the pecan tree.

Their work of vengeance done, they rode away.

The weight of the seven men pulled the giant limb down so that the toes of the end man just touched the ground.

It was enough to take the pressure of the rope from his neck, although he nearly choked. But he kept perfectly still until the cattle-men had disappeared.

When all was quiet, he slipped a knife out of his pocket and cut the rope. Hoping to save the one who was hanging next to him, he released

him too, but it was too late. The man saw all the others were dead.

The one survivor then walked across the field, where a boy was plowing. This boy had witnessed the hanging shortly before, and recognized the rustler.

Noticing that the man's neck was red and swollen and bore the marks of the rope that had been tightened around it, the boy suddenly remembered that McDow Hole was reputed to be full of ha'nts. He left his team and rushed for cover in the timber, where he remained hidden, quaking with fear, until the ghost had passed through the field and out of sight.

Later in the morning, a bunch of cowboys rode up to the hole to water their horses. They found five dead men hanging on the pecan tree, another dead man stretched on the ground, and two ropes dangling from the end of the strong limb that had been used as a gallows.

The man who saved himself from the fate of the other cattle thieves by cutting the noose from his neck went to another State, changed his name, gave up rustling for good, and became a highly respected citizen.

He was seen not so very long ago, a white-headed, hale and hearty old man, and may be living still.

McDow Hole is still the abode of ha'nts, and there are many superstitious persons in the neighborhood who could not be persuaded to go near it after dark.

With the passing of time, the six rustlers who died there, have become heroes of romance to the small boys, who believe that they were the honest punchers of a rival outfit, and were framed up by a jealous enemy.



C. RECKON FOR

## 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 RECKON yuh folks that are livin' on farms or ranches are gettin' yore pore ol' turkeys ready fer the end o' this month. Seems like thar's always a holiday or feast o' some sort tuh keep remindin' us thet the time is passin' by.

An' as I've said afore this, the passin' of time is always full o' the

makin's of history; an' one of the most long-lived ways o' preservin' history is through folklore an' folk songs. Thet's why, folks, I'm always after yuh tuh keep yore eyes open fer any ol' song o' the West thet might add a bit tuh the existin' body of folklore.

Yuh needn't think thet everything is already found thet kin be found

about the ol' West, either. Thar's always new material floatin' in. So I hope thet if yuh have any opportunities tuh pick up new items, yuh won't let 'em escape yuh.

Now, for tuh-day, I'm gonna give yuh an ol' song that I think is right well worth preservin'. Those of yuh who have been readin' the Corral as far back as 1932 may have it in yore scrapbooks, but I want new folks tuh have it, an' even if yuh have got it, it won't do yuh any harm tuh be reminded of it again. So hyar goes:

#### PASSING OF THE WRANGLER

By Henry C. Fellows, of Oklahoma.

"Wrangle up yer broncs, Bill,  
Let us hit the trail;  
Cinch 'em up a knot er two,  
'Fore there comes a gale.

"Fill the wagon full o' chuck,  
'Fore we cut adrift;  
Fer we'll have a time, Bill,  
With this winter shift.

"My bones, they feel a blizzard  
A-hatchin' in the west,  
An' I must load my gizzard  
With some pizen piker's best.

"Sam, git yer chips together,  
An' stack 'em in a box;  
An' gather up the tether  
Ropes, shirts, and dirty socks;

"An' lash 'em to the cayuse  
An' strap 'em tight an' strong,  
Fer we're goin' to haf to ride, Sam,  
Kase it seems they's somethin' wrong.

"Pards, see the clouds a-shiftin';  
They's goin' to turn a trick  
An' make us go a-driftin',  
Afore we reach the crick.

"It's a hundred miles, ye know, boys,  
To reach the OX camp,  
An' we'll have to keep a-rollin',  
Er we'll ketch a frosty cramp.

"So skin the mules aplenty  
With yer double-triggered crack;  
An' keep the broncs agoin'  
Jist so ye know the track!"

So with a whoop an' holler,  
The rounders, full o' pluck—  
An' tanked up to the collar—  
With their wagon load of chuck.

They left the Dodge behind 'em,  
An' started fer the South;  
With the wind a-blowin'  
A peck o' dirt a mouth.

They sea'ce could see the other  
Feller, lopin' through the cloud;  
Or hear nothin' but the thunder,  
An' the flappin' o' their shroud!

