

STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST

15¢

WEEKLY

CONTENTS COPYRIGHTED 1935

APRIL 13

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

CHALK BUTTE COYOTES

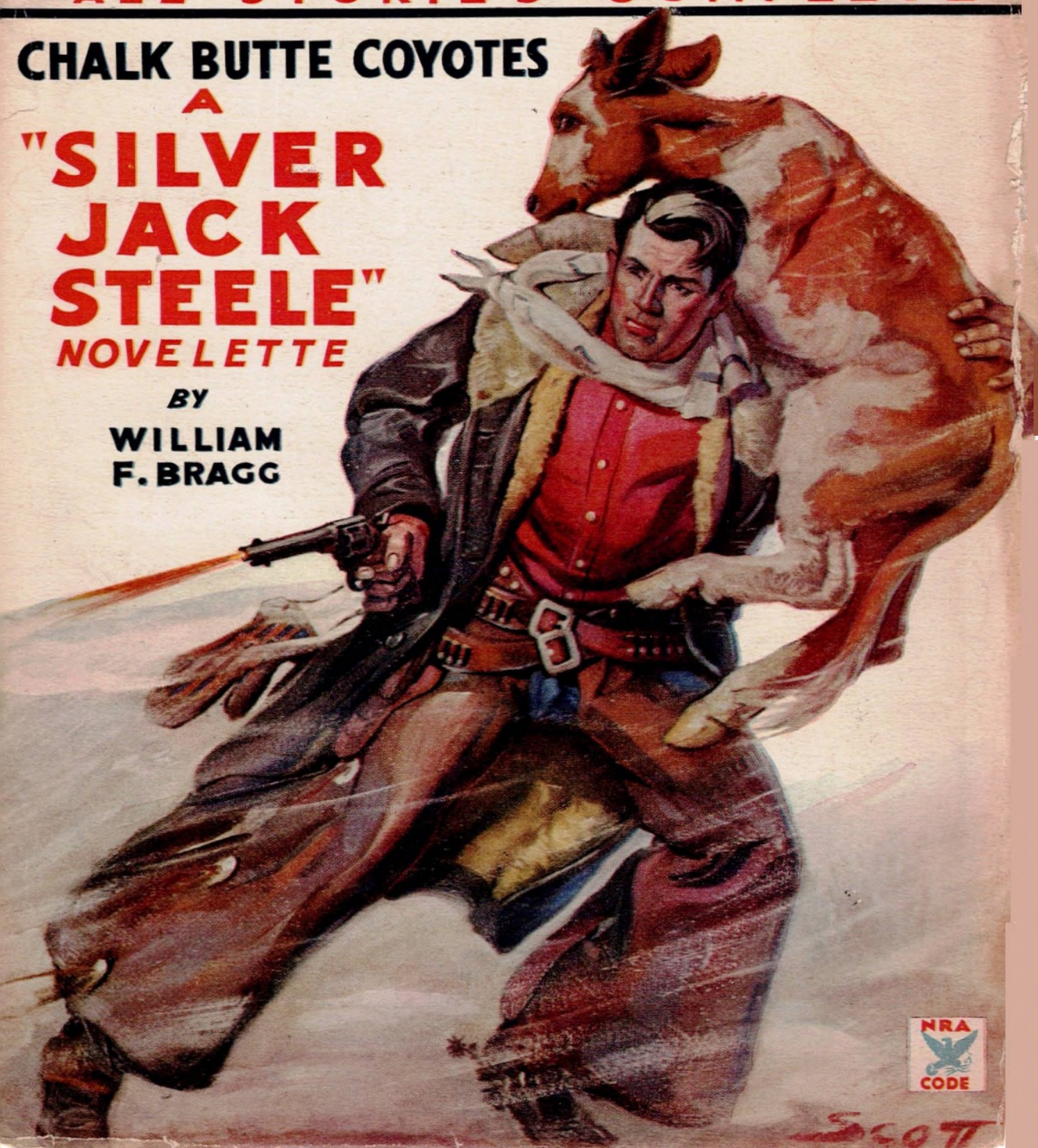
A

"SILVER JACK STEELE"

NOVELETTE

BY

WILLIAM
F. BRAGG



SCOTT

HEIGHT
5FT. 8IN.
WEIGHT
160 LBS.

NECK
15 1/4 IN.

CHEST
40 IN.

WAIST
31 IN.

THIGH
22 IN.

CALF
14 3/4 IN.

ANKLE
8 1/2 IN.

Posed by
professional
model

SKINNY MEN

Get this news!

Amazing easy way adds solid pounds Quick!

*Thousands gain 5 to 15 lbs. in a few weeks
with new double tonic. Richest imported brewers'
ale yeast concentrated 7 times, iron added.*

THOUSANDS who were once scrawny, sickly, weak, praise this new easy way to gain weight, strength and health.

As you know, doctors for years have prescribed yeast to build up health. But now with this new yeast discovery in pleasant tablet form, you can get far greater tonic results than with ordinary yeast—regain health, and also put on pounds of solid flesh—and in a far shorter time.

Not only are thousands quickly gaining husky, good-looking pounds—but also clear, ruddy skin, freedom from constipation and indigestion, new strength and pep.

2 greatest body-builders in 1

This amazing new product, Ironized Yeast, is made from specially cultured *brewers' ale yeast* imported from Europe—the richest yeast known—which by a new scientific process is concentrated 7 times—made 7 times more powerful.

But that is not all! This marvelous, health-building yeast is then ironized with 3 special kinds of strengthening iron.

Day after day, as you take pleasant little Ironized Yeast tablets, watch flat chest develop, skinny limbs round out attractively, complexion clear—you're an entirely new person.

Results guaranteed

No matter how skinny and weak you may be, this marvelous new Ironized Yeast should build you up in a few short weeks as it has thousands. If you are not delighted with the results of the very first package, your money will be instantly refunded.

Special FREE offer!

To start you building up your health *right away*, we make this absolutely FREE offer. Purchase a package of Ironized Yeast at once, cut out the seal on the box and mail it to us with a clipping of this paragraph. We will send you a fascinating new book on health, "New Facts About Your Body," by a well-known authority. Remember, results are guaranteed with the very first package—or money refunded. At all druggists. Ironized Yeast Co., Inc., Dept. 5010, Atlanta, Ga.

WHO WANTS TO

marry
a
girl?



CERTAINLY, there is a girl you want to marry! But how are you ever going to make this dream come true on the money you're making? The wonder is not new to you, is it? Quit wondering—start acting! Thousands of men have acted by making themselves worth more money by

acquiring more training for the job at hand and the job ahead. They have gotten this training in spare time. Their very first step was mailing this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools at Scranton. Why don't you do it? Right now while you think about it!

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- | | | | | |
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| ☐ Architectural Draftsman | ☐ Telegraph Engineer | ☐ Plumbing | ☐ Highway Engineering | |
| ☐ Building Estimating | ☐ Telephone Work | ☐ Heating | ☐ Chemistry | ☐ Pharmacy |
| ☐ Wood Millworking | ☐ Mechanical Engineer | ☐ Sheet Metal Worker | ☐ Coal Mining Engineer | |
| ☐ Contractor and Builder | ☐ Mechanical Draftsman | ☐ Steam Engineer | ☐ Navigation | ☐ Air Conditioning |
| ☐ Structural Draftsman | ☐ Machinist | ☐ Steam Electric Engineer | ☐ Boiler Maker | |
| ☐ Structural Engineer | ☐ Patternmaker | ☐ Surveying and Mapping | ☐ Textile Overseer or Supt. | |
| ☐ Development and Protection of New Products | ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals | ☐ Refrigeration | ☐ Cotton Manufacturing | |
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| | ☐ Diesel Engines | | ☐ Marine Engineer | |
| | ☐ Aviation Engines | | | |

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- | | | | |
|--|---|---|--|
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| ☐ Office Management | ☐ Bookkeeping | ☐ First Year College | ☐ Grade School Subjects |
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| ☐ Traffic Management | ☐ Spanish | ☐ Lettering Show Cards | ☐ College Preparatory |
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| ☐ Cost Accountant | ☐ Advertising | ☐ Civil Service | ☐ Cartooning |
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Name..... Age..... Address.....

City..... State..... Occupation.....

If you reside in Canada, send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada

WW-1E

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Vol. 92, No. 5 CONTENTS FOR APRIL 13, 1935 Whole No. 1695

Cover Picture—Scene from

"Chalk Butte Coyotes" Painted by H. W. Scott

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

- Chalk Butte Coyotes William F. Bragg 8
 Silver Jack Steele bags two kinds of 'em—four-laigged, an' two.
- Skunk Tracks on the Bar L Nelse Anderson 59
 They lead a gun-wise young rannihan right inter a lot o' trouble.
- Cougar Fang on the Warpath Walker Tompkins 91
 The young pioneer has a flamin' show-down with Black Buzzard.

FOUR COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

- Dead Hombres Talk Philip F. Deere 35
 An' what one of 'em says lands some ornery jaspers in Boot Hill.
- The Whistlin' Kid Is Puzzled Emery Jackson 46
 There's mighty few puzzles thet the range dick can't solve—with lead.
- Mix-up At Maverick Canyon Allan R. Bosworth 81
 It's a ruckus, with Shorty Masters an' Willie plumb in the middle of it.
- The Fight On Squabble Creek Hal Davenport 122
 When cattle are dyin' fer water, a waddy figures it's time fer gun play.

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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; Artemas Holmes, Vice President and Secretary; Clarence C. Vernam, Vice President. Copyright, 1935, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., New York. Copyright, 1935, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter, December 8, 1911, 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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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.



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National Radio Institute

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J. E. SMITH, PRESIDENT, DEPT. 50D
NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE, WASHINGTON, D. C.

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(Please print plainly)

NAME.....AGE.....
ADDRESS.....
CITY.....STATE.....

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Dr. T. A. Ellis

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GOOD YEAR
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30x4.50-21	2.45	.85	31x4	2.45	.85
32x4.75-19	2.45	.85	32x4	2.55	.85
29x4.75-20	2.50	.95	32x4 1/4	2.55	.85
30x4.75-20	2.55	.95	34x4	2.75	.85
32x4.75-20	2.65	1.05	30x4 1/4	3.15	1.15
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.15	32x4 1/4	3.45	1.15
29x5.25-18	2.95	1.15	34x4 1/4	3.45	1.15
30x5.25-18	2.95	1.15	30x4 1/2	3.65	1.25
32x5.25-18	3.25	1.15	32x5	3.75	1.45
28x5.50-18	3.15	1.15	34x5	3.95	1.45
29x5.50-18	3.35	1.15			
30x5.50-18	3.40	1.15			
32x5.50-18	3.45	1.15			
32x5.50-20	3.45	1.25			
34x5.50-21	3.65	1.25			
31x5.50-19	3.65	1.35			
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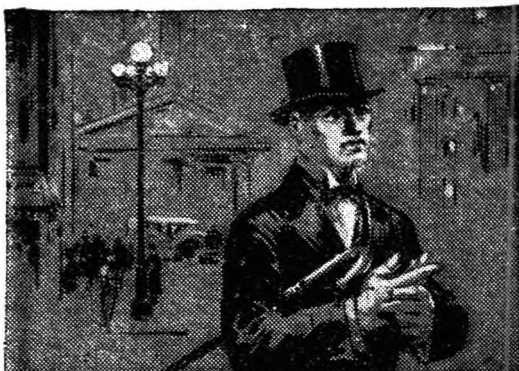
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INVENTOR

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\$2.40
30x4-50-2

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Size Rim		Tires Tubes		Size		Tires Tubes		Size		Tires Tubes	
20x4-40-21	\$2.15	0.85	30x3	\$2.25	1.05	32x4 1/2	\$3.35	1.10			
20x4-50-20	2.35	0.85	30x3 1/2	2.35	0.70	33x4 1/2	3.45	1.10			
20x4-50-21	2.40	0.85	31x4	2.45	0.85	34x4 1/2	3.45	1.15			
20x4-75-19	2.45	0.85	32x4	2.55	0.85	35x4 1/2	3.65	1.35			
20x4-75-20	2.50	0.95	33x4	2.55	0.85	36x4 1/2	3.75	1.45			
20x4-80-19	2.55	1.05	34x4	2.55	0.85	37x4 1/2	3.95	1.55			
20x4-80-20	2.55	1.05									
20x4-80-21	2.55	1.15									
20x4-80-22	2.55	1.15									
20x4-80-23	2.55	1.15									
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20x4-80-48	2.55	1.15									
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30x16	4.75	2.15	36x16	14.95	4.95		
30x18	4.75	2.15	36x18	15.95	4.95		
30x20	4.75	2.15	36x20	16.95	4.95		
30x22	4.75	2.15	36x22	17.95	4.95		
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Chalk Butte Coyotes

By William F. Bragg

Author of "Moran's Six-gun Jury," etc.

A "Silver Jack Steele" Novelette

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST COYOTE.

WHEN the wind roars down from the peaks with a bite that cuts through the leather chaps and sourdough coat of a range rider, then that rider should dig in his spurs and hurry toward shelter. "Silver Jack" Steele knew that, for the young special officer had spent the greater part of his life on the vast Wyoming range. He knew that a blizzard was due.

"An' pronto," he said as he put his bay pony down a long hogback ridge of Chalk Butte Basin that led toward the cattlemen's dugout shelter on the banks of Cayuse Creek.

Smoky-brown clouds were banking up along the main divide of the Broken Horn Mountains to the east. In a half hour, the temperature,

Jack believed, had dropped at least twenty degrees.

Snow hadn't started to fall, for until this day the winter had been fairly mild. There were a few big drifts on the ridges, and a thin covering over the brown gumbo earth of the bad lands.

"But when that snow *does* start," Jack growled, "it won't fall. It'll come straight ahead at eighty miles an hour. An' every purty little snowflake will be froze into an icicle."

Then would come disaster, suffering, even death to the rider of the bad lands. Blizzard drifts would cover the sagebrush, the only fuel in this bare range country. A man might find shelter from the wind under some ledge. But without a fire, he would freeze during the night.

Before pinning on the star of a State special officer, Silver Jack had

ridden up the Texas Trail with herds of longhorns. He had fought his way through dry summers and hard winters. He had burned under the sun, shivered in the blizzards, gone thirsty when water was short, hungry when grub ran low.

As an officer, he had matched his six-guns and grit with many a cold-nerved gun fighter. And he knew from this wealth of experience that nothing is so great a menace to life—not even hot slugs from a killer's gun—as the blind, merciless forces of nature. Drought, storms, blistering sun, these were more feared by cowpokes and range men than any other thing.

"I got tuh ride," Jack snapped, for now the howling wind had risen to a higher, keener note.

The tips of the sagebrush, ordinarily stiff as a broom, began to sway. Along the divides raced whirling dust storms. Snow flew in a fine cloud from the surface of every drift.

Down the long ridges, cattle were stringing at a trot, and bellowing mournfully. In the distance, Jack saw the white flashes on the hind-quarters of antelope as a herd of wild ones moved toward shelter.

A coyote slipped across his front, yellow eyes turned toward the rider, then flickering back to the cattle and wild game that indicated hot meat.

Jack knew the wolves and coyotes would benefit from the blizzard. These beasts of prey would hang to the flanks of the retreating herds, pull down and hamstring weakened calves and starving mothers.

"I hate a coyote worse than the dangedest hoss thief that ever walked—or rode what didn't belong to him," Jack snapped.

He wasn't the man to waste bullets, a hundred miles from the nearest place of supply. But the sight of the coyote, trotting ahead to cut down beef, angered him.

His guns were buried under his long sheepskin-lined coat. But in a leather scabbard under his right stirrup fender, Jack carried a rifle.



He raised his knee to release the gun, dragged it forth, snapped it against his shoulder. His trained pony halted at the rider's low command.