Tumble weeds a-rollin'  
With a forty-minute clip,  
An' the clouds a-pilin'  
Up like a phantom ship.

With 'er double-triggered action,  
The wind she turned her tail,  
An' kicked out all the suction  
Fer the souther's gale.

She started in to rainin'  
An' follerid with a sleet;  
An' kept 'er speed a-gainin',  
A-throwin' down 'er sheet,

Till everything was covered,  
A frozen glare of ice.  
Yet she still closter hovered,  
An' pinched us like a vise.

That blizzard come a-peltin'  
With 'er frozen shot;  
An' siche snow a-driftin'  
I never have forgot!

We couldn't see a nothin'  
Nor hear a rounder croak,  
But the gurgle o' the pizen  
A-puttin' us to soak.

We kept the hosses movin'  
From bein' froze to death;  
While waitin' fer the mornin'  
To thaw us with his breath.

But when the snowy mornin'  
Had come in with his smile,  
He'd left a ghastly warnin'  
Fer many and many a mile.

A thousand head o' cattle  
Caught driftin' in the storm.  
Were frozen, while a-millin',  
A-tryin' to keep warm.

Poor Sammy, with the wagon,  
Was found a mile alone,  
Was stuck adrift, an' frozen,  
An' harder'n a stone.

Ol' Bill, he froze his fingers,  
An' blistered up his face,  
Tryin' to pitch his ringers  
An' a-fightin' fer the ace.

I fell into a canyon,  
With my cayuse an' my traps,  
An' shuffled for the joker,  
With the cinchin' straps.

I warmed myself aplenty  
A-keepin' up the fight,  
A-skimm'n' ol' McGinty  
Till a-comin' o' the light.

Poor Sam! He boozed aplenty  
To stack him in a heap;  
An' the devils swiped his ante  
When he went to sleep.

So Bill and me together  
Stood in silence by the wag-  
On, not a-knowin' whether  
To swig another jag.

Or cut the cussed pizen  
That had fogged up our breath,  
An' kept our spirits risin',  
Without a fling o' death.

So me an' Bill, we tackled  
The job without a drop,  
An' in the hill we hacked  
A grave with an icy top.

An' shuffled Sammy in it,  
An' banked him with snow,  
An' reected up a monument  
To let the nesters know.

We had done our solemn dooty,  
An' planted him in style,  
With the whitest snow o' heaven  
Heaped on him in a pile.

Poor Bill! he sniffled a little  
When I lifted up my hat,  
An' let some weepin' splatter  
On Sammy's frozen mat.

Sam wa'n't no idle rustler,  
No one could ride the range  
Better'n he, nor brand 'em.  
Nor dip 'em fer the mange.

His check book showed a balance,  
Fer a wrangler o' the stuff.  
Fer a-helpin' of his mother;  
No one could speak enough.

His heart was where God put it,  
His blood was always red;  
His mouth he alluz shut it,  
When troubles was ahead.

An' if the storm was ragin',  
He rode the line alone,  
An' never once a-stagin'  
Some other's stunt his own.

Fer his larnin' he was known,  
Figgered with the letter X;  
Never had to once be shown;  
Was no mangy maverick's.

Set an' count a herd o' stars  
Driftin' from the hand o' God;  
Tell us all about the flowers  
Playin' boopeep in the sod.

Hope the judge will let him through,  
When he rounds up at the gate;  
But, ol' pard, I'm fearin', though,  
Sam'll be a little late.

Peace be then to Sammy's ashes,  
Till the round-up o' the race,  
When each wrangler's check book cashes  
What it's worth an' at its face.

Thar, folks, that's a rousin' good  
song. So long, an' good luck.



# Western Pen Pals

Conducted by SAM WILLS—Postmaster

Some day you're going out West yourself to the Western outdoors. It will be a nice thing to have friends out West when that time comes—friends who'll extend a hand o' welcome and put you onto things.

You can make these friends through this department of Wild West Weekly. The idea is to exchange information about different parts of the West—about ranches and camps, getting work, prospecting, and learning to rope and ride.

Letters are exchanged only between men and men, and between women and women. Let's get together and make this department a real help to readers of Wild West Weekly. I'll do my part by forwarding letters between parties likely to be interested in writing to one another. You do yours by always printing your whole name and address carefully on every letter you send to this department; and by giving the name and State of the Pen Pal you choose, as it appears in the magazine, as well as the date of the magazine in which you find him or her.