The coyote, until now moving at a slow and dawdling canter, but with wary eyes ever on the hated human, suddenly developed an amazing speed. As if shot out of a gun, the yellow beast leaped toward the lip of a gulch just a few yards ahead.

"Movin' like a streak of yaller light," grunted Jack.

Bang! The rifle spat a chunk of lead, and dust flew up at the coyote's heels.

Steele stiffened in his saddle until his arms were rigid as metal braces. He moved his front sight until it bore on a spot just ahead of the coyote's pointed nose.

Bang! The beast stopped as if it had run into a brick wall.

It bounded high in the air, then thudded to the ground. As he had outguessed many a human varmint, so the young officer had cut this four-legged pest and killer off the beef range. For by shifting his aim ahead of the speeding animal, he had allowed the coyote to run into his bullet.

"Like shootin' at ducks on the wing," he allowed. "Got to throw yore charge ahead of them, because they fly too dang fast to hit 'em whar they be when you pull trigger."

He trotted over to the coyote. The animal was dead. And as always, whenever he was forced to kill a four-footed creature, Jack felt a twinge of regret. After all, it was only coyote nature to kill for food. Man had the same habit. But again, coyotes and wolves often killed apparently for the sole joy of it.

"An' ag'in," Jack whispered, gazing down at the stretched out wild dog, "I'm forced to say that some men do the same."

As he turned his horse away to hurry on toward Cayuse Creek which lay five miles to the west, he glanced down into the gulch. If his bullet hadn't stopped the coyote, the varmint would now be down there among the cover of greasewood clumps and sandstone boulders.

Jack's roving glance, the keen-eyed inspection of a range man that discards all but signs of life in the wilderness and the wealth or scarcity of feed, water, and wood, picked up a red-brown object that moved. And a grin came to his weather-beaten face and a smile to his thin lips. Now he didn't regret the death of the coyote.

"That's a calf down there," he said. "Mr. Coyote had smelled the meat. He was shore hustling fer his meal. But whar's the mother?"

The howl of the wind bade Steele hurry toward shelter. The sight of a helpless calf, apparently lacking a mother, forced him down into the gulch. After all, he was a man brought up in the hard school of the big cattle range.

He rode his bay down into the greasewood, spurred up the edge of a deeply cut ditch plowed out by spring storms and indicative of the vast snow banks that the blizzard would soon pile in this valley.

There stood the calf, a late spring youngster and, therefore, not so big and strong as those that had been born in late April and May. A June calf with a pair of inquisitive ears, a spotted nose, and four wabbling legs.

At sight of Jack, the little animal bawled and staggered toward him.

He saw that its flanks were drawn, its ribs plainly outlined, and its eyes dull and listless.

"It's starvin'," Jack whispered. "Whar is the mother?"

The calf paused by Jack's bay pony as if welcoming the sight of another four-footed creature.

"Gosh," Jack said pityingly, and his gray eyes were soft, "the pore little feller thinks ol' Bay is his mamma."

The bay pony, a willing enough cow horse, didn't pretend to be a calf's mother. Snorting and straining, the bay danced away. This gave Jack a clear line of sight through the patch of greasewood ahead.

He saw then why this calf was starving. A big cow lay there. It had been dead for at least a day for the body was stiff. Steele rode to the carcass. And now his face was grim and the soft look had departed from his eyes.

For this cow had a red hole between its glazed eyes.

"Shot tuh death," the officer barked angrily. "Hit right square between the horns. An' what fer?"

Well, to answer that question, Silver Jack Steele had come quietly into this Chalk Butte country, a week before. He had ridden the trails, become acquainted with creeks and other features. And this wasn't the first bullet-butchered cow or horse he had found. All bore the brand of the Quarter Circle Dot.

A letter from the angry owner of that outfit, a powerful and wealthy cattleman known as "Bellerin' Hack" Graw had put Jack Steele on the job. He threatened war against all suspected men on his range, unless the law moved fast.

"Why are they killin' off Hack Graw's critters?" Jack mused. "I've sized up fifty carcasses this week.

Never a clew as to who did the job. Nor why they did it. Don't blame Hack much fer gittin' mad."

He hadn't told Bellerin' Hack of his arrival, for Steele desired to work in secret and more easily unearth the motive for this strange cattle and horse murder. There must be some good reason for this hatred of the Quarter Circle Dot owner.

"But any man that would kill a cow an' leave the calf to starve," Jack growled, "is as bad as the human coyote that sets out pizen fer dogs. Ain't no reason fer sich cold-blooded work. If I caught sich a gent, I'd take pleasure in killin' him, same as I did in slappin' a .30-30 slug into that coyote. In fact, more pleasure, fer the coyote was but movin' accordin' to his natural instincts. While the man who killed this cow—he knew right well what would happen to her calf."

The wind roared with renewed force, recalling to Jack that he had been galloping before to beat a blizzard.

"I got to git goin'," he jerked out. "I'll turn out fer more work after the storm's over."

But his horse bucked when he swung around. And with good reason, for the bay had tripped over the starving calf. That recalled to Steele that he couldn't ride off and leave the little animal to die of starvation or be mauled to death by wolves or coyotes.

A few moments before, he had jerked his rifle and sent a speedy bullet through a coyote. Now, staring down at the pathetic calf with its funny, spotted nose and tilted ears, he found it difficult to line his rifle and put a merciful bullet into its brain.

As a practical rider, he knew this to be the easiest way out. But staring into a pair of big eyes dulled by

suffering, Jack Steele couldn't pull the trigger.

"I'm a dang chicken-hearted fool," Jack said sheepishly. "But danged ef I can kill that leetle orphan, even tuh keep it from starvin'. Mebbe if I ride off, some of these cattle comin' down the divide to shelter will pick it up. It may find some cow that has lost her calf an' will adopt this un. Lots of things may happen."

But as he turned his horse down the gulch, he knew in his heart that things wouldn't happen as he hoped. No, the calf would certainly die. And die a slow and painful death.

"It'll either freeze in the blizzard, starve, or make a meal fer varmints," growled Steele.

He was riding away at a faster clip, for he had wasted precious time killing the coyote and inspecting the dead Quarter Circle Dot cow. His own life was now in danger. He sheathed his rifle, set the spurs into his bay.

"Git fer camp," he jerked out.

Then he heard a high-pitched bawl, the wail of a calf for its mother. He turned in his saddle. The calf was following him.

"Still thinkin'," Steele snapped, "that my bay plug is its mother."

He stopped his horse then, took off his hat, and scratched his shock of dark hair. Here was a puzzler.

"If I ride away from that calf," he declared, "I won't sleep easy to-night. An' wonderin' what happened to it will shore spile my appetite."

A dozen hard-faced killers and robbers of Wyoming would have laughed at the sight of Silver Jack Steele, so worried over the problem of a starving calf.

The young special officer never worried when he faced hostile guns.

He walked into trouble with a smile on his lean face.

The streak of white in his hair indicated his cold nerve when it came to battling twisted humanity. A bad man had marked Steele thus with a sawed-off shotgun at close quarters.

A charge of buckshot had creased Jack's scalp as he rushed the hostile weapon to make his arrest. He had survived to clamp steel cuffs around the wrists of the marksman.

Later, hair as white as the saddle mark on a cayuse's back, had replaced that torn away by buckshot. This mark had given Steele his nickname throughout the West.

It was a name feared and respected by outlaws. It stood for high courage, straight shooting and dealing. It had won Jack Steele a roving warrant from the governor of Wyoming as a special officer, and the right to enforce the law over a land where the code consisted of six shells in a .45 and the nerve to back up flying lead.

And Silver Jack Steele who would shoot it out, toe to toe, with the toughest man between Canada and Mexico hadn't nerve enough to kill a starving calf and thus relieve himself of some worry and loss of appetite!

"Gosh," Jack growled as he swung down from his saddle, "if the boys ever hear of this, they'll shore laugh."

But there wasn't an audience that day to give him the laugh. Nor one to approve. For many men would have approved of Jack's next action. He picked up the calf in his strong arms, planted it across his saddle fork, and hit leather again despite the indignant efforts of the bay to buck him into the near-by ditch.

"Stand hitched, you star-eyed fool," Jack flamed, "or I'll shore

rowel you from ears tuh tail. Yuh don't want tuh pack extry weight. Yo're thinkin', I reckon, about a feed of oats and warm shelter down at that Cayuse Crick dugout. Waal, we'll slow down a bit. We'll take a few chances. We'll carry this calf until we meet a herd of cattle what's found shelter. And thar we'll drop the orphan."

It required real riding to stay aboard the plunging bay with a helpless calf swung over the saddle horn. Steele's spurs were working overtime, his hands hard on shortened reins.

Then his horse went down so suddenly that Jack was flung from the saddle. The calf hit the ground beside him.

Bang! There sounded the far-away report of a gun, rising above the deep-toned roar of the blizzard wind.

"I'm danged!" snarled Jack, and he raked out his six-gun as he crawled into shelter back of his fallen horse. "Fust that rooster butchers cows. Now he's after men."

He had been fired on by an ambusher. No doubt existed in Jack's mind as to the reason. Whoever was butchering Quarter Circle Dot stock had discovered that Steele was an officer sworn to run down the marauder. To prevent such discovery, the criminal had awaited his chance and tried to kill Steele when the latter was almost helpless on the back of a bucking horse.

"Dang yaller skunk!" growled Jack. "Didn't dare tuh come within decent range. Fired too low. Got my hoss 'stid of me."

But after all, the man with the rifle had put Jack Steele in a tight pinch.

"Fer here I lay," the young officer growled. "Dead hoss. An'

five miles from shelter with a blizzard comin'."

On high-heeled cow boots, and weighted down with heavy clothing, a man couldn't travel fast enough to beat out the storm.

"An' shucks," drawled Jack, "what about this calf? I started out tuh save its life. An' danged if I don't keep tryin' or freeze along with it."

Bang! The man on the ridge had crept nearer, and his bullet plumped into the twitching body of the bay.

Steele propped his right elbow on the saddle seat, thumbed the hammer.

CHAPTER II.

THE BLIZZARD TRAP.

STEELE went into action with a six-gun. His rifle was caught under the body of the bay. It was long-range shooting, for the unseen marksman lay back of a ridge two hundred yards distant. Jack's first bullet zipped across the top of a big snowdrift that lay just under the rise. His second sang over the crest.

Only a lucky shot could cut down the ambusher, but this close fire made the man keep his head down. Thus his rifle fire was hurried, which gave the young officer time to seek an escape from his tight pinch.

"Hoss plumb dead," he muttered. "Me afoot! Blizzard comin' pronto. An' bare ground to cover before I can git into shelter."

The deep ditch, cut by spring floods, lay a few yards distant. If he could roll into it, it would offer a way out of this valley of death.

"But then thar's the calf," Jack drawled.

He smiled grimly as his hard gray eyes sought the sprawled body of the cowland orphan. The little animal had been stunned by the fall

from the bay pony. It lay quietly enough.

"I rode down here an' fell heir to that dang dogie," growled Jack. "An' the leetle feller is my pard until I git out."

Whang! The marksman back of the ridge tried another shot.

The bullet spun over Jack's head, missing his top knot by inches.

"Gittin' the range," growled the officer, and this time he raked out his left six-gun. Alternately, he fired each weapon. The heavy Colt discharges rolled like a drum within the gulch. Echoes crashed back from the rims. The fine dust and snow flew like powder along the hostile ridge. The rifleman was silenced for the time.

"But gosh," Jack muttered as he crammed fresh shells into his hot guns, "I'll lay here an' waste all my ammunition. Then he'll either sneak down an' bore me or the blizzard will finish me an' the calf."

The same thought occurred to the ambusher. For now Jack heard a harsh-voiced hail.

"You down thar. Yuh better put up yore hands! I got yuh covered."

"What yuh after me fer?" Steele shouted.

"Fer butcherin' beef!"

Steele could have shouted that he was an officer, but he had come to the Chalk Butte section on a secret mission. Better to argue with the ambusher, seek some other way out than reveal his identity.

"You got me wrong, hombre!" he declared. "I jest killed a coyote on the ridge. Rode down to see what the varmint was trackin'. Found a dead cow an' an orphan calf."

"What's that calf branded?"

"Same as the mother, Quarter Circle Dot."

Whang! The rifle barked.

It was a hasty bullet, fired in sudden anger. It cut up clods of gumbo between Steele and the calf's body.

"Dang yuh!" howled the ambusher. "Yuh got no right to live! Ridin' the range! Knockin' off cows! Stealin' calves."

Wham! Jack answered with a .45 slug.

"A man," he yelled, "would be a fool to try to steal calves with a blizzard comin'!"

There wasn't any reply to this. The wind had grown piercingly cold. Jack's fingers tingled.

"Won't be long before they git numb," he said. "I shore got to hunt shelter."

But where now was the ambusher?

"If I try to git into the gulch," Jack decided, "he's apt to drill me."

He cast longing eyes toward the ditch. It was lined with greasewood and sagebrush. Its steep walls would break the wind. He might be able to build a fire down there. Also find head cover from bullets.

"Wuth the chance," he snarled. "I can't lay here on this cold ground and freeze."

He propped his lean and rangy body up on hands and knees. He twisted toward the ditch which lay but a few yards distant. Just a few yards, but it would be a dash across shelterless ground.

A rifleman, who had learned his trade hunting fleet deer and antelope, would have no trouble picking off a man weighted down with heavy leather chaps and spurred boots.

"But it's the only way out," growled Steele.

He leaped up, started for the ditch. In his own peril, he had forgotten the calf that he had vowed to save. In certain ways, Silver Jack was a stubborn youth. Once

he set his mind on a thing, he went to extreme lengths to carry it out. So with the calf.

Wham! From the left flank of the gulch came a bullet.

Jack understood now that the ambusher had shifted position so that he could throw his fire down against Jack as the latter lay exposed back of the dead horse.

The bullet tore past Steele's bent body. He swerved to avoid a second, dodging like a buck antelope. His right boot hit an object. He fell to his knees. He had tripped over the calf. The fall saved him. For the ambusher's next slug roared over his head.

"If I die within ten seconds," Steele snarled, "I'll *not* quit this calf."

He picked up the little animal. It was light enough, for it had starved since the death of the mother. He flung it over his shoulder, arose and dashed for the ditch.

A bullet cut a neat round hole through the flaring right wing of his chaps. Stumbling on his high-heeled boots, tripping because of the long shanks of his spurs, Steele plowed grimly ahead toward the ditch. No time now to stop and shoot. Swift death hummed across the bare ground. The blizzard wind howled like a wolf.

"If I come out of this alive!" Steele panted. "I'll shore track down an' git that ambusher."

He hadn't seen the man, but he felt certain that he would never forget the harsh voice with a note in it like a file against the teeth of a saw. That voice had sworn at him, condemned him without mercy to die here in this storm-swept gulch.

"If he ain't the skunk that's butcherin' beef," raged Jack, "he's about as mean."

He wasn't five feet from the ditch. A split second to go. But he believed that the marksman was now lying tense behind his rifle, gambling all on this final bullet.

"He'll bore me through the bris-
ket," snapped the officer.

If the bullet plowed through Jack's body, it would first penetrate the calf. For the little animal had slumped down into Jack's arms.

With a heave and a toss, Steele pitched the calf ahead. It tumbled into the ditch, into shelter. But that short pause to make the throw had given the marksman his chance for a death shot.

Yet Steele had faced pitiless riflemen before. Even as he flung the calf from him, he swerved to the side. The bullet, intended for his heart, cut through the slack of his sheepskin coat. It cut a red crease just above his short ribs.

The wound was slight, but the shock of the heavy slug knocked out Steele's wind as if he had been hit in the pit of the stomach. He crashed down to his knees. For an instant, he writhed in agony. His eyes were glazed, his lungs pumping madly for air.

Through his brain ran the thought that now he was helpless, at the mercy of the sneaking rifleman who lay above him. His last bit of strength went into a desperate effort to snake his way into the ditch. But it was a feeble effort, for nothing so cripples a man as loss of wind.