Address your letters to Sam Wills, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

W~~A~~AL, folks, do yuh realize that Christmas ain't so far in the offlin' an' how nice it would be to have a few extra Pen Pals at that time? It's easy enough tuh get 'em, but if yuh want me tuh print a request fer Pen Pals, better send in yore letter right off, because

it'll take some time, anyhow, before it can appear in the magazine.

O' course yuh can also use the quicker method in makin' friends with new Pen Pals, either by writin' the ones yuh select or by askin' me fer addresses.

What yuh want tuh look out fer,

howsomever, is tuh take names from the latest issues o' the W. W. W. because sech Pen Pals, being new members, will be the most active. Now read this week's letters:

#### SONG LOVERS AND COLLECTORS

DEAR SAM: How about having my letter appear in your department? I would like to hear from loads of boys and men who want to exchange songs. Well, Pen Pals, just send me your list, and I shall offer you mine to choose from. I am getting new songs all the time, but I think in making exchanges I can increase my collection in the easiest manner. No one who writes will regret it.

HOWARD BARR, OF MISSISSIPPI.

DEAR SAM: I am requesting Pen Pals all over the world to write to me, and I would be extremely glad if some radio entertainers were among them. I am collecting songs and have by now nearly two thousand different ones which I am desirous of exchanging with other collectors. Indian girls, who have been good friends of mine in the past are especially invited if they have songs to exchange. Note that I am a girl in my late teens, willing to answer all who write to me.

HAZEL SNYDER, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I am a young married woman of eighteen. My hobby is reading to my husband and collecting wild flowers and shrubs. However, this summer I had little time to follow my hobby, and so I thought that perhaps through you I could get in touch with Pen Pals who would be willing to exchange flowers or send some along to me. I would pay the postage gladly if it would not amount to too much. But I shall be glad to have letters, even if a Pen Pal has no flowers to send and to the first three who answer this request I shall send a package of lady-slipper seed, of which I have specimens in six different colors.

KITTEN, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man, twenty-two years old, quite well advanced in music and as I am an ardent stamp collector I offer to compose piano arrangements to song melodies, whether classical or modern style, in exchange for discarded stamp collections or stamps of the eighteenth century.

G. J., OF OREGON.

DEAR SAM: I have written to you before, but I regret to say that so far I have not obtained any Pen Pals. For this reason, I am asking you to print my request at earliest possible moment. I would like to get Pen Pals from anywhere who are interested in songs. My own collection stands now around eight hundred, but I desire to get more and am ready to exchange with any one who writes. I promise to typewrite each song wanted and will answer all letters.

CLYDE, OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fifteen, fond of sports, music, and dancing. My special ability is drawing and my hobby is that of stamp collecting. For that reason I desire to get Pen Pals anywhere to assist me in getting stamps. Foreigners will be especially welcome. KAY HACKER, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a young fellow, eighteen years old, interested in collecting stamps and coins. With that in mind, I am asking you to get me some Pen Pals from all over the world. Whoever writes will receive an answer that will be interesting reading.

LESTER A., OF SOUTH DAKOTA.

#### SPECIAL REQUESTS

I recommend these letters tuh be read by everybody, because they're interestin', an' besides, yuh may just find what yuh've been waitin' tuh see in one o' them.

DEAR SAM: I am a young woman of twenty-six, and I would like to hear from Pen Pals anywhere, especially the West. I am at this time trying to make a quilt, and I would be very happy if some Pen Pal would send me a block, thirteen by thirteen inches, with the sender's name worked in the center of it. In return I will send postal cards with views of my home State. Who is to be the first one to write?

EDITH GARDNER, OF MARYLAND.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonely waddy, a boy of eighteen, in search of Pen Pals. I have worked on ranches and know pretty well about the ways of the West. Having lived there nearly all my life, I am fairly sure that I can answer most any questions that might be asked. Let me hear from you, Pen Pals.

MANANA KID, OF NEW MEXICO.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, seventeen years old. I am interested in all sports, especially boxing, being quite an amateur boxer myself. What I am asking for is Pen Pals anywhere, especially sailor boys who can give me information about their life and work, because I intend to become a sailor later on. EDGAR J., OF SOUTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of seventeen, and I am leading a rather exciting life. I am working as a trick rider in the Wallace Rodeo and have an act all my own, just I and "Smile," my horse. When I am not traveling with the rodeo I work at a racing stable as exercise boy. Now I am trying to get in touch with fellows from the West, preferably Arizona and Mexico, who know something about horses. I will gladly exchange snaps of myself, while performing, for some of real Western life.

SKEETS BRUCHEY, OF MARYLAND.

DEAR SAM: I am a fellow nearly sixteen years old and I would like to get Pen Pals of about that age anywhere in the East. Where I live we had a rodeo some time ago, which led to some friends and I crossing the near-by border to buy some pack burros. And what trouble we got into! If you would like to hear the story, just write me. It will be interesting, all right!

PAUL HAUSE, OF TEXAS.

#### FROM ABROAD

Calling fer Pen Pals hyar an' elsewhere, an' thar's one letter from a country we haven't heard from for a long, long time. That ought to fetch stamp collectors in a hurry.

DEAR SAM: I am a new reader of the W. W. W. and I only just have noticed the department for Pen Pals. I am a girl of seventeen and would indeed like to be one of them, asking Pen Pals in any part of the world to write to me, especially girls of my age in your own country.

KATHLEEN WAGSTAFF, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: This is the first time I have written to you, and I hope that you will publish my letter. I am a girl of sixteen and a very interested reader of the W. W. W., although I like the Pen Pal section best of all. I would like to find correspondents anywhere, will exchange snaps and promise faithfully to answer all letters.

JEAN CANNING, OF IRELAND.

DEAR SAM: I would be much obliged if you would print a request for me in the W. W. W. I am a soldier, twenty-three years old, serving in the Foreign Legion. Born in Czechoslovakia. I speak my mother tongue as well as Polish and German, French and English. I would be very glad if you could get me in touch with some Pen Pals in America, and especially so if among them there should be a few from my own country, Czechoslovakia. All may be sure that I shall be a true Pen Pal and in return for information from your part of the world, I will serve with such on Morocco. I hope that my request will be heard.

LEGIONAIRE, OF MOROCCO.

DEAR SAM: I am writing in the hope that you can find some Pen Pals for me. When I got hold of a W. W. W. I well enjoyed the yarns it offered, but the Pen Pal department intrigued me so that I shall try to be one of the correspondents. I am a girl, eighteen years of age, fond of dancing, and am interested in collecting tinfoil.

BETTY H., OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a soldier, away from home, and anxious to keep contact with the old country by corresponding with some Pen Pals there. Young men in the early twenties may write, and they can be sure that in return they will receive letters which will prove of interest to them.

HOWARD, OF PHILIPPINE ISLANDS.

DEAR SAM: Would you please enter me as one of your Pen Pals? I am a boy, twenty-one years old, greatly interested in the West and for that reason, anxious to correspond with fellows around my own age in Nebraska, Montana, and Oklahoma. Please do your best to help me get contacted.

MACLEAN, OF SCOTLAND.

#### WESTERNERS AN' OTHERS WANTED

Plenty o' letters hyar an' I hope that whatever they ask fer is comin' tuh 'em. I would especially like tuh see Western gals an' boys respond readily as readers of a magazine like ours have a kind o' reason to expect.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of sixteen, and I would like to have some Pen Pals in the West. I am eager for information on anything that concerns the West and in turn I shall gladly tell about the country I live in now.

RODERICK, OF CANAL ZONE.

DEAR SAM: My age is fifteen years, and I am a boy who is very much interested in the West. For this reason I would like to have Pen Pals there, boys around my own age on ranches who can tell me about life out there.

ROY PEYTON, OF WEST VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to get in touch with some real cowgirls who would make loyal Pen Pals. I am a girl, fifteen years old, and fond of all outdoor sports, such as horseback riding. Pen Pals in Texas and New Mexico are especially invited to write to me, and I promise to answer all letters and to give information about the part of the country in which I am living.

ALICE DAVIES, OF LOUISIANA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: Here I come, searching for Pen Pals, and I am hoping that you can rope me in some out of your corral. I am a sixteen-year-old girl, living on a three-hundred-acre farm. This fact, of course, makes me partial to the wide-open spaces, and so I would like to get my Pen Pals in the West, especially among cowgirls in Montana, Wyoming, or Utah. All letters will be promptly answered.