Then, as he twisted and squirmed toward cover, a banging broke out above him like a Fourth of July celebration. There was no mistaking the sharp crack of the ambusher's rifle. But now he wasn't firing at Steele. He was pitching lead across the gulch. For from the right rim, a heavy weapon that

boomed like a cannon had bought into this little game of life and death.

Bong! The big-caliber gun won out.

As it sent its last soft-nosed slug trundling across the valley, Steele dropped over the lip of the ditch. He lay there panting, fighting for wind and strength, listening intently for renewed signs of warfare.

He heard nothing more except the dismal howl of the wind, the scrape of sand and gravel hurled against the bending sagebrush above him.

"Somebody," he jerked out, "shore reached me jest in time."

He had regained his fighting strength. The raw wound above his belt pained him, but no bones were broken.

"I can travel," he said, "if I can ever git out o' this ditch."

As he waited, he reloaded both his six-guns. A man must be prepared for further trouble. As he crouched on the alert, he heard the soft thud of a horse's hoofs falling on the gumbo above the ditch.

"If it's the ambusher," he growled, "he may figure I'm wounded or dead. Comin' up to look me over."

The horse came nearer. When Steele judged the animal was near the ditch, he leaped up, rammed both six-guns over the top, and shouted, "Hands up!"

His guns covered a queer-looking horse and a queerer rider. The animal was big and bony, Roman-nosed, and spotted with blotches of black and white. A calico horse if Steele had ever seen one.

The rider was tall and stoop-shouldered, thin as a rail, and togged out in a flea-bitten buffaloskin overcoat, an old slouch hat tied to his head with a red bandanna, and cowhide boots covered with vast wrap-

pings of gunny sacking to keep out the wind.

The man's nose was long and red, his eyes small and almost hidden in deep caverns above protruding cheek bones that were shiny from the cold. A straggling, grizzled beard covered a long jaw. Blossoms of gray hair poked through holes in the hat.

"Hold on thar!" the rider of the calico horse shouted in a high-pitched whine. "Dang my galluses, young feller, yuh aim tuh blow off my head?"

"Git up yore hands!" Steele insisted grimly, "I ain't takin' chances!"

The lean old man grinned. "Shucks," he drawled, "yuh don't need tuh be feared of ol' Wolf Runner. I'm plumb peaceful except when I run into a varmint, human or otherwise. I jest knocked one of them human varmints off that ridge yonder. 'Peared tuh me he was sneakin' bullets down at a young sprout that sort o' looked like you. Had the same white blaze in his hair as you got."

"So yo're the man that saved me," Steele said. He lowered his guns. "I was about done for," he went on. "He had bored me above the ribs. Knocked out my wind. But fer you, I'd never have made this ditch. I—I shore feel sheepish about holdin' yuh up this way. But then, I didn't dare to take no chances. I never got a look at the ambusher."

"Me neither," drawled old "Wolf Runner" in his wheezy voice. "But ol' Meat-in-the-Pot"—and proudly he patted the barrel of a long rifle that lay across his saddle fork—"ol' Meat-in-the-Pot got some nearer. Last I see of that dry-gulcher, he was jest a cloud of dust goin' down the divide. I traced him fer a jump

or so with a couple slugs. I wasn't tryin' tuh kill him. Sort o' goes agin' my grain to kill a man that's runnin' away. But I reckon I put the fear into him."

Steele crawled up from the ditch, grunting because his bullet crease pained him.

"If I don't start movin' fast," he told Wolf Runner, "I'll stiffen up."

The old man looked down with his wise eyes of washed-out blue.

"I don't know who yuh be, young feller," he drawled. "But stiff or not, yuh kin bet I'll stay with yuh until we find shelter. Ol' Calico here can pack double. Thar's a dugout down on Cayuse Crick. Cowman's shelter. Reckon we still got time to whip this storm."

Steele scratched his head. Then he pointed down into the ditch.

"I—I ain't alone," he confessed. "I got into this mess tryin' to save an orphan calf. I swore I'd take keer of the leetle feller. His mother was killed by a bullet. I don't know why. But in tryin' to ride out o' this gulch with the orphan across my saddle, I got slipped up on by that dry-gulcher. An' so——"

"So, wounded and afoot, yuh are mule-headed enough to try an' save a calf. Why not put a bullet through its head?"

"That's practical," Jack confessed. "I started to do it, but somehow, the dang leetle feller looked at me an' bawled. So I didn't kill him. I reckon"—he looked up at old Wolf Runner—"you'll think I'm a prize chump."

Wolf Runner grinned. Then he shook his head. "All my life," he answered, "or most of it, I've been trailin' an' killin' wolves an' coyotes. I hate the pesky varmints. I've seen 'em corner an' hamstring deer, antelope, weak cattle. Onct a pack of coyotes killed off a fine colt I was

raisin'. Blood brother to ol' Calico. An' thar's no wiser hoss in Wyomin' than Calico. So—while I hate coyotes an' kill 'em—I can understand why you wouldn't knock off that calf. Waal, thar's a chance fer us. H'ist the calf outa the ditch. I got a pack hoss up on the divide. I'll go git 'im."

He trotted away on Calico while Jack hauled the calf out of the ditch. When Wolf Runner returned, leading a buckskin pack horse, Jack threw the calf over the rawhide-covered pack that contained all of Wolf Runner's food, clothing, and traps. A skillful hitch anchored the little animal. By now it had fully recovered and was kicking and bawling.

"Now," Wolf Runner commanded, "climb aboard behind me."

Before they quit the gulch, Steele recovered his rifle. Then the queer pair headed down toward the mouth of the gulch. As they emerged in the open, where a long flat dropped away toward Cayuse Creek, they came into the teeth of the gale. The first snow was falling.

"We're up agin' it," drawled Wolf Runner. "In fifteen minutes, we won't be able tuh see our hands in front of our faces."

"Mebbe we better hunt shelter. Git sagebrush. Build a fire."

"This storm," Wolf Runner said, "will last all day an' night. We'd freeze shore. No, we got to make that dugout."

"But how?"

Wolf Runner patted the scrawny neck of old Calico.

"This ol' hay-burner," he declared, "can pick a trail to Cayuse Crick. Look, he's p'intin' his nose already an' quarterin' around to put his tail to the Wyomin' zeefires."

The wise old horse would proceed toward shelter on Cayuse Creek, fol-

lowing a zigzag course that would keep the wind at his back.

With a calm belief in Calico's power, old Wolf Runner wrapped his reins around his saddle horn. He slapped his bony plug on the shoulder.

"Git goin', yuh ol' oat thief," he drawled.

But before they had gone a quarter mile, both riders saw that the gallant pony could not pack two men and also fight its way through huge drifts that were piling up in the buffalo wallows and along the rocky rims of gulches.

"All off," drawled Wolf Runner.

All around whirled the storm. The air was white and filled with sleet that cut flesh like tiny knives. The cold pierced through leather and fur.

Wolf Runner made his preparations for this last dash toward Cayuse Creek. The men could have killed the calf, distributed their weight between the two horses. But neither suggested abandoning the calf. They had vowed to bring it in. Both were stubborn men.

Wolf Runner tied the lead rope of the pack animal to Calico's saddle. Then he grasped the long black tail of the rear horse, and commanded Steele to follow him.

"Yirrup!" he bawled above the wind.

Old Calico trudged ahead, wise eyes narrowed to keep out blinding snow, frosted muzzle advanced to sniff for trail sign.

Where the drifts were deep, two stout horses broke through. They made a fair trail for Wolf Runner and Steele who stumbled along, half frozen and weary to the bone.

Tied to the pack, the calf had quit bawling. The snow covered it.

There were times during that weary march when Jack longed to

lie down in the snow, sink into restful sleep. But he knew that such a sleep meant no awakening.

Wolf Runner was in no better shape. When their muscles grew slack from the numbing wind that cut like knives, both men restored circulation by going ahead of Calico to fight through the drifts. And when they stopped occasionally for a breather, each joshed the other into renewed effort.

"You got icicles hangin' from the end of yore nose," said Steele. "Yuh look like Santy Claus."

"An' you," gasped Wolf Runner, "look like a polar bear. Thar's white frost all over yuh from boots tuh hat."

Nor did they quit their joking when old Calico finally halted and would not advance a step. The pinto's Roman nose was shoved against a wall of ice and snow on the side of a steep slope. Wolf Runner argued with the pony, even threatened to break a trace chain across his hind legs. But Calico wouldn't move.

"You reckon the ol' plug has got tired an' is balkin'?" the trapper asked Steele.

"If he has," Jack muttered, "we've about played our last hand. An' lost to the blizzard."

No chance now to gather sagebrush and build a fire. Nor could they see to find shelter from the wind. All around raved the wind and the flying sleet. Ahead loomed the wall of ice that barred Calico's path.

"May be a way through it," Jack muttered.

He stumped around on boots that were frozen hard as iron, that ground into his half-numbed feet. There might be a low spot in the giant drift through which they could prod the balky horse.

There wasn't a low spot. But Steele saw something, dimly glimpsed for a moment as the wind eased down. A black round object protruding above the big drift.

"Wolf Runner!" he shouted. "Yore hoss knows more than us! We've reached the dugout! It's covered by drifted snow. But thar's the stovepipe stickin' up."

But for the wise old pony, the two men might have wandered straight past the dugout that meant life.

There came no answer to Steele's shout. He staggered back. Old Wolf Runner had slumped over. The fight against the blizzard had sapped his strength.

"My turn now," said Steele. He picked up the old fellow, and flung the lean and skinny body across his shoulder.

CHAPTER III.

THE DUGOUT FIGHT.

PACKED snow blocked the door to the dugout. Steele pushed through the drift, old Wolf Runner trailing limply over his shoulder.

"Hope this dang door ain't locked," Jack gasped, for the fight against the blizzard, and the wound above his short ribs had about sapped his strength.

He swung a boot. The door opened. Steele staggered inside the dugout which before this had often saved the lives of winter-bound punchers and their horses. A draft of steamy air struck his frosted face. It made his flesh tingle.

"But jest the same," Jack sighed, "it shore feels good."

Coming from the blizzard whiteness, he stood a moment, blinded, despite the glare of the fire that had been built in the stone fireplace at the rear of the dugout.

Then, as his sight cleared, Jack

stumbled the length of the long, low-roofed room to bring old Wolf Runner near to the live-saving blaze.

A grin came to his cracked lips as he saw that three men were in the place. Two lounged by the fire. At his entrance, they had straightened up swiftly.

One now leaped to his feet. He advanced toward Steele. He was a long and lanky man, with coarse black hair that rolled down to the collar of his buckskin hunting shirt, and beard and mustache of the same color.

"Room fer a pore ol' trapper that needs plenty heat!" Jack shouted, half jestingly, as the black-bearded man barred his path.

"No room here fer trappers," barked the stranger.

Jack stopped in his tracks. His snow-dazzled eyes narrowed. Swift anger coursed through him like a flash of fire. This was unheard of on the winter range, this arrogant refusal of life and shelter to a half-dead victim of the blizzard.

"What you drivin' at?" Jack rasped.

As he spoke, he gently lowered Wolf Runner down so that the old fellow lay on a soft robe of wolfskin that decorated the dirt floor.

"This," growled the black-bearded man, and he rammed a six-gun barrel an inch into Jack's middle just above his belt buckle.

It wasn't the first time that Steele had gone against a hostile gun. But he was taken off guard. He hadn't expected trouble here. Rather he had thought that these men would spring instantly to the aid of Wolf Runner.

But rage at this treacherous gun drive fired up Jack's strength. He forgot all he had gone through. Instantly he was the cool and alert

young special officer, master of a whole bag of tricks against black-bearded gun fighters with slanting green eyes.

His own guns were out of reach, belted under his long sheepskin coat. His rifle had been tied to the pack on Wolf Runner's extra horse. Steele possessed nothing for defense except his two good arms, and the keen brain under the famous lock of silvery white.

The two men by the fireplace had risen, and were now facing Steele. Behind them, something on the floor gleamed with a yellow light. These strangers, both hard and hairy men, had dropped their right hands to the butts of holstered six-guns.

Nearer Steele, saddles and bed rolls were piled against the right wall of the dugout. On the left, ran a line of two-decker bunks. There were a few rough boxes and stools, and a heavy table in the center of the room. On it stood a tin can in which had been planted a long candle to serve as light when the fire died down.

Here and there, Steele also glimpsed coils of rope, rifles leaning against the walls. One Winchester was near him with barrel resting on the edge of a bunk.

"Not five jumps away," Jack decided.

Then he looked again at the man who had blocked his way with a gun.

"What you holdin' me up fer?" Jack asked.

"This place is occupied. No room here fer strangers."

Outside the wind whooped and snow drove against the door. Jack grinned, nodded.

"No room out there for men, either," he said. "You don't expect tuh drive us out to freeze?"

"We didn't invite yuh here. What happens to you is none of our business."

"None of yore business?" Steele spoke slowly.

He stripped soggy gloves from his hands as he talked. His fingers were numb. Even if he gripped a gun, it would be difficult to thumb the hammer.

The gunman watched him closely, grim mouth tight and sharp under trailing black mustache, green eyes squinting and cruel.

"You better pick up yore pal," growled the man who held the drop. "An' git out o' here, unless yuh would prefer a hot bullet to a cold blizzard."

Steele braced himself in his boots. There was one trick that might succeed. His flesh was icy, without feeling.

"I'll take my chances," he said slowly.

Then he flashed into action. He drove down his left hand, planting his thumb between the cocked hammer and cylinder of the green-eyed man's gun. The latter swore, jerked the trigger.

The sharp steel hammer cut into Jack's flesh. But he felt no pain. Even as the gunman sagged back, striving to clear his weapon, Steele doubled his right hand into a hard fist, struck from knee level. The swift punch cracked off the green-eyed gunner's hairy chin.

If the storm hadn't taken its toll of Jack's strength, that blow would have stretched his opponent. As it was, the gunman dropped to his knees. His gun was wrenched away from Steele's left hand. But it fell to the floor.

Instantly both men began a wild scramble to secure the weapon. Their heads bumped together.

Steele saw shooting stars as he fell back.

The gunman swore, fumbled dazedly for the six-gun that had fallen under the edge of the table. His head struck the edge. The table went over.

The two men by the fire came forth on the high run. They had cleared their guns. Steele's way to the six-gun was now barred by the body of his late opponent and the overturned table. He scrambled up to hands and knees, scuttled toward the bunk against which rested a Winchester.

Blam! A six-gun flashed, and a bullet cut splinters from the edge of the bunk.

Steele ducked, grabbed the rifle, lined it from belt level.

Wham! His slug tore into the hard-packed dirt floor between the two men who were coming toward him with guns cocked for action.

They broke to right and left. One dived behind a packing box that served as a cupboard and was filled with tin dishes and canned goods. The other leaped out of Steele's range and hid behind the bunk nearest the fireplace.

Steele also took shelter around the corner of his bunk. Just a few feet away, in the center of the room, the table heaved up as the green-eyed man finally located his six-gun and came up dizzily for more battle.

Until now old Wolf Runner had lain, half senseless, on the wolf robe. Steele and his opponent, in fighting for the six-gun, had fallen over his limp body. Their boots had jarred the trapper's ribs, probably kicked the life back into his spent body.

Up on his boots now, the gunman whirled to cut down Steele. But Wolf Runner stretched out a leg, somehow got it between the gunman's boots, jerked back sharply,

and sent the fellow crashing to the floor. And weak as he was, the old man flung his skinny arms around the struggling gunman, and pinned down the six-gun long enough to give Steele a fighting chance.

"You hombres!" Steele ripped out sharply. "You cool down. Me an' my friend don't know who you are. We don't care. We're here to find shelter from the storm. Put up yore guns. We'll do the same. It's a blizzard truce."