EDNA G., OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I am a sport-loving girl of seventeen, dancing being my favorite. Right now, I am on the lookout for Pen Pals and having always longed for some friends in the ranch country, I hope that you can manage to find some Pen Pals for me in the West, especially among ranch girls.

LITTLE JANIE, OF IOWA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of eighteen and as my existence is rather a tiresome one, I would like to get just loads of Pen Pals with whom I could correspond regularly. I hope you can find some friends for me among the real cowgirls of the West. I will appreciate each letter I receive and answer promptly. Will also exchange snapshots.

DOROTHY DAVIES, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I would like very much to get in touch with some girls about twenty-two years of age, living either in Montana, Wyoming, or Arizona. Utah, New Mexico, and Colorado would be my second choice. Girls who are interested in outdoor sports will be especially welcome, and I will gladly exchange information with them about the respective States in which we live. Ranch girls and girls not living in any of the large cities, please write to me.

DOROTHY ENGEL, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: I am just clamoring for Western Pen Pals, because I want to learn all I can about horses and cattle. I am a girl of eleven years, and I hope that there will be many answers coming my way.

BARBARA SMITH, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of ten, and I would like to have some Pen Pals. If you will tell the girls in the West, especially in Arizona, Montana, Oregon, and California to write to me soon I will appreciate it and promise to answer right away. I can ride and rope quite well.

DOROTHY GREEN, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fifteen. I would like to get some Pen Pals of about my own age who live on ranches in the West. I will surely appreciate it if you make some nice contacts for me.

BOB DUNIGAN, OF ARKANSAS.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of nineteen. I live on a farm, like music and most sports, being especially fond of hiking. I would like to find some Pen Pals with similar inclinations, from anywhere in the United States, but preferably from Nevada, Arizona, and Texas.

LOU C., OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fourteen and I desire to get some Pen Pals. Please see what you can do for me. To those who think of writing to me, I am now saying that every letter will be answered promptly.

DICK FOLTERMAYER, OF MONTANA.

#### THE LONESOME FOLKS

Are askin' Pen Pals for a little cheer, an' I think that nothing could show the true Pen Pal spirit any better than fer one tuh help the other wharever they can. Surely a comfortin' sort o' letter is quickly written an' will be mighty welcome.

DEAR SAM: We are sisters, both as lonesome as can be, and we long for Pen Pals to correspond with. We are respectively fourteen and sixteen years old, fond of sports, especially horseback riding and also interested in music. Please try to get some Pen Pals for us, no matter where, and from fourteen to twenty years old. All letters will be answered.

MARGARET AND DORA TAYLOR,  
OF UTAH.

DEAR SAM: I am a very lonely girl, thirteen years old, and I long for Pen Pals to write to me and cheer me up. Girls from twelve years up to twenty-one, please write to me, especially cowgirls from Arizona, Texas, and Montana. Will answer all letters and exchange snapshots.

RUBY HANNAH, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fourteen, and I am at present very lonely so that I am just yearning for some Pen Pals. I would love to hear from girls anywhere in the world, and I will answer each letter promptly.

KATHRYN MAZZA, OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR SAM: I am a very lonesome girl of fourteen, and so I come to you in the hope that you can find some Pen Pals of about my own age for me. If you can arrange it, get me in touch with girls from the West because that part of the country interests me most, and I would like to learn more about it. Will answer any letters received, however.

FLORENCE BUEGE, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: Here is a girl, almost fifteen years old in search of Pen Pals from that age on up to twenty-one. I am interested to a degree in sports, but like writing of letters better, so everybody can be sure that letters I receive will be attended to promptly.

SUE R., OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl, fifteen years of age, and terribly lonely. Is there any wonder that I come to you for some Pen Pals? Please see that some one writes to me soon, especially some girls in the West between the ages of fifteen and eighteen.

YOLANDA, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fifteen, lonesome and longing for the West, which is the part of the country that interests me more than any other. I would be greatly thrilled if some real cowboy could answer my plea, and I surely hope you can make some of them write to me.

JAMES V., OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: Being a very lonesome girl, I would like to have Pen Pals, no matter in what part of the world. Whoever writes may be sure of a prompt reply. I ask especially girls around fifteen, which is my own age, to write.

VIRGI G., OF MARYLAND.