"An' if we don't?" growled the man who was hiding behind the cover.

"You can fight it out then," snapped Steele. "I got a rifle an' I know how to use it. Point-blank fire agin' yuh at a range of ten feet."

"We got six-guns."

Steele laughed. "A rifle suits me jest now. I'll bet it agin' a brace of six-guns. An' I might tell you, that I got a couple six-guns under my coat, too. If I could have got to 'em when yore green-eyed pal jumped me, this fight wouldn't have started."

One man, under good cover, and armed with three weapons, would be a match against two men not so well equipped. Nor did these men know that Steele also owned a bowie knife with an eight-inch blade.

This was tucked in a sheath which was sewed inside one of his cow boots. If he ran out of ammunition, the style was to reach down, grip the buckhorn haft of the bowie, draw it forth in a mighty, dazzling swoop that would cut open an adversary from belt to gullet.

But on the wolf robe, the green-eyed man, angry because Steele had defeated him, was battling against the despairing clutch of Wolf Runner. The trapper was weak from suffering in the blizzard. He hung

to the gunman's thick arms with all his waning power. But it was certain that he would soon be beaten, then hammered down or killed with "Green-eyes' " six-gun.

"You ol' pelican!" raved Green-eyes. "I'll show you what happens when yuh trip up a man."

Smash! Down crashed the butt of the six-gun.

The blow was aimed at Wolf Runner's head, but the old man dodged it, took the sharp blow on his right shoulder. He groaned between stiff lips.

Steele heard, came out on the run. This exposed him to two waiting guns. Both roared. The dugout walls shook. A pan crashed down from the cupboard. Then followed a cascade of other tinware and canned goods. The gunman, hiding there, swore as a can of tomatoes clipped him back of the ear.

Light was dim in the dugout for gun work. The big bullets sang past Steele. They spattered against the front wall of the dugout that had been built of country rock.

Jack wasn't thinking now of the two men in hiding. His gray eyes flashed with the fighting light. They were centered on Green-eyes who had raised his weapon for a second crack at Wolf Runner's head.

Steele tilted his rifle barrel, whirled it until the front sight was downward. He cracked it down, struck Green-eyes where the man usually parted his hair.

Green-eyes sprawled out across old Wolf Runner's body. He groaned once. Then he lay like a dead man.

Steele's blow had wrecked the rifle. He dropped it, grabbed the front of his sheepskin coat, jerked open the garment. Big buttons flew in all directions. The young officer had cleared the way to his guns.

They leaped from oiled holsters. The hidden gunmen gaped in amazement at this tall young stranger's dazzling speed. Then they remembered that they were in a fight.

Steele stood above the bodies of the two men on the wolf robe.

Blam! His right-hand gun smashed a bullet.

It plowed through the wrist of the man behind the cupboard as the latter stuck out his weapon for a try at Steele.

With a howl, the gunman leaped out, clutching his wrist, doing a war dance of agony. His spurred boot caught on the edge of the cupboard foundation. The entire structure overturned, burying him under a pile of pots, pans, black kettles, and canned goods.

There was even a can of blackstrap molasses which lacked a cork. The black strap flowed slowly over the pile that heaved and shook above the wounded man.

As he nicked the man behind the cupboard and put him out of the fight, Steele leaped toward the overturned table, ducked behind it. A bullet plowed into the wood, sent the splinters flying. But Steele's lunge had brought him into line for a shot at the man behind the bunk.

"Yo're covered!" he shouted. "Come out, or I'll bore yuh! An' then, I'll put out the lights fer yore two pards."

The cards were running for Jack Steele. The man who crouched at the end of the bunk saw that. He stumbled forth, gun trailing from his right hand.

He was a lumpy, bow-legged fellow in greasy chaps and patched boots with a battered slouch hat pulled down over his eyes. Coarse yellow whiskers covered his face. His arms were long and gorillalike.

"Drop that gun!" Steele barked.

"Yuh look like a monkey to me. An' right now, no monkey business goes!"

"What's the idea of comin' in here an' startin' a fight?" whined the gun toter.

Jack gasped. "Startin' a fight?" he shouted angrily. "Say, all me an' my friend wanted was shelter from the storm. Yore green-eyed pal tore into me, ordered us out. I still can't figure why. I don't know none of you hombres."

"Well, I can explain to yuh." As the whiner talked, he edged around so that his gun was in position for a quick flip and shot at Steele.

Bang! A bullet from Steele's gun clanged against the steel frame.

It wasn't a difficult shot, for the whiner stood only a few feet from Jack. The blow of the big .45 slug against the weapon wrenched the owner's arm, stung his hand. He dropped the gun as if it was something hot. And gladly he rammed his arms into the air at Steele's sharp command.

Now Steele arose from behind the table. He surveyed the scene of battle. One man still struggled under the rattling pile of tinware, and choked as thick molasses seeped into his mouth. His mate stood facing Steele with arms high in the air, and fingers almost touching the ceiling of the dugout.

Behind Steele, old Wolf Runner had finally dislodged the sprawled body of the green-eyed gunman. Now the trapper staggered up, reeled over to the bunk that had sheltered Steele, slumped down on it. But though he was weak, Wolf Runner was game.

"I know these hombres," he gasped. "That one yuh nailed so hard is Cayuse Charley Spotts. That gent what's yellin' about his molasses bath is Charley's ridin'

mate, Jim Wigger. An' the one with his arms up is Lump-jaw Bunker. They own a bunch of hosses here on this range."

"By the livin'," Jack Steele answered angrily, "if they try any more tricks of keepin' white men from escapin' a blizzard they are apt to quit ownin' hosses. An' right sudden."

Then Steele ordered "Lump-jaw" to lower his arms, get the water bucket, and revive "Cayuse Charley." As the man grumbly obeyed, Steele stepped over and kicked Jim Wigger out from under the tinware and sirup.

He had to grin at Wigger's looks for Jim was a short, fat man with thick, curly hair and a beard that once had been brown and glossy. Now Jim's glory had departed. Thick black molasses covered his face, hair, and whiskers. And a can of baking powder had spilled its white contents over the sirupy surface.

"You need water, too," Jack drawled, studying the queer-looking turkey. Then he added, "But I don't reckon plain water will do yuh much good. Looks like you'll have tuh shave off yore whiskers an' git a short hair cut to git rid of that stuff."

Lump-jaw, bending over the slack body of Cayuse Charley, looked up with a scowl.

"Ain't no barberin' tools around here," he snarled. "Jest a pair of hoss clippers fer trimmin' the mane and tail of a cayuse. They are plumb dull. They pull right bad."

"That's tough luck," Jack agreed. "But jest the same, we can't let Jim jig around an' howl an' suffer. Besides, he's a sight to make any man lose his appetite. When yuh git through patchin' up Charley's head, you git them hoss clippers an' go

after Jim. Give him a reg'lar barber-shop job. An' plug up his wrist."

Then Jack turned to Wolf Runner, handed over the six-guns that he had picked off the floor.

"You reckon," he asked, "that you can ride herd on these hostiles while I go outside?"

"Shore! But why you leavin'?"

"Got to take keer of the hosses. An' you fergit we got an orphan calf roped to the packs. We swore we'd save the leetle feller."

CHAPTER IV.

COLD MURDER.

BOWING his head against the wind, Steele pulled open the door, fought through the drift that barred the entrance. The two ponies were standing patiently in the storm.

Jack stabled them under the overhang of the cliff adjoining the dugout where he also found the mounts of Cayuse Charley and his pards. The cave was warm enough for horses covered with thick winter hair.

"But not so dang good fer June calves," Jack decided.

As he unlashed the limp body of the calf, Jack's thoughts reverted to the fight in the dugout. Why had Cayuse Charley ordered him back into the blizzard?

"It don't run to reason," Steele muttered, "that a man would be that sneakin'. Naw, them gents have got somethin' on their minds besides runnin' hosses on the Chalk Butte range."

This vast country, a hundred miles from the nearest town, would make an ideal hiding place for bandits. Such thieves could pass themselves off as honest stockmen between their raids.

"If they're thieves," Jack whispered, "mebbe they know me."

He hadn't thought of that. But it might explain Cayuse Charley's hostile action. Many Wyoming outlaws knew Silver Jack Steele by sight.

"It means a wakeful night fer me," Jack decided, as he started for the dugout door with the calf across his shoulder.

Blam! Even above the howl of the gale, he heard the crash of a big six-gun inside the dugout.

"They've jumped ol' Wolf Runner!" he snapped.

He dropped the calf, flung his weight against the door. It burst open. He leaped into the room.

He saw Wolf Runner lounging easily on his bunk with a smoking gun gripped in his hand. Lump-jaw and Jim were flat on the floor near the table. Back by the fireplace, Cayuse Charley, head bound up in a flour-sack bandage, gripped his right hand with his left, and hopped around while he swore a blue string.

"What—what's up?" Jack Steele gasped.

Grinning, Wolf Runner tilted his gun barrel toward Charley.

"Everything was peaceful as a Kaintucky barbecue," he drawled. "Lump-jaw had Jim atween his knees an' was gittin' at his whiskers with them hoss clippers. Course Jim was cussin', but not much louder than a bobcat caught in a trap squalls. I told Cayuse tuh move near the fire, wrap up his head whar you marked him, an' take it easy. Fust thing yuh know, I see Cayuse puttin' his hand inside his buckskin shirt. Figured he might have a gun cached thar. An' then he picked up somethin' from the floor. It was sort o' dim, an' I couldn't jest make out what it was. Watched him a minute. Then I

yelled, 'Drop it' an' shot at what he was holdin' in his hand."

"Was it a gun?"

Wolf Runner laughed. "I regret to say it was the sorghum can," he answered. "Jest why Charley was foolin' with it is beyond me. But I wasn't takin' any chances on its bein' a six-gun."

Steele walked back to the raving horseman. He glanced down at the sirup can into which Wolf Runner's bullet had ripped.

"Why," he asked Charley, "were you foolin' around with that?"

Charley snarled. "We're short on grub. Five of us to eat. Sirup will taste right good fer breakfast. It was leakin' all over the floor. I was jest settin' it to rights when that ol' fool let go with his gun."

Steele laughed. "You know now that you don't want to make any fast moves while he's watchin'." Steele picked up the sirup can, placed it on the shelf above the fireplace. Then he turned again on Charley. "To be safe," he said, "I'll search you."

The green-eyed man submitted quietly. He had no weapon on him. Steele then searched Lump-jaw and Jim. He didn't dig into their pockets, for it wasn't likely they could hide a death-dealing weapon there. But he made certain they were not packing sawed-off Colts in armpit holsters or bowie knives stuffed into boots.

"They're clean," he told Wolf Runner. "Now we'll take the bullets out o' their six-guns and rifles. After that, mebbe we can git through the night alive."

For that was now Steele's greatest concern. The blizzard had trapped Wolf Runner and himself with three hostile gunmen. Only continual watchfulness would bring them through alive.

"Watch 'em," he directed. "I'll take keer of our calf."

Wolf Runner grinned. "I'm watchin' 'em," he said.

Steele got the calf and carried it in to the fire. Hunger and cold had long since taken half the life out of the range orphan.

Cayuse Charley leaned against the mantel, looking down contemptuously as Jack knelt and prodded the calf for signs of life.

"Fer a full-growed man," Charley sniffed, "you don't show much sense. Foolin' around with a dang bum calf. What did yuh bring it in here fer? This ain't no corral."

"Naw," Jack said, "it was a skunk den until me an' Wolf Runner come in. I reckon this calf will measure up to you an' yore friends fer nerve. Three of yuh tryin' tuh shove a couple gents back into the blizzard."

Charley frowned. "Listen," he explained, "I figure we both started wrong."

"I'd tell a man! Shovin' a gun into my stummick."

"But I had you figured as riders fer this dang bully that figures he owns Chalk Butte. He's sworn tuh kill me on sight. Said he was hirin' gun fighters to track me down."

"Who do yuh mean?"

Cayuse bent forward, eyes gleaming fiercely underneath his head bandage. "Bellerin' Hack Graw," he snapped. "Owner of the Quarter Circle Dot."

Jack stood up slowly, narrowed gaze on the horseman.

"Charley," he asked, "does he hate you because you been butcherin' his cows an' hosses?"

"Naw! I wouldn't do that. He hates me because we turned out a bunch of hosses on the Chalk Butte range. Hack has claimed this section fer years. He's tried to run a bluff on everybody who moved in.

Most times he's succeeded. People hate him fer it. But—unless yuh got nerve—yuh can't beat Hack's money an' his hired gun fighters."

So that explained the brutal butchery of cows such as the mother of the calf.

"Hatred of a range hog," Jack mused. "An' findin' which enemy is doin' it is like huntin' a needle in a haystack. Bellerin' Hack probably has a hull army of men who hate him."

Cayuse had moved away from the fire and was pulling on his gloves. For as night came on, the blizzard chill penetrated into the dugout. A few feet away from the fire, the air was growing bitterly cold.

"We'll shore need plenty o' blankets to-night," said Jack.

The calf hadn't responded to his first-aid treatment. What the little animal needed mostly was food. Jack pawed through the canned grub on the floor, hunting for condensed milk. It was a vain hope. Cowpokes who used this dugout took their coffee black.

"Mebbe," he said, "that sirup would put some kick in the leetle feller. Mix it up with hot water. Ought ter work."

But as he reached for the can on the shelf, Cayuse Charley stepped in.

"What you goin' to do with that?" he asked.

"Make up some pap fer the calf," Jack answered.

Cayuse stuck out his hairy chin. "Listen," he grated, "you can foller any fool whim so long as it don't interfere with our chance fer life. But when it comes to usin' food that men may need on a dang calf, then I shore object."

"Thar's plenty grub here for us besides this sirup. You must have a sweet tooth, Cayuse."

"Thar ain't much food. Suppose

this storm lasts a week. We'll need every bit in sight. Five men can eat a heap to keep alive in freezin' weather."

Steele's first impulse was to knock the man aside, take down the sirup can, and feed the calf. But even in his anger, Jack was fair-minded.

Cayuse had advanced a powerful argument. Blizzards had been known to rage for days. There was a chance that the sorghum might serve as an emergency ration. The range would condemn any man who risked human lives to save a calf.

"Thar's some truth in what you say," Jack observed, and he looked from glowering Charley toward the sticky can that meant life for the calf.

He faced a difficult decision. It couldn't be solved with a bullet. For Cayuse Charley was unarmed.

"I'd shore like tuh save the calf," Jack whispered. "But if men starve while it lives, I'll be in a tough pickle. It's a dang hard thing to decide."

Nor did Jack decide it at that moment. For suddenly the dugout door was flung open. The candle on the center table guttered and almost went out as the wind and snow swept in. Steele whirled in his tracks.

A sixth man had come to the dugout for shelter.

He stood in the doorway, swaying on legs that were numb from the cold. Frozen clots of snow clung to the coarse wool of his buffalo-hide overcoat. A cap of muskrat fur was pulled down and coat collar up until only the frosted red tip of a big nose was in sight. The stranger stood for a moment.

Then Wolf Runner shouted. "Shut the door, dang ye! An' come in an' git warm!"

The trapper's wheezing voice seemed to act on the newcomer like an electric shock. He started, then raised a gloved hand and shoved back the fur cap.

Steele stared at a beefy, brutal face, red from the freezing wind, tiny black eyes gleaming under coarse brows, a black beard that covered the man's chops.

"Is that you, Wolf Runner?" rumbled the stranger.

Hearing the voice that carried a harsh note like that of a file against steel, Jack forgot the starving calf, Cayuse Charley, everything. For this was the voice of the man who had ambushed him in the gulch, tried to kill him as he sought to rescue the Quarter Circle Dot calf.

"The dang skunk!" Jack grated, and strode angrily up the room.

Life also had returned with a vengeance to Wolf Runner's skinny frame. He leaped off the bunk, made for the table. For now the stranger had shut the door and shuffled into the room.