DEAR SAM: We are two lonesome girls of fifteen. We would like to have Pen Pals all over the world, especially in Wyoming. We promise faithfully to answer all letters and exchange snaps. Our hobbies are Kodaking, swimming, hiking—going places and seeing things. Every one, please write to us, but please address us separately.

MALINDA AND DOC, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I am so lonely that I would feel myself alone among a crowd of people. I happen to be different from those around me and I guess that accounts for my loneliness. Now I want Pen Pals anywhere in the world and among them cowboys from the West, because I love adventure and feel never more at home than when I ride horseback. I am a boy about eighteen years old.

COWBOY Y., OF GEORGIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a lonely girl of fourteen who wishes to have Pen Pals, especially in foreign countries and the West. Will exchange postal cards and snaps and answer all letters I receive promptly.

LEONA WALLER, OF OKLAHOMA.

DEAR SAM: Thanks for having attended to my mail. Can I now ask you also to find some Pen Pals for me? I am a boy of nineteen, not particular as to age of Pen Pals or where they may live, but I would like to get in touch with fellows who will take answering letters seriously. Amongst others you might, perhaps, induce Pen Pals in California and Texas to write.

JULIAN B., OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of eighteen, now connected with a C C C camp. Letter writing would be a nice diversion for me, and for that reason I am trying to find Pen Pals anywhere in the world. Please do your best for me.

DAVE JOHNSON, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I would appreciate it very much if you would secure some Pen Pals for me. Letters from all over the world are welcome and will be promptly answered.

ED SLECHTA, OF ILLINOIS.

Thar we are an' a right han'some lot o' letters I have gathered fer yuh to pick from. So I say "adios" until next week.



# 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.

THE first gent we sees when we comes inter the Corner fer this week's meetin' with the waddies o' the 3W spread is a tall, good-looking young hombre packin' a pair o' well-worn six-guns. His hat's shoved back, showin' the streak o' white runnin' through his dark hair. So we recognizes him right away. It's Silver Jack Steele.

"Hi, yuh, Jack!" we says. "Long time no see, ol' hoss! How're yuh, anyhow?"

The young special officer grins an' shakes hands with us—an' we winces when he bears down on it.

"I'm feelin' plumb fine, Boss," he chuckles, "in spite of a few bumps an' bruises an' bullet nicks. How're yuh an' all the gang?"

"We cain't answer fer the rest o' the gang," we says, "but we're still able ter set up an' take notice. An' judgin' from the looks o' this outfit

here ter-night, none of 'em is on the sick list."

The outfit, this week, is made up o' Kid Wolf, Soldier o' Misfortune frem down by the Rio; the Shootin' Fool, from Cotulla, and Corporal Bud Jones, o' the Texas Rangers. All in all, the Lone Star State is plumb well represented.

"What's on the cards ter-night, Boss?" asks Bud. "Still gettin' seads o' mail from the readin' hom-bres?"

"Yuh said it, Bud!" we exclaims. "We're danged near snowed under with letters this week. Mebbe we better git busy on 'em, too. What d'yuh say, gents?"

Everybody is plumb agreeable—an' anxious ter git on with the meetin'. With Circle J missin', there ain't no arguments or ruckuses ter delay us. So we starts right in on the mail. Here's the first letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to the Wranglers Corner, although I have been reading your magazine for the past five years. Here's hoping it gets into print and not in the wastebasket.

I like all the bunch, with the exception of Johnny Forty-five's fat pard, George Krumm. The ones I like best however, are Kid Wolf, Sonny Tabor, Circle J, Dave Starr, the Trouble Triplets, Johnny Forty-five, and Freckles Malone.

Please do not ever stop printing stories about the Circle J pards. 3W would be dead without them. Circle J has helped make the 3W the fine magazine it is to-day.

The best Kid Wolf stories I have read are "Drums Of Silver Mesa," "Kid Wolf's Fighting Edge," and "Kid Wolf in the Snow Country."

My favorite Sonny Tabor stories are "Sonny Tabor's Trail To Thanksgiving," "Sonny Tabor At Gun Fog Pass," and "Sonny Tabor's Errand Of Justice."

The best Circle J stories are "Rustlers Of Haunted Valley," "Maverick Rustlers," and "The Mystery Of Nugget Gulch."

Let's have some stories about the old favorites, such as Vincente the Yaqui, the Ranny Kid, Blondy Of Twin Bells, Señor Red Mask, Freckles Malone, Johnny Forty-five.