The three men met at the table. The stranger stood on the side nearest the door. Wolf Runner was at one end. Steele stood across the board. Between them, the candle, protruding above its tin-can holder, smoked and cast its dim glare.

"You ol' tarrapin!" bellowed the stranger, angry glare on Wolf Runner. "What yuh doin' here? On my property? Yuh dang butcherin' outlaw!"

"Yore property?" raged Wolf Runner. "You mean mine. This here dugout was homesteaded by me. I got a deed for it from the government. But you—dang yuh—yuh stole it from me."

"Stole it? I loaned yuh money on it. Yuh never paid me back. So I took the land as security. To git

even, you started butcherin' my hosses an' cattle. Yuh even did wuss than that."

"I paid yuh back that loan in cash. You gave me a receipt. I lost the dang thing. When I asked yuh fer another, yuh laughed at me. Wouldn't return the land deed I had give you as security."

The stranger crashed his fist on the table. The candle jumped. Cayuse Charley and his mates shuffled up to hear the argument. The six men were crowded closely about the table.

"You did wuss than that," shouted the stranger. "Wuss than killin' my cattle. You snuk into my ranch house, a week ago, cracked open my cash box, an' stole a roll of bills amountin' to five thousand dollars. Big bills that I had put away in my account book. An' yuh also took my gold luck piece. You knew I valued it."

"Yo're a liar, Hack Graw!" shouted Wolf Runner. "Much as I hate yuh fer stealin' my land when I had dealt fair with yuh, I wouldn't stoop to rob you of money and kill off yore cattle. Naw, I wouldn't do that."

"Nor would he lay on a rim rock," Steele cut in angrily, hard eyes fixed on Hack Graw's beefy face, "an' ambush a man what was tryin' to save a Quarter Circle Dot calf. You dang varmint! Yo're wuss than any coyote what runs the range."

"You?" roared Bellerin' Hack, turning on Jack. "So you have throwed in with this ol' pelican. Say, I'm dang sorry I didn't git yuh. It was clear to me what had happened in that gulch. I heard a gunshot. I galloped up. I see you down thar alongside a dead cow. It was clear to me I had caught the hound what was butcherin' my

stock. I cut down with my gun an' blazed away."

"That shot you heard was me killin' a coyote what was after yore cattle, you lunk-headed pirate."

Bellerin' Hack ripped out an oath. "Don't try to fool me! You've thrown in with this ol' sneak what claims to be a trapper. He's nothin' but a thief. Why I'll bet he's got my gold luck piece in his pocket this minute. An' likely my roll of money is hid out in this dugout."

Cayuse Charley asked smoothly. "What sort of a gold piece was it, Hack?"

"It was a slug o' Californy gold, made fer a private bank in 1856. The date is on it. The slug is in the shape of an oblong. It's wuth fifty dollars. Bein' kind o' rare, I have saved it fer years."

"Yah!" barked Wolf Runner, eyes glittering with rage. "I've seen the gold slug. But I ain't got it. I'll prove it. Yuh said I was probably packin' it in my pocket."

Contemptuously, the old trapper rammed his right hand down into the various pockets of his fur coat. He brought forth a fistful of matches, rifle cartridges, string, chewing tobacco and other odd bits. He plunked the entire mess down on the table.

Then the angered look in his face gave way to one of utter bewilderment. And even Steele stared down, amazed. For there on the boards gleamed an oblong slug of gold.

Bending over, Steele saw that it was stamped with the date as given by Hack, and the title of the private firm of California bankers that had issued it during the gold-rush days when Forty-niners ran their own mints to take up the shortage in government money.

"I—I swear I didn't know that

was in my pocket, Hack," old Wolf Runner cried. "I—I don't know how it come thar. I swear I don't. I hate yuh, Hack, fer stealin' my land. I'd kill yuh in fair fight. But I'd never rob yuh."

"You danged ol' thief!" Hack roared.

Around his thick waist was belted a six-gun in an open holster. Steele caught a flashing glimpse of men moving swiftly. He saw Hack facing the trapper. Cayuse Charley stood near. And Lump-jaw and Jim Wigger were crowding around the table.

Then as Hack reached for his gun, the candle went out. A hand had swooped down, grasped the tallow, smothered the light.

The dugout became a cave of darkness. A gun flared redly. The roar shook the walls. Steele ripped out his six-gun. He heard a groan, the crash of a man's body hitting the floor. Then hands clawed at him. He leaped into the clear, collided with another man, fell heavily.

Bang! There sounded another blazing report.

Then Steele, scrambling to his feet, heard the filelike voice of Bellerin' Hack Graw, choked now and dying in the cattleman's throat:

"You killed me, you murderin' gold thief!"

CHAPTER V.

CLEAN-UP ON VARMINTS.

THE red glare of the embers in the fireplace was Steele's sole light as he raced toward the side of the dugout. He was planting himself in position to shoot if a man opened the door and sought to escape. The fugitive's body would be outlined plainly against the white curtain of the storm.

But the dugout remained black and silent except for the heavy

breathing of men and the choking groans that finally ceased.

"Can't stay here all night," Jack thought. "My job is tuh round up the killer if murder's been done."

This dugout affair had now become a job for the law. Before, it had been merely a private quarrel. It was Steele's duty to take action.

He extracted a match from his pocket, scratched it along the wall, held it far out from his body. If the killer were crouching and waiting for such a target at least his bullet wouldn't bore through Steele.

The match failed to draw a bullet. Instead Jack heard a hoarse plea.

"Bring that light up here. Thar's shore been a dirty killin'."

As an officer, Steele couldn't resist that entreaty. He gambled his own life as he stumbled toward the center of the room, lighted match in one hand, six-gun in the other.

His foot struck the edge of the overturned table. He moved around it. He stumbled over another object on the floor. And he knew instantly from the feel, that here lay the murder victim.

Steele bent, got another match, held it down closely so that the dim glare outlined the limp body on the floor. It was, as he had suspected, Hack Graw. The cattleman would bellow no more on the Chalk Butte range. He lay flat on his back with eyes wide open and glazed. Dead.

"That dang candle must be around here," Steele growled.

The tin-can holder gleamed as he searched with upheld match. The candle was there, bent and dented where a man had grasped it to snuff out the light.

Steele lighted the wick, arose with the can gripped in his left hand. The yellow glare now revealed the

men who were in the dugout. Swiftly Steele made his count.

"Four!" he snapped. "An' one of the four is a murderer."

He saw old Wolf Runner leaning against the nearest bunk with a ghastly look on his leathery face. Lump-jaw and Jim Wigger were braced against the opposite wall. Cayuse Charley stood some distance down the room and near the fireplace.

"It was him I bumped into," Steele decided. He spoke sharply. "Charley, throw a log on the fire. Let's git some real light in here."

By this better light, the four men watched silently as Steele knelt and examined Hack Graw's body. The death-dealing bullet had gone through the buffalo coat on the right side, bored into Hack's body and undoubtedly touched his heart.

"What gun turned the trick?" Jack whispered. "Only me an' Wolf Runner was packin' iron."

The four men must have been thinking the same for Cayuse Charley pointed his trigger finger and drawled: "Hack's gun is gone."

It was the truth. When the candle had gone out, Steele had seen Hack in the act of reaching for his gun. But now the weapon had disappeared.

"Only one way to figure," Jack snapped. He stood up and brushed off his hands. "We had taken away all guns here except those carried by Wolf Runner an' myself. The killer crowded up alongside Hack in the excitement of our argument. He reached out with his left hand, grabbed the candle, pulled Hack's gun with his right, shoved it agin' Hack's short ribs, an' let 'er go. Killed Hack."

But who was the killer?

"You hombres," Jack ordered, sharp eyes roving over the four men,

"pick him up an' stretch him on a bunk. Throw a blanket over his face. We can't help him now."

Cayuse Charley snarled. "We're short on bunks. He's cold meat. Put him outside. He won't mind the weather."

Steele said coldly: "Do what I tell yuh. None of yuh liked Hack. Neither did I. But after he's gone, we can show some decent respect fer his carcass. Grab hold of his laigs, Charley."

They placed Hack on the bunk, covered him up. Then Jack called the four back to the center of the room. They stood waiting his questions.

The dugout was silent. Outside the blizzard roared, and sleet pelted the door through which so lately a living man had come to his quick death.

"One of us killed him," Steele said shortly.

Cayuse Charley grinned, looked toward Wolf Runner.

"Ain't hard to figure who did it," he remarked.

Wolf Runner's red-rimmed eyes flashed with anger. He swung toward Cayuse Charley. He was ready to ram his gun against the man's body.

"Don't call me a dirty killer!" he rasped. "Thar's been too much loose talk already in this dugout."

Steele stepped between the two angry men. "Go easy," he advised. "We've reached the point where friendship stops. It's my job to hunt fer evidence an' arrest the murderer."

"Arrest?" gasped out Wolf Runner. "What do you mean, yore job?"

Steele had made his statement for a purpose. Wolf Runner's surprise indicated that he did not know Steele to be an officer. But Cayuse

Charley remained silent as did his friends.

"They know," Jack thought. "I was right. They recognized me when I come out o' the storm. They tried to git me. Which proves they got somethin' up their sleeves."

Now Cayuse drawled: "If yo're an officer, yuh better do yore duty. Arrest that ol' feller." He pointed toward Wolf Runner.

"I am an officer," said Jack. "My name is Steele."

Wolf Runner's eyes widened. "Silver Jack?" he gasped.

Steele nodded. "Some folks call me that."

Wolf Runner almost went to his knees. "Jack," he pleaded. "I ain't no lily-white gent. But I swear I never robbed nor killed, coyote fashion. Hack accused me of robbin' his house, of makin' off with his gold luck piece and five thousand dollars. I swear, Jack, that I been framed. I—I ain't guilty."

Cayuse cut in: "The evidence is agin' yuh. Yuh took the gold slug right out o' yore pocket. It was a dead give-away. An' when Hack turned on yuh, yuh doused the light, jerked his gun, an' beefed him. Shucks!" He shrugged his heavy shoulders and looked at Steele. "Thar's enough evidence agin' him to hang a dozen men."

Old Wolf Runner was almost in tears. It wasn't that he felt sorrow over Hack Graw's death. But all his life, the trapper had lived up to a strict code of fair dealing. If he killed, the victim must get an even break. And Hack hadn't got that break.

"Jack," the trapper declared brokenly, "why would I jerk Hack's gun when I had one of my own? Look at it. One shell empty. One I fired when I put a bullet through the sirup can. Look at it, Jack." And

he broke the weapon and pleaded with Steele to inspect the cylinder.

Jack shook his head gravely. "We're all under suspicion," he declared, "until we find the murder gun. Hack's own hogleg. Spread out. Search the dugout."

As Wolf Runner started away, Jack said awkwardly. "Ol'-timer, much as I hate it, you'll have to hand over yore gun."

Wolf Runner's face hardened. He passed over the weapon, butt first.

"I figured," he said curtly, "that after what you an' me had been through, that you'd take my word that I'm innocent."

"An officer," said Jack, "can't take the word of any man—friend or enemy."

Hearing this, Cayuse Charley laughed. "Mebbe," he said to his pards, "we'll git some action on this. I was afeared at fust that this Steele would favor the trapper."

He didn't know that Steele was sparring for time. Allowing Wolf Runner to suffer some mental worry in the hope of trapping the real murderer. Steele had already decided on the logical suspect. But deciding and proving were two different things.

He watched them as they searched the bunks for the killer gun.

"They were all crowdin' around the table," he muttered. "It would be easy then to slip that gold slug into Wolf Runner's pocket. What was it I noticed as I come into the dugout?"

His mind pictured that scene as Cayuse Charley stepped forward to ram the gun into his body. Lump-jaw and Jim had been crouching in front of the fireplace. Steele remembered now that he had spotted something with a dull-yellow gleam

that lay in front of the fireplace. Then the fight had started.

"I'll bet," he said suddenly, "that they was countin' Hack's money. An' had laid the gold slug thar on the floor. But if so, whar's that money?"

He had searched Cayuse and his pards after the battle. Of course, that had been for weapons. He hadn't run his hands into their pockets. But five thousand dollars in bills would make a bulky package.

"I wouldn't be apt to miss sich a bulge," Jack mused. "Naw, they had got rid of the money before I searched 'em."

But if they had been counting their loot as Steele entered, there had been no time to hide the roll of bills except in that portion of the dugout nearest the fireplace.

"Gittin' warmer," Jack said, and he frowned. "I got to work this out fast or lose all of Wolf Runner's respect."

The old man had saved him from Hack Graw's bullets. Jack would rather lose a right arm than Wolf Runner's friendship. Yet until the real killer revealed enough legal evidence for an arrest, Steele must treat Wolf Runner as a suspect. In fact, as the principal suspect.

"A tough job," Jack sighed, and he hated to look at Wolf Runner's hard face.

Cayuse and his mates were not worrying. They laughed as they searched for the gun. And soon their merciless talk centered on Wolf Runner.

"Must shore feel painful to git hanged," said Cayuse Charley.

"Yeah," sniffed Lump-jaw, "an' especially fer killin' a man like yuh would a yaller dawg."

"Honest men on Chalk Butte

range will never fergit it," added Jim Wigger.

Wolf Runner whirled like an animal in a trap.

"Dang yuh!" he cried. "I'm innocent. One of you hounds killed Hack. Yuh was all around that table."

He stood at bay. Steele was watching, vigilant and wary. He stood alongside the table. The candle gleamed there, a trifle bent and twisted because of the hard grasp of the mysterious killer.

Cayuse Charley sneered and turned on his heel. He stalked up the room. He glanced at the silent body on the bunk. Then he swung with a laugh and said to Steele: "Why don't yuh put that ol' feller under arrest? What more evidence do yuh need?"

Wolf Runner staggered toward the table. Lump-jaw and Jim trailed him, cruel grins on their grimy faces.

"Jack," pleaded the trapper, "don't make a killer out o' me. Don't let that green-eyed buzzard talk yuh into framin' an innocent man."

"Most of the evidence is agin' yuh, Wolf Runner," Jack answered soberly. "Much as I hate it, I must tell yuh that anything yuh say from now on will be held agin' yuh."

Wolf Runner shouted: "Jack, are you arrestin' me?"

Cayuse Charley was lounging against the bunk that held the dead man. He laughed and raised his left hand to stroke his black mustache.

"It shore sounds like an arrest," he croaked. "That's what they generally say jest before they make yuh stick out yore mitts fer the cuffs." He stretched out his hands and laughed again. "I'd shore hate to feel the steel lockin' around my wrists."

Steele's eyes narrowed. He looked at Cayuse Charley, spoke softly.

"You wanted legal evidence," he said. "Waal, I'm now ready to furnish it."

The grin froze on Charley's face. He looked up sharply. He licked his dry lips before he spoke.

"You accusin' me of that killin'?"

"Charley," Jack rapped out, "what's that on the palm of yore left glove?"

Cayuse looked down. Four pairs of eyes were riveted on his glove. There was a white streak plainly outlined on the yellow buckskin.

"I can tell you," Jack snapped. "It's tallow. When you grabbed the candle, it stuck to the leather. You forgot that, Cayuse. An' I'd never have seen it—nor thought of it—if you hadn't made that fool talk about handcuffs an' exposed yore mitts. Yo're guilty of murder, Cayuse. An' under arrest. An' whar's that gun?"

As Steele ripped out the question, Cayuse Charley straightened up. His right hand had slipped back to the bunk. He stared into Steele's hard eyes.

Then suddenly he grinned, leaped away from the bunk. And he went into the gun-fighter's crouch, body half swung toward his foe to offer a narrow target.

"Here's the gun!" he barked.

In his right hand, he held Hack Graw's Colt. He had hidden it under the blankets that covered the body after helping to carry Hack to the bunk. Before that, it had been secreted about his clothing.

Facing a lined six-gun, Steele knew that he had made a great mistake in not searching all four men immediately after the murder. But the killing had happened so swiftly it had taken him off guard.

He had pulled out of the hole by revealing Cayuse as the killer, because of the candle tallow on the man's left glove. And he had also unearthed the murder weapon.

"But mebbe too dang late!" he growled.

They stood not six feet apart. Steele looked straight into Charley's green and blazing eyes. He saw the unwavering black muzzle of Hack Graw's six-gun, knew that within a split second the weapon would roar.

Blam! Blam! Two guns rolled as one.

But as Steele fired, he leaped to the side. Cayuse was as quick. He ducked down behind the table.

Bang! Charley's second bullet thudded into the wall above the bunk on which lay Hack Graw.

If Steele hadn't dropped to his knees, the slug would have drilled him between the eyes.

Cayuse reached up, seized the table, attempted to overturn it to serve as a barricade.

Down the room, Lump-jaw and Jim Wigger leaped on Wolf Runner like angry coyotes. The three went down with the old man fighting for his life.

"It's up to me," Steele ripped out.

With blazing gun, he charged straight toward the table. His audacious rush hurried Charley's next bullet. The slug sang past Steele's right ear.

Then Jack had leaped across the table. Cayuse rose up, six-gun trailing smoke. He reached for Steele's throat. Jack crashed down the barrel of his Colt.

It hit Cayuse along the part in his hair where there was a previous bump. For the second time that same day, the green-eyed gunman dropped out of the fight.

Promptly Steele turned, went lunging down the room toward the

three men who battled savagely on the dusty floor. Lump-jaw was seated astride Wolf Runner's chest. Jim Wigger had grabbed a length of firewood and was waiting an opportunity to brain the trapper.

As Jack ran into the battle, he reached down with his left hand and raked out his bowie knife. The eight-inch blade gleamed wickedly in the red light from the fire.

"Up on yore legs, yuh coyotes!" he roared. "I've already killed a four-legged varmint to-day. An' I'm r'arin' tuh take the hides off a few two-footed ones. Git up, an' reach fer the ceilin'."

They reached. The fight was over. Wolf Runner staggered up, felt gingerly of his Adam's apple. Then he shook hands with Steele.

"I'm all together," he said. "But this has shore been a busy day."

He saw Cayuse Charley stretched out on the floor.

"Yo're tender-hearted," he told Jack. "Why didn't yuh beef him?"

Steele grinned. "I'd ruther take him to jail an' be present at a legal hangin'."

Steele took no chances with his prisoners. Aided by Wolf Runner, he roped them with lengths cut from an extra lariat. The three were then stretched out in one bunk like lengths of firewood.

"A dang good clean-up," said Wolf Runner. "I reckon they was killin' off Hack's cattle to git him mad at me. Then, when they robbed him, he'd figure I was the man. You walkin' into the deal as an under-cover officer sort o' hurried the play. They tried hard to plant the killin' on me."

"An' they had good evidence," Steele reminded the trapper. "If it hadn't been fer Cayuse exposin' his mitt with candle grease on it——"



Dead Hombres Talk

By Philip F. Deere

Author of "Border Buzzards," etc.

A GRIN crinkled Deputy Sheriff "Dusty" Wayne's face as he cocked his spurred boots up on the jail desk and gnawed off a chew from his black plug of tobacco and looked out upon the twinkling lights of El Portal through "Newton's Pride."

That's what the folks of Paradise Valley called the big plate-glass window that covered almost the whole front of the sheriff's office—"Newton's Pride." Through it, Sheriff Clem Newton could look out over the streets of the cow town and see nearly everything that went on without moving his fat body from his swivel chair.

In the absence of the sheriff, one

of Dusty Wayne's most important jobs was to protect that glass window and keep it clean and shiny. Even running down the current band of rustlers was second in importance to this.

The sheriff had had that window shipped in clear from Kansas City by train, stagecoach, and pack mule. He had paid for it out of his own pocket. It made the sheriff's job a paradise for a lazy man.

Dusty reached over and wiped a bit of dust from the window.

"Don't blame ol' Clem fer bein' particular about this window glass," he chuckled. "It shore makes it handy to keep a watch on folks down in town. Reckon he'd fire me

quick as a wink if anythin' happened to it.

Cra-a-s-h! Wham! There was a noise like an explosion, and the expanse of plate glass seemed suddenly to blast in Dusty's face.

Sharp splinters stung his cheeks, his neck, his hands, and even stabbed through his clothing. Only the fact that his hat was pulled down over his eyes saved him from being blinded.

The swivel chair went over backward. And Dusty went with it, clawing madly at the air. With a thud his body plopped to the floor, jabbing more glass splinters into his hide.

Something hard and rough dug into his ribs, and he found himself looking at a hefty rock. Some one had hurled that thing through the window, making a total wreck of Newton's Pride.

The whole place seemed to be paved with crystal splinters which gleamed in the glow of a swinging kerosene lamp. With a bellow of rage, Dusty leaped to his feet, freckled face twisted with anger and pain, and leaped through the doorway.

"Who done that?" he howled. "Who throwed that rock? I'll git the whisky-gulpin' coyote."

At a dead run, he circled the jail. No one was in sight. Dusty's sprint left him breathless and somewhat calmed. More slowly he went around the place, trying to read sign.

Down on the main street, several people looked up, attracted by his first yell, but they soon went about their own business.

In a little grove of cottonwoods, Dusty found fresh tracks. That was where the rock thrower had stood.

"Jumpin' tarantulas!" muttered Dusty. "If I don't git the jasper that done this, Sheriff Newton will fire me sure. Gosh, I don't want

to be here when he sees that window! I'll bet that pizen hombre is down in one of them saloons right now, laughin' his head off at me. If I was to walk in quietlike, mebbly I kin spot him."

High-heeled boots *clop-clopping* on the board walk, Dusty Wayne tromped along the main street, with his battered Stetson pushed back on his thatch of unruly red hair. Long-barreled Colts in oiled holsters slapped against his work-blackened chaps at every step.

Dusty met many men, but none of them acted suspicious. There was Sam Barns of the Box 8 spread, and Bill Maxton of the 2 Dot.

Then Dusty saw the swinging doors of the Long Bar Saloon bulge outward. Tall, skinny "Spur" Markel with his barrel-bodied, black-bearded brother, "Rep," stepped out onto the board walk. The brothers owned the 7 Diamond and bossed a crew of hard-eyed lead pushers. But they didn't even glance at the young deputy.

Dusty wandered through the Long Bar, but found no one on whom he could pin the crime of shattering Newton's Pride. The deputy retraced his steps toward the jail. His route took him past the El Portal livery stable, run by old "Solitaire" McGinnes. The building was dark.

"Wonder where the old gent is?" muttered Dusty. "He never closes up this early."

Shrugging his shoulders, Dusty continued on his way. Old Solitaire got his moniker from the card game he played every spare moment of the day or evening. He and Dusty were great friends.

Dusty stepped back into the jail office and surveyed the damage with troubled eyes. Then his gaze fell on the stone. With a low growl,

the deputy lashed out with the toe of his boot and kicked the rock the length of the room.

"Hey, what's that!" cried Dusty abruptly.

A small piece of paper fluttered to the floor. Quickly he picked it up. It had been tied to the big rock with a piece of string. He had been so angry when the window was broken that he hadn't taken time to examine the stone.

Walking over to the table, Dusty held the paper under the lamp, which was still burning. There was writing on one side, and as Dusty read it a low whistle escaped his lips. The note said:

DUSTY: I'm throwin this in cuz I don't want to be seen. I got some dope on them rustlers to-day. Seen 'em workin' from a cliff. I know who they are. Come on down and I'll give yu the low down.

SOLITAIRE.

Quickly Dusty blew out the light, locked the door, and went down the board walk at a dogtrot.

"If I kin nab them rustlers, mebbe ol' Clem won't be so hard on me for lettin' the window git broke," chuckled Dusty. "Reckon Solitaire tried to pitch the rock through the open door an' missed."

The dark lines of the livery stable loomed up in front of the young deputy. No lights greeted him from the wide doorway. A strange shiver of dread ran along Dusty's spine.

He loosened his twin Colts in their low-cut holsters. He stepped off the board walk into the ankle-deep alkali and crossed the street. Overhead diamond-cut stars glimmered in a cloudless sky. He was in front of the livery stable now.

Dusty's forehead wrinkled. There was something wrong here. He could smell trouble as a thirsty cow

can smell water. His scalp tingled and his pulse quickened.

Horses in their stalls snorted and stamped the ground, as Dusty edged forward into the dark interior. The odor of fresh hay filled the air.

His eyes became accustomed to the gloom. Over there in a corner he saw the old box where McGinnes played his solitaire. Scattered over the floor he glimpsed the old man's greasy, cracked deck of cards.

"Solitaire! Where are yuh?" called Dusty softly.

Then Dusty's foot struck something soft. A lantern hung from a nail on a post. Quickly he lifted it down, scratched a match on his boot heel, and lighted it.

The flickering, yellow rays flooded the interior of the big stable and fell on old Solitaire McGinnes, lying face down on the floor. With a gasp, Dusty dropped to his knees and turned him over.

A big splotch of crimson stained the old fellow's shirt. There was a gaping hole in his chest and one in his back where a mushrooming slug had slammed through the frail body. Matted gray hair hung down over the ashen face. Solitaire was dead, shot down without a chance.

Solitaire had not died right away. The deputy could see where the livery-stable owner had dragged his body across the straw-covered floor.

Then Dusty noticed something that caused a muttered exclamation to escape his lips. The old man had dragged himself to a stall. A pair of spurs lay on the ground there. The old frontiersman clenched one of these in his dead hand.

Quickly Dusty pried the stiffened fingers open. The spur fell to the ground with something white. The deputy picked up the latter object.

It was a playing card Solitaire had snatched up from the spilled

deck on the floor. Turning it over, the deputy saw that it was the seven of diamonds. There was no writing on it.

"Seven!" he muttered. "Diamonds! Solitaire was tryin' to leave some sign. Them rustlers knew he seen 'em. They kilt him afore he had a chance to tell."

Dusty hunkered down and studied the objects. He took a piece of plug-cut from his pocket and bit off a chew.

"There ain't nobody around here named Diamond," said Dusty slowly. "What's this spur for?" A puzzled frown wrinkled his forehead. "A seven of diamonds and a spur. I cain't make——"

Suddenly Dusty jumped to his feet, his eyes lighted with a deadly glow, his fists clenched.

"Now I see it!" he exclaimed. "Seven of diamonds. A spur. It means Spur of the 7 Diamond. Spur Markel did this killin'. He's the rustler that old Solitaire was goin' to accuse." Then Dusty looked down at the crumpled body at his feet. "I'll git him, Solitaire. Spur wasn't very particular about seein' if he'd done yuh fer good. He don't know that some dead men kin talk!"

II.

Dusty Wayne roweled his big roan cow horse down the airless canyon. Sand spurted out from beneath the animal's churning hoofs. A copper-colored sun boiled down from a leaden sky and scorched through the cheap cotton shirt that clung damply to the broad, muscle-bulging back of the young deputy.

He had decided to wait until daylight before proceeding to the 7 Diamond to arrest Spur Markel. Old Solitaire had known his murderer was Spur. The Markel brothers

were rated as the fastest gunmen in Paradise Valley, and both were as treacherous as sidewinders.

After Dusty had the coroner take charge of Solitaire's body, he was puzzled as to why he had not heard the shot that snuffed out the old man's life. Dusty figured he did hear the explosion. Gunshots were common in El Portal, and he had paid no attention to them.

Straight toward the 7 Diamond ranch house, set in the grove of cottonwoods, galloped Dusty Wayne. He knew that death awaited him there, but those big Colts in their slick holsters were his insurance.

Four tail-swishing mustangs jerked on the reins that held them to the hitch rack in front of the sun-warped house and neighed as Dusty flashed across the clearing and dismounted.

With a steady, unhurried stride, he crossed the board porch and banged on the screen door with a big fist.

"Come in!" snapped a voice from the house.

Quickly Dusty took in the picture, as he stepped inside and pressed his shoulder blades against the wall. The four men in the big room had pushed their chairs back from the knife-hacked table, around which they had been sitting, so that they could have easy access to the six-guns that sagged from their waists. They had seen Dusty ride across the yard and were prepared.

Threadbare Indian rugs covered the floor. An old powder horn and a Sharps rifle hung on pegs from the wall. A big iron safe was in one corner.

Although a smoldering rage burned in his body, Dusty was outwardly calm. He studied those four expressionless faces.

There was Spur Markel with his

long, narrow head and chinless face. Murder blazed in his close-set greenish eyes. His tall, skinny body was stiff as dried cowhide.

The hombre who sprawled lazily in his chair, squinted one beady eye, and fingered the scraggy black beard that dribbled down over his greasy shirt was Rep Markel.

A short, squat gent, with a scarred face, was "Chuck" Olman, the 7 Diamond foreman. The other hombre was a hard-eyed, grim-lipped cowhand, a professional killer.

As Dusty Wayne stood there, balanced lightly on the balls of his feet, he knew that one word from Spur Markel would send a volley of leaden death pouring across that room. He realized that his chances of not leaving this place alive were four to one.

Only scant clock ticks passed since Dusty had ridden into the yard and entered the ranch house. Quickly he sized up the situation. He was one lawman, bent on doing his duty, against four gun hawks who would stop at nothing.

Spur Markel leaned slightly forward. His thin-lipped mouth was twisted in a sneer.

"Don't yuh know that lawmen ain't welcome on the 7 Diamond?" he snarled. "Just because that badge-totin' boss of yores, old Sheriff Newton, has left town ain't no sign yuh kin git visitin' fever."

Every muscle in his body tense, Dusty Wayne faced the four killers. He knew that Spur Markel and Rep were in the split-second class as gunmen. Chuck Olman and the other hombre were probaby above the average.

Yet the young deputy didn't flinch as he saw hands hover above gun grips. Lives hung in the balance. At any instant, Colts might chatter death music in that room.

Dusty Wayne's lips barely moved as he spoke in a cold, sharp voice.

"Solitaire McGinnes took a slug in the back last night," said Dusty slowly. "Spur, sign points yore way."

Spur Markel wet his lips with his tongue and got slowly to his feet.

"That's a danged lie," he snarled. "Just because yo're the only lawman in El Portal an' new at the game, besides, ain't no cause fer you to go around accusin' people of——"

"I ain't accusin' yuh, Spur," drawled Dusty. "A dead man did the accusin'. I'm takin' you in fer murder."

Rep Markel threw back his head and laughed so hard his matted beard trembled.

"I ain't worryin' about Spur," he chortled. "I'd just as leave see his neck stretched. But we Markels is a prideful tribe. We don't like interferin', ear-wet lawmen. How does yuh figure on gittin' Spur to jail?"

Spur Markel shot his brother a hateful glance and growled under his breath.

Dusty Wayne's eyes glinted dangerously.

"I'll git Spur to jail all right," said Dusty. "He'll either walk or he'll go in a pine box."

While he talked, Dusty's brain was figuring out a plan of action. Three feet away, to his right, stood the big iron safe. If he could reach that, he would have heavy metal between his body and Markel bullets.

It would be a long gamble, trying to reach that shelter with lead roaring from gun muzzles, but he would have to chance it. The show-down had come.

With sudden resolve, Dusty Wayne squared his shoulders and bent slightly forward from the

waist. His voice split the deathlike stillness like the crack of a Winchester.

"Spur," he said icily, "unbuckle yore gun belt or come a-smokin'! It don't make no difference which!"

Suddenly the cowhand at the end of the table twisted sidewise and whipped a gun waist-high. Dusty had caught the movement out of the corner of his eye.

Throwing himself to the floor, he heard the screech of a bullet as it whined over his head. The slug splintered the window behind him. Tinkling glass showered to the ground outside.