I think that the combined stories of Sonny Tabor and Circle J were swell.

Yours till Kid Wolf misses with his bowie knife, KID WOLF, JR.

Grand Rapids, Michigan.

"Gosh, Boss," chuckles the Kid, when we lays that letter down, "thet hombre sho' is an ol'-timah! He speaks about the story called 'The Drums Of Silvah Mesa,' an' that happened ovah five yeahs ago."

"Waal," we says, "yore namesake allows as how he's been readin' 3W fer five years."

We pulls another letter out o' the sack then. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: What kind of a magazine have you got? Every blamed story I've read in 3W seems to be written after the same plan as the one before it.

The way your authors write, you would think almost all the outlaws were low-down, yellow, back-shooters who couldn't hit the broad side of a barn with a shotgun, if they were on the inside with the door closed.

And the authors also make their heroes goody-goodies who always have the best of equipment and who can always shoot the whiskers off a snake at fifty paces.

Every time I read one of your magazines, it seems to be worse than the one before. Why can't you put in a few stories that really picture the West? It would be a good plan for all your authors to drop their pet heroes and begin all over again.

Yours truly, ROBERT VOORHEES.  
Battle Creek, Michigan.

"Waal," laughs Silver Jack Steele, "as Buck Foster would say, I'll be a horned toad! Thet hombre don't like us waddies much, I reckon."

"Reckon not," we says, grinnin'. "Howsomever, he can't mean all he says, or he wouldn't 'a' read enough 3Ws ter figure that each one is worse than the one before."

"An' I haven't seen many outlaws," says Kid Wolf, "who weren't low-down, yellow back-shootahs. Have yo', Bud?"

The young Ranger shakes his head. "Darned few," he says. "O' course, there's Sonny Tabor an' the Oklahoma Kid, but they're different, I figure."

"I reckon that some of the other reading hombres will have plenty to say about that letter," the Shootin' Fool speaks up.

"Wouldn't be none surprised," we answers. "We'll be lookin' fer a flood of answers right pronto."

An' this here's the next one that comes out o' the sack:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is our first letter to you, and we sure hope to see it printed in the Corner. We have been reading 3W for a long time, and enjoy it very much. All the cowboys are good.

Our favorites are the Circle J pards, the Bar U twins, Freckles Malone, Sonny Tabor, and Johnny Forty-five.

Please give us more stories about the twins, Johnny Forty-five, and Storm King. Also, please have more girls in your stories.

Yours till Buck Foster learns to mind his own business. TWO SATISFIED READERS.

Ridgely, Tennessee.

Here's another:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This letter is comin' from a couple o' rannies what has been readin' yore mag fer six years without ary a hitch. So kindly accommodate us by printin' this here message ter them hombres we been readin' about.

What we uns would like better'n anythin' else is no womenfolks an' no Buck Foster. Thet sheep-herdin', cow-rustlin', hoss-stealin' walrus is a plumb disgrace ter the rest o' the bunch.

We is entirely in favor of a spread what rides sech hombres as Johnny Forty-five, Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, the Oklahoma Kid, Hungry and Rusty, Dave Starr, an' thet Calamity Boggs jasper. There's a bunch o' real he-men fer yuh!

But them four-flushers sech as the Circle J bunch, Lum Yates, Shorty Masters, Freckles Malone, an' the Whistlin' Kid ought not ter be allowed ter ride fer yuh. Yuh ought ter let sech gents as the Shootin' Fool and Silver Jack Steele take their places.

We is also in favor of seem' Sonny Tabor an' Kid Wolf ride tergether. There's what we'd call a pair!

Not yores truly till Buck Foster starts ridin' a pack mule an' loses his vest,

THE BLOCK O TWINS.

Ironton, Ohio.

"It shore is a good thing that Circle J ain't here ter-night!" laughs Silver Jack Steele. "I kin jest imagine the fireworks that would be explodin' around here, right now, if Buck Foster had 'a' heard that last letter."

Jack ain't the only hombre at the meetin' who's got an imagination. The hull bunch kin realize jest what a roarin' ruckus would be ragin', if Buck Foster had heard them Block O twins call him a "sheep-herdin', cow-rustlin', hoss-stealin' walrus"!