Colts ripped from their holsters; Dusty's calloused thumbs rocked the hammers. The killer, who had fired on him, spun crazily as bullets splattered into his body. The big table overturned, when the gunman's lurching body crashed into it, to the floor.

All of the gun hawks were shooting now. Hailstones of leaden death raked the spot where the lawman had been an instant before. The upsetting table caused the 7 Diamond crew to jump back, thus momentarily throwing off their aim.

Dusty was rolling across the floor. He reached the protection of the iron safe. Through a blue haze of powder smoke, he saw Spur Markel's thin face. The skinny gent held bucking Colts in his hands. Rep's bearded face was a mask of fury as he leveled his weapons on the young lawman.

Bullets whanged off the iron sides of the safe and plunked into the wood walls. One slug ripped across Dusty Wayne's ribs. Another fanned a breeze close to his cheek.

Chuck Olan leaped around one end of the overturned table. He was in the open, thumbing back the

hammers of his hoglegs, trying to finish Dusty.

Blue eyes narrowed, the young deputy calmly sighted his weapons and squeezed trigger. Chuck grabbed his stomach and jackknifed to the floor, where he threshed around in mortal agony.

"Git fer cover!" shrieked Spur.

But Dusty knew there was no cover for the 7 Diamond gunmen. They were exposed, while he had the protection of the safe. Eyes burning with powder smoke, Dusty stuck his two hot six-guns over the top of the safe.

"Surrender, Spur!" he yelled. "You an' Rep throw down yore weepens, or I'll drill yuh between them cat eyes o' yourn!"

For an answer Rep Markel loosed a volley of zinging bullets at the lawman. Fired in haste, they all missed.

"Wait!" howled Spur. "I'll quit!"

The firing suddenly ceased. Rep Markel's beard wagged as he swore loudly. But Dusty Wayne didn't miss the wink that passed between the brothers. Dusty had them covered.

"No tricks," he warned. "Throw yore hoglegs to the floor! Quick!"

Spur scowled blackly, then allowed his weapons to clatter to the planks. Dusty caught the twinkle of triumph in Rep's beady eyes, as the gun slick let his hoglegs drop.

"Rep," drawled the deputy, "there's a suspicious-lookin' bulge under yore shirt. You figure on usin' that hide-out to drill my back while it's turned. Put yore hand in nice an' easy an' lift out that smokepole. Let 'er drop like a hot iron. I got two twitchin' trigger fingers."

Dusty Wayne held his breath. For an instant, it seemed that Rep Markel would flip his hand in his shirt front and attempt a lightning

draw. But Spur saw the murderous look on his brother's face and kicked him warningly with his boot.

"Don't!" he snapped. "This gent'll kill us. We'll let him take this pot, but the game ain't over yet."

Dusty chuckled grimly, as Rep lifted the hide-out gun into view and threw it down. Quickly the lawman forced the killers to turn around. Stepping from behind the safe, he kicked the fallen guns into a corner. The two men he had shot were dead.

"Come on, Spur!" said Dusty triumphantly. "You an' me is ridin' to El Portal. From now on yore address is jail. That is, until yore date with the hangman."

Suddenly Dusty stiffened, and his grip tightened on the two Colts. To his ears came the clicking sound of many shod hoofs on hard ground. Through a window he saw three heavily armed killers riding across the ranch yard.

Death was smiling down on Dusty Wayne.

III.

For agelike seconds, Dusty stood rooted to the floor. Then his brain snapped into action. He saw Rep Markel's big body shake with mirth. He had heard the killers, too. The bearded hombre's voice broke the stillness.

"Guess yore game's up," he laughed. He half turned, as he spoke.

Then Dusty acted. One Colt slid into its holster. His long fingers clenched into a hard fist. Dusty's arm flashed upward. There was the sharp crack of knuckles on hard bone. Rep's head jerked back. Then, without a sound, his legs folded and he dropped to the floor.

From outside, Dusty could hear

the three gun-toting punchers dismounting. He had to work fast.

Spur whirled around on his heel, his narrow face twisted in rage. His thin-lipped mouth opened to shout a warning to the men in the yard. Dusty's gun muzzle rammed into his stomach.

"Don't peep," growled the deputy in a low voice. "I'll kill yuh as shore as sunshine. Git through that window there. Pronto!"

Taking one look at his unconscious brother crumpled on the floor, Spur put a leg over the window sill and dropped to the ground. Colt held in a steady hand, Dusty followed Markel.

They were at the rear of the house. Dusty heard the gunmen walking across the front yard, boot heels grating on gravel. Quickly he stole a glance around the corner of the frame building.

Their horses were in front. Dusty knew it was risky business to try and mount with his prisoner, under the eyes of the three men, but he had to do it.

Herding the surly ranch owner in front of him, Dusty marched him along one side of the house.

"Don't try to yell," snapped Dusty Wayne, "or I'll give yuh a slug in the back like yuh handed to old Solitaire."

Spur Markel glowered at Dusty's words, but said nothing. Dusty walked beside him, keeping his Colt muzzle jabbed in the skinny gent's ribs. They were past the shelter of the house now, heading toward the ground-stamping horses tied at the hitch rack.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dusty saw the three hands down by the bunk house. One of them suddenly turned and pointed at the lawman and Spur. The others

looked. Words passed between them.

"Untie yore bronc an' git in the saddle," growled Dusty in a low voice. "Remember if them jaspers start anythin', I'll git you fust."

Alert to catch the first suspicious move on the part of the gunmen, Dusty watched them covertly. They seemed to be undecided as to what to do. Evidently they were waiting for some word from their boss.

Spur yanked the reins loose from the rack and climbed into the saddle. Dusty waited until he had mounted, standing on the far side of his mustang so that the 7 Diamond hands, grouped down there by the corrals, couldn't see his naked gun.

Dusty knew that at any instant they might go for their Colts and open up on him. One of them suddenly called out to the 7 Diamond owner.

"Anythin' wrong, boss?" he yelled.

"Tell him it's all right," rapped out Dusty. "Pronto!"

He placed one foot in the stirrup and swung aboard. Twisting around in the saddle, Dusty held the cocked Colt a little behind him, out of view of the gunmen. For a minute, Dusty thought Spur was going to ignore his command and try to make a break for it. Then he answered.

"Everything's all right, boys. Just takin' a *pasear*." He had a hard time controlling his rage-choked voice.

Apparently satisfied, the three gunmen entered the bunk house.

Suddenly a loud, bellowing roar sounded from the ranch house. Dusty's pulse quickened. A Winchester cracked from a front window. The deputy had a momentary glimpse of Rep Markel's black-

bearded face in the opening. He was yelling to the men in the bunk house.

"Kill 'em both! Don't let either one of 'em leave here alive!" he raged.

The three gun hawks burst out of the bunk house and were running for their horses, firing as they moved. Bullets chopped the air dangerously close.

Dusty slapped Spur's mustang on the flank with the flat of his hand. Manes and tails streaming out in the wind, the animals rocketed across the uneven ground. Quickly they gained the shelter of the hills.

Hot rage filled Dusty Wayne as he looked at Spur Markel's narrow back and thought of the cold-hearted killing of old Solitaire McGinnes. Rustling in Paradise Valley would cease when Spur Markel was hanged for murder.

After a half hour of hard riding, Dusty and his prisoner slid to a halt in front of the adobe El Portal jail. Dusty locked the killer in a cell at the rear of the building.

Dusty had outdistanced the 7 Diamond gunmen. But the deputy wasn't fooled. He knew that, with the coming of darkness, six-gun trouble would flame in El Portal.

Night enveloped the Paradise Valley country like a huge black mantle. A round, orange-colored moon wheeled slowly across the star-studded sky. A warm wind whistled across the desert and sighed through the tops of lonely cottonwoods.

Saddle gear squeaked as six men dismounted at the top of the hill overlooking the El Portal jail. Horses neighed and stamped the ground.

Rep Markel pushed his barrel-chested body through the brush and

clawed at his scraggly beard, chuckling softly. He squinted his eyes in the gloom at the small adobe jail at the bottom of the long incline.

Giant boulders and smaller rocks dotted the hillside, looming gray and ghostly. Off to the right a cliff sheered off abruptly and dropped a hundred feet to a dry river bed below.

A new sound broke the stillness. It was the squeak of wagon wheels and the crack of a bullwhip as it was snapped over the backs of a six-horse team. Around a bend in the steep road appeared a big canvas-topped freighter.

"What yuh goin' to do with that wagon?" asked a short, runty gunman known as Mitch Burly.

"Bustin' jail with it," chortled Rep.

The 7 Diamond boss called orders softly. The wagon was backed around off the road, so that the tail-board faced the jail. The brake was set and the team unhitched. Rep had worked his plans out carefully.

"Fill that wagon bed with rocks," ordered Rep Markel.

Like vultures of the night, the 7 Diamond gunmen worked. Grunts and groans filled the air as the men lifted the huge stones and dropped them in the wagon bed.

"That's enough," snapped Rep, after a minute. "Pour that kerosene over the canvas and on the wood."

Two shadowy figures leaped forward to do his bidding. Soon the odor of coal oil filled the air.

"If yuh send that wagon down there in flames, yo're liable to kill Spur," said Mitch Burly.

"I don't give a hang," retorted Rep. "If Spur gits out alive, it's all right. If he dies, I'll be the so'le owner of the 7 Diamond, and we'll keep on usin' a runnin' iron an' git-

tin' rich. With McGinnes dead, that deputy is the only one that knows about us. We'll finish him off in grand style."

Mitch Burly's mouth broke into a snaggle-toothed grin.

"Suits me," he laughed.

The big wagon was in a natural runway. At the bottom stood the jail. If the heavy vehicle was turned loose, it could not miss its mark.

Down in the jail office, Dusty Wayne watched the activities on the hill through a barred window. All lights in the jail were out. There were no prisoners except Spur. Dusty gripped a long-barreled Winchester in his calloused hands.

He couldn't make out what they were doing. Suddenly there was a rumble, and Dusty could see the big freighter rolling down the hillsides. Bright-yellow flames licked out like banners in the darkness.

Spur's pleading yelp came to him from the cell.

"Don't let me die like a rat!" he wailed. "I kin see what they're doin'! They'll burn me alive!"

Dusty's blue eyes blazed, and his teeth clamped together with a snap. He couldn't let anybody perish like that. Running to the cell door, Dusty fitted a key in the lock. The rumble and roar of the wagon was coming nearer.

Holding a gun in one hand, he swung the door open. Sounds of the racing wagon were growing louder and louder. Dusty knew he had only seconds to work. From his belt he took a pair of handcuffs and snapped one cuff around Spur's wrist and clicked the other around his own. Then he lurched toward the door.

"What're yuh doin' this for?" cried Spur. His face was white as

the snow that capped the Paradise mountains.

"I'm givin' yuh the same chance I got. If I die, you die, too."

IV.

With a mighty crash and roar, the big wagon struck the front part of the jail. Through narrowed eyes, Dusty saw the adobe wall crumble, sending chips of bricks flying through the air. Glass shattered and jangled to the floor. Flames licked through the jail office.

Dusty and Spur were hurled flat on their backs by the impact. The deputy knew that the killers would charge them now.

Leaping to his feet, Dusty dragged the manacled slayer after him. Straight through the side door he raced. Luckily he had kept his mustang saddled.

Out into the night blackness they ran, Spur yelping in fear and Dusty growling savagely under his breath. He hoisted the murderer into the saddle, forking the cantle behind him.

Hoofbeats thundered near by. The 7 Diamond gun hawks were spurring down the hillside to finish the kill. Flames crackled and roared through the jail, painting the sky orange.

Crack! Bang! Crack! Dusty heard slugs clip through the air all around them, as he spurred the cayuse toward the hilltop.

Spur leaned forward over the neck of the cayuse, trying to escape the deadly hail of lead. He pulled Dusty with him. Their left hands were manacled together.

Something burned along Dusty's ribs. Warm fluid soaked into his shirt. Big Colt held in his right hand, Dusty blazed away. A 7 Diamond killer uttered a strangled cry,

grabbed his throat, and plunged head-first to the ground from the back of his racing cayuse. Mitch Burly's runty body wilted under Dusty's deadly fire.

Another gunman swung around the corner of the burning jail. A gun flamed in Dusty's face, as he squeezed trigger. The 7 Diamond hand pitched over on his face and lay still.

Spur was babbling like a crazy man. Dusty was heading for the big rocks on the hilltop. He could find shelter there and have a chance to fight off Rep and his jaspers.

They had reached the top of the hill and were riding along the edge of the hundred-foot cliff. Suddenly Spur Markel twisted his skinny body around in the saddle and yanked Dusty's right-hand hogleg from its holster, firing as it cleared the sheath. The bullet plowed through the flesh of Dusty's side.

Swinging his Colt upward, Dusty tried to club the murderer. Spur wrenched back convulsively. At that instant the bronc stumbled, throwing him off on the very brink of the cliff.

Dusty felt a terrific yank on his arm. Pain shot through his body as he went flying through the air. With a shriek of terror, Spur rolled off the high ledge, pulling Dusty after him. Frantically the young deputy braced his feet against a rock outcropping.

The full weight of Markel's body strained on his manacled wrist. It felt as though his arm was being pulled from its socket. Slowly, agonizingly, Dusty inched back from the brink of destruction.

Spur dangled over the edge of the cliff, handcuffed to Dusty Wayne's wrist. Sweat beaded Dusty's forehead. His whole left side ached. Steel bit cruelly into his wrist.

Then a horseman spurred through the clearing. Dimly Dusty saw a big-bodied, black-bearded gent. It was Rep Markel. Quickly Rep's face lighted with triumph, as he took in the scene. He raised his weapon and fired.

Jerking to one side, Dusty heard the bullet plow into the ground an inch from his face. With one killer hanging off the edge of a cliff, manacled to his left hand, and another one standing over him with a cocked Colt, Dusty Wayne was in a tight place.

Swinging his hogleg into position, Dusty thumbed back the hammer and snapped a quick shot at Rep Markel. For one age-long minute he thought he had missed.

Suddenly the bearded killer's face went blank. Rep tried to raise his weapon for a finishing shot, and then dropped like a log over the neck of his horse to the ground.

Desperately Dusty Wayne began to pull Spur Markel to safety. Every muscle in his body throbbed. The wound in his side sickened him. Lights danced before his eyes.

Then he felt Spur's body coming slowly to the top of the cliff. Spur was helping, clawing at roots and stones, digging his toes into crevices.

Dusty knew Spur had a gun, but he would have to take the risk. With one mighty wrench, he got Spur to level ground. Losing his balance, Dusty staggered backward.

Spur's narrow face was masked in fury. Dusty saw the long, black muzzle of the killer's gun come snaking out of its holster. As if through a haze, he saw Spur Markel thumb back the hammer. Then Dusty fired.

An agonized cry burst from the murderer's lips. Slowly he turned sidewise as if to walk away and fell face down on the ground, dragging Dusty to his knees. Solitaire McGinnes's death was avenged.

Two days later, when Sheriff Clem Newton returned to town, he found his deputy, Dusty Wayne, sitting on an old box in front of the blackened ruins of the El Portal jail. The young cowboy's left arm hung in a sling.

"Listen, sheriff!" he cried, jumping to his feet. "I kin explain about Newton's Pride gittin' busted. Yuh see——"

The old sheriff threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"I heerd what yuh been doin' while I was gone. Bustin' that danged window ain't nothin'. Yuh broke up the biggest gang of rustlers ever to throw a wide loop in Paradise Valley. I never did like this jail nohow. Next time let's build it higher up on the hill an' git a real window where we kin have a better view. Dusty, yuh shore know the cure fer killers."





The Whistlin' Kid Is Puzzled

By Emery Jackson

Author of "The Whistlin' Kid Gets His Man," etc.

THERE was no real wind, but the air moved faintly off the hot plain up the narrow main canyon, as smoke is drawn through a chimney. Some of it passed upward to the cooler heights through a side ravine. And that air was charged with a scent that made the ears of the "Whistlin' Kid's" buckskin, Speed, prick high, while its sensitive nostrils widened.

It was a scent that was never entirely out of place in the cow country. It might mean nothing, and it might be charged with peril.

In such a lonely spot as this, the

Kid, catching the odor the next moment, considered it an omen of evil. Something that it was very much his business to investigate.

He had ridden over the ridge of the mountains, noticed the narrow canyon, and wondered if it would furnish him with a way down to the sage flats. But he had found no way of entry at the upper end, and now was riding along the rim.

It was plain that the side ravine was a box canyon, and the Kid had begun to think of swinging west to where some hogback ridges spurred out from the main mass. That

meant a longer route, but he should be able to descend there easily enough, and it was only mid-afternoon.

He rode Speed to within twenty feet of the edge of the smaller cleft and dismounted. Then he went forward cautiously on foot, and then on his stomach, snaking over the rocky ground toward the lip of the cliff.

There was more than smell coming up now, there was a faint smoke. It was hardly different from the heat waves that wrinkled the air and distorted the landscape.

The smoke came from a hardwood fire, not large but certainly very hot. It was part of the smell, but only a small part.

The rest was burning hair and hide—living hide, on a live animal. It might be a horse, but the Kid would have bet his month's wages to a crooked cent that it was a steer.

More than one steer. Somebody was blotting brands. And that was the Kid's business.

He crawled on, careful not to break off a weathered fragment, or dislodge a pebble that might disturb the rustlers at their work.

There was plenty of rustling going on in this county of Conejo. This remote side canyon was not the place for honest cowboys to brand mavericks. It was not the time of year for stray calves to be roaming without brands.

On top of that, the Kid had heard nothing like a bawl. That sound would have carried far. This branding was being done in silence, the steers or cows had been muzzled to keep the affair secret, lonely as the spot was.

The Kid had seen cattle bunched on the flats as he rode down the mountain, but they were all well out. Rustlers must have driven the stolen stock into the canyon. No

cow that was not loco would have gone there by itself. Nothing grew there except soapweed and cactus.

The Kid's bronzed face was set, his bold features seemed more hawkish than ever. Except for his cowboy rigging, he looked like an Indian, creeping up to spy on an enemy.

His face was unwrinkled, save for sun lines about the eyes. He was barely old enough to vote, but now he seemed aged with experience and determination.

The Whistlin' Kid was the star range detective of the Cattlemen's Association, sent to find out what was happening in Conejo County to the owners who were members. There was more going on than mere rustling, the Kid's hunch told him.

But it looked as if he had stumbled by sheer luck, in almost the last place he would have suspected, upon part of the mystery.

Yet his discovery was to leave him puzzled. The attempt to solve that puzzle was to lead him into bewilderment.

He looked down into the side ravine. There were two men there, two horses and three cows.

One cow had been rebranded and stood disconsolate by bars of cedar poles that had been set up across the ravine to turn it into a corral. They were so placed, where the ravine zigzagged, that they could not be seen from the main canyon.

The cow was still muzzled with a wide strip of rawhide. It would not be taken off until the first smart of the hot iron had died away. Then the critter would not be so likely to bawl, and the two punchers would be on their way.

Another cow lay on the ground, hog-tied with pigging strings. One of the cowboys sat on her head, a loop

about a hind foot, hauling on the rope.

His partner was inspecting the running iron he had set in the small, hot fire. The iron had a short wooden handle. It was the tool of a man who knew his job.

As the Kid watched, he began to alter the brand, to fake it skillfully with strokes of the glowing iron, much as an artist uses a pencil.

The Kid read the brand on one of the horses, then on the other, as it shifted position. Both brands were the same—CS, the brand of the biggest spread in Conejo.

Its owner, Charles Sanger, was chairman of the local cattlemen's board. It was he who had signed the letter asking for a range detective.

It looked as if two of Sanger's riders were doing some stealing on the side. They did not mean to sell the meat of the cows as "slow elk." The Kid wondered why they had not chosen steers.

He was going to do a lot more wondering before he found that out.

For the brand on the cow that had not yet been roped and the brand that was being so surely and cleverly altered were the same as those on the horses. That seemed to mean only that the cowboys were robbing their own employer. But the Kid's dark eyes narrowed as he read the doctored brand on the cow that had been done over.

The letters had been turned into figures.

The "C" was changed to a 6, the "S" altered to an 8.

CS 68

Then a 2 was added. When these brands healed, those three cows

would appear as the property of Ranch 682.

682

And Ranch 682 was the second largest spread in Conejo.

Now it appeared as if these punchers were drawing wages from the CS, but really working for the 682.

Such things had been done before. Riders drawing double pay. The owner of 682 was a man named Henry Richards. He must be in on this.

They were not very good cows. Part grade Hereford, but with more scrub than grade blood in them. Anything but the pick of the ranch.

That made it queer again. So long as they were stealing from the stock they were paid to herd, why not present the 682 with the best.

The branding of the second cow was finished. The tie-ropes were cast off, and the cow got up, shaking its head, its jaws tight held with rawhide. It trotted off to join the first one.

One cowboy mounted, the other set the iron back in the fire. The third cow was neatly roped, then ground-looped and thrown by the other puncher.

The Kid could not see their faces because of the brims of their big Stetsons. But he saw that fodder had been brought in. There were bales of hay, probably alfalfa, a few sacks of chopped feed. The punchers could not have ridden in with them. A wagon had brought it.

There was also a small spring, hidden in a cleft from which issued a pipe that led the water to a trough.

It was evident that the cows were to stay here until the scars healed, the scabs dropped off, and they became 682 stock.

Others might be added to them. The ravine might have been in use for a long time.

But the Kid did not think so. He saw no sign of it. What spots of bunch grass there were had not been cropped.

When the third cow had been doctored, they were all herded to the end of the ravine, the muzzles were taken off. One of them bawled, then both the others.

"Bawl your fool heads off, cows," said one of the men. "We don't give a hoot who hears you now. Come on, Curly, let's drift. The Old Man'll be wantin' to know how we made out."

They rode recklessly for the bars, jumped their horses over them. Some feed had been spread for the cows, who did not feel like eating right away, but went to the trough.

"Curly"! The Kid made a mental note of that name. As for the "Old Man," that term would ordinarily mean the man they worked for, Charles Sanger. It was rubbing it in a bit for them to refer to Richards that way. But they might consider him their real boss.

The Kid made up his mind to visit the CS and make the acquaintance of Curly and his riding pal.

The Kid remounted, rode to where he could watch the two brand fakers leaving the canyon.

He had a map of the country. He glanced at it, checking up.

To his right, far out on the plain, he saw the snaking curves of Cedar Creek, coming in from the west. It was a shallow stream that sometimes ran dry. Its course was marked by stubby willows.

Aside from a few water-holes, it was the main supply of the CS. The outfit had to use tanks to be sure of water the year round. Not too sure of it, at that.

WW-4E

Off to the left, there ran the straighter, deeper Conejo Creek. That was on Richards's 682 range, a valuable asset. No doubt, thought the Kid, Sanger must have often wished he could swap creeks.

Moreover, the chief of the Cattle-men's Association—a man who knew much and usually spoke little—had told the Kid that there was friction between Richards and Sanger and had been for a long while.

Richards had married the girl whom Sanger wanted. He had been nominated for and elected to various county offices, and it seemed that Sanger resented this.

But Sanger was important. He was a director in the Conejo National Bank, chairman of the local cattle board. Both were big men, in their way.

Since Sanger had lost the girl, and Richards had married her—and also had a political drag and better water—it did not seem logical that Richards should be hiring Sanger's riders to steal CS cows—and mighty poor cows at that.

The Kid knew that logic had little to do with rustling. He mistrusted it more than ever, when he saw the two punchers leave the canyon.

The course they took was not toward Conejo Creek with its cottonwoods and other timber that told of an unfailing watercourse. It was back to their own outfit, back to the CS.

Yet Curly had spoken about the Old Man's being anxious to learn how they had made out.

The Kid took off his Stetson and scratched his black hair.

"It's got me hornswoggled, ol'timer," he said to Speed. "Derned if it ain't like tryin' to play poker with a pinochle deck. Let's drift over to the CS. Ought to get there round supper time."

II.

The sun was low, the cook was pounding the triangle for chow, when the Kid and Speed arrived at CS headquarters. They were tired, thirsty and hungry, but they got no welcome.

It is the unwritten law of the range, that a man who rides up at sundown is welcome to board and bunk for the night.

But the cowboys, trooping from their bunk house and the trough where they had washed up, looked at him with cold, hostile eyes, without an answer to his "How yuh!"

One man stepped forward as the Kid check-reined the buckskin. A tall, bow-legged man, with only one eyebrow. The other had been slashed off, or shot off. It was marked by a scar and the eyelid beneath it drooped.

"You lookin' for anything?" he asked. His greeting was almost an insult.

The Kid ignored it. He could understand that with rustling going on, they might be suspicious of any stranger. And he had no intention of declaring himself as a range detective.

Once that got out, most sources of information closed up like clams.

"Reckon you wouldn't be needin' a hand?" he asked. "Might you be the foreman of this outfit?"

He saw by the look in the man's face that he had made a mistake. The other did not look like an owner, but he promptly announced himself. They were all a rough-looking bunch, the Kid thought.

"I'm Sanger. I own this spread. You reckon right, cowboy. We don't need any hands. Nor visitors. Fork your cayuse, cowboy, and vamoose. Conejo cow town is ten miles south."

The Kid had slid off Speed, to case the cinch and give the buckskin a drink. "Me, I can last out," he said, "but how about some water for my bronc. He needs it."

Sanger sneered at him. The punchers had gathered in a knot. The cook was by his triangle. The Kid wondered which was Curly. And he began to tingle all over, to get hot, then cold, then hot again. This reception was against all range rules.

He was sure that Curly and his partner could not know he had seen them. Besides they had stolen cows from their own outfit. They would not complain about the Kid without getting themselves mired.

The core of the thing was that the CS outfit wanted to be left to itself.

"You'll cross the crick on your way to Conejo," Sanger said. "Don't forget yo're inside private wire, but we'll overlook that, if you hit the trail, pronto."

"I can't leave too pronto to suit me," drawled the Kid.

Sanger grew black with rage. He scowled and snapped something at the cook in Spanish. The Kid understood the order and moved a little clear of Speed. He might have mounted, but he knew that they wanted to see him galloping off like a chased coyote.

Sanger had told the cook to let loose the dog.

It came from the back of the cook shack, snarling, showing all its fangs, coming in great bounds for the stranger. It was part wolf, savage as any wild animal, vicious and powerful.

It weighed all of seventy-five pounds, and it hurled itself over the ground in a fury of rage.

The Kid stood his ground. He could have shot the ravening brute,

but he knew it was not its fault, but that of the men who had bred and trained it.

The beast leaped. The Kid threw up his knee. It met the dog on its chest, bowled it over, off balance. It sprang again before it was quite ready, snapping and slashing. The Kid caught it by the throat with both his hands. He raised it from the ground, clawing and struggling; but out of reach of its prey, at arms' length.

"I don't want to kill the dawg," said the Kid. "He rates a sight better than you two-legged, hydrophoby skunks. But I will if you don't shackle him."

"You harm that dawg," returned Sanger, "and I'll let the sunset shine through your ribs."

The Kid laughed. "Take your dawg," he said.

He swung the writhing dog at Sanger, fairly into his arms, and the beast, frantic and unreasoning, snapped at him. Sanger went down as two punchers came to his aid, the cook running up with a leash. This was snapped to the brute's collar, and he was dragged away.

Sanger got up slowly. He limped a little, with one hand set back of his right hip, as if he had been bruised and hurt.

Suddenly he stiffened in his crouch. His eyes slitted, became venomous. His hand shot to his hogleg. He meant to kill the Kid. And the Kid grinned at him, motionless, until Sanger's .45 was half-way from its holster.

Then the Kid moved, in a blur of speed, a lightning draw too fast to be followed, far swifter than the pass of an expert magician.

Flame spurted from his six-gun, bright and spiteful in the dusk. Sanger's heavy weapon was

slammed out of his grip to the dirt. He wrung his palsied hand.

That miracle of speed, and aim, held them for a second. The Kid vaulted to his saddle. He tickled Speed with his spurs and the buckskin reared. His six-gun was back in the holster, but they knew how it could get into action, fast as the strike of a rattler.

"So long, hombres!" said the Kid "I'm off to Conejo. Any time any of you want a shootin' lesson, look me up."

Speed whirled. He could turn on a dime and leave a nickel change. He raced off at top speed, as if it was dawn instead of sunset, with forty miles behind him. The alkaline dust rose like a cloud about horse and rider.

Out of the cloud, drifting back to the owner and riders of the CS there came a whistled tune, clear and mocking. The tune of "The Cowboy's Lament."

The Kid decided not to go to Conejo right away. By his map, the 682 outfit was nearer. He was curious to compare the two spreads and the men who owned them.

Sanger had not impressed him favorably, but the Kid did not mean to be prejudiced. Men's nerves got on edge at times. Sanger might be missing cows, not suspecting his own men, but hostile to all strangers.

Supper was over at the 682 when the Kid rode up, and asked to see the boss. He made himself known to Richards privately, producing his identification papers.

He had felt no inclination to do this with Sanger. But Richards was a horse of another color. An old-timer, with a clean, clear look in his eyes.

The Kid met Richards's wife, who got the cook to bring in a meal for

the Kid at the ranch house. Then she went upstairs. She was quite a bit younger than the owner of the spread, and there were three youngsters on the 682.

These people were not the sort who hired rustlers from the riders of a neighbor's outfit, the Kid told himself. But he reserved final judgment, for he was up against a tougher riddle than he had yet met.

He said nothing of what he had witnessed that afternoon, nor of the fact that he had come from the CS. It took some persuasion for Richards to discuss Sanger. He did so only after the Kid showed that he knew something of the way things stood.

"Sanger had me in a jam for a spell," Richards said at last. "He's director in the bank that holds my mortgage. He wants to get my spread. Most of all, he wants my water. We don't like each other personally. That don't matter."

It had mattered once, and still did with Sanger, the Kid believed, thinking of Richards's pretty wife.

"That grudge he's got agin' me would keep on even if he could see me sold out and get possession of the 682. Sanger is a man who hates hard and long. We'll let that ride. I've landed the beef bid for the railroad contract. It lets me out. I'm sellin' enough beef to pay off the mortgage. I'll be in the clear."

"Provided you make delivery," said the Kid.

"Why won't I? My steers'll pass any inspector. I get a good price, but I'm sellin' prime beef."

"When do you drive?" asked the Kid.

"Three weeks from to-day. I get my money right away. It's a stock-loan mortgage. They can't foreclose on me under a month's notice, and I've got the interest paid up. It's a close call, and it's worried the wife

an' me a lot, but we can see our way out."

"I'm glad to hear it," said the Kid. "How about the rustlin' that's been goin' on? Did they hit *you* hard?"

"I lost quite a few primes, one time and another. But they've let up lately. In fact, there ain't been another raid since we owners wrote in to the Cattlemen's Association."

"It sometimes happens that way," said the Kid. "Somehow or another the word leaks out, an' the rustlers lay off for a spell."

"We're ridin' the beef herd night an' day, from now on," Richards told him. "I'm takin' no chances. The boys are totin' saddle guns as well as their hawlegs."

The Kid stayed for a while, but declined the invitation to spend the night. He was sure of one thing, that Curly and his partner, if they meant what they said by reporting to the Old Man in a hurry, could not have meant Richards.

But that did not explain why they had hidden three scrub cows in a side ravine, faking the brand of their own outfit. The feed the cows would eat before their scabs fell off would cost as much as they would sell for.

It was clear also that, unless something extraordinary happened, Richards was going to clear