But, bein' as he ain't here, we're able ter git right on with the next letter, an' here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Why don't you put Silver Jack Steele in your magazine more often? I see that the writer of Silver Jack's stories, recently wrote a story about

an hombre named Andy Irons, instead. I don't like that.

Sonny Tabor is my favorite hombre. He may be an outlaw, but he sure is a good one.

I agree with the other reading hombres about not having girls in 3W.

Buck Foster, Joe Scott, and Hungry and Rusty are the hombres who always give me a laugh.

Here's hoping that you will soon put Silver Jack Steele in the W. W. W. again. Yours truly,

BILLY THE KID.

Rochester, New York.

Seein' as how that readin' hombre has got his wish, this week—Silver Jack grins as he listens ter that letter—we goes right on ter the next one. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been writing to you for quite a while now, and I surely hope that the waddies are not tired of hearing from me. Here goes with my list of favorites:

First of all is Billy West. Then there's Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, Johnny Forty-five, Bud Jones, the Whistlin' Kid, and the true stories about Billy the Kid.

Say, Boss, why not combine more stories? I mean like "Sonny Tabor Fights For Circle J." If you did that, you would have room to include all the favorite characters in one issue of 3W.

Here are some of the old-timers I should like to see again: The Scorpion, the Red Wolf, Silver Carroll, the Black Ace, Slickear Sawyer, Smoke Walsh, Clay and Pat Gatling, Dusty Doran, the Oklahoma Kid, and Chico, of "Chico Rides The Gun Trail."

I have been reading the W. W. W. for about three years, and I have seen only two "combination" stories. They were "Circle J Trails Sonny Tabor" and "Sonny Tabor Fights For Circle J." Why not have Kid Wolf or Bud Jones trail Sonny? I know neither of them could ever catch him.

Hungry and Rusty ought to team up with Bud Jones and hunt *real* bandits with him, instead of the tenderfoot cowboys they call bad men.

Lum Yates, Buck Foster, Joe Scott, and George Krumm ought to be run out of the Corner, barefooted, and chased across the desert. Every time they stop, they should be shot at.

All argument about which horse is the

fastest ought to be settled pronto. Hold a race for Danger, Paint, Blizzard, Speed, Pepper, and Shorty Masters's mules. Here's how I'll bet such a race would end:

Danger and Paint would tie for first; second, Blizzard; third, Pepper; fourth, Speed. Last, of course, would be Shorty Masters and his long-eared mules.

Tell Kent Bennett, who writes those true stories of Billy the Kid, to write a few about Jesse James.

I must close now, Boss. Good luck to you and the whole outfit. Yours till Billy West marries Ruth Dawe,

EARL FOLKES.

Martinsburg, West Virginia.

After that, we figures we've got time for one more, an' here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I find, in reading the Wranglers Corner every week, that you have quite a few grouches among your reading hombres. I don't think people are fair to old Buck Foster. After all, he always does the best he can.

As for myself, I kind of like Señor Red

Mask. He would make any girl's heart turn flip-flops. And Rusty Bolivar—Oh, oh! You just can't help loving him!

There is just one favor I should like to ask of you—please put in more stories of the Bar U twins, Sonny Tabor, the Trouble Triplets, Kid Wolf, Lunn Yates, Hungry and Rusty, and Circle J.

I want to add my protests in the romance question. I vote for no women in 3W. Women are in everything else; so why not keep one place that's free of them?

Yours till Buck Foster falls in love,

WILMA G. HOXWORTH,  
Louisville, Kentucky.

Once ag'in, everybody's glad that not all the outfit's here ter-night. If Rusty Bolivar had heard what Wilma had ter say about him—an' if Buck was here ter rub it in—waal, there shore would be trouble.

Thet winds up this meetin' o' the 3W spread. There'll be another meetin' next week. So long till then!

THE RANGE BOSS.

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#### THE OKLAHOMA KID TRAILS TROUBLE

*Novelette*

By LEE BOND

And as usual, the ugly little outlaw don't have a hard time findin' it, what with Deputy Sparks trailin' him an' a gang o' killers blazin' away at him with .45s.

#### DEPUTIES FROM CIRCLE J

*Novelette*

By CLEVE ENDICOTT

The saddle pards make a plumb fine bunch o' lawmen, an' they tangle with the tough hombres who try ter take Twin Rivers. The result is swift and deadly gun play.

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*Novelette*

By PHILIP F. DEERE

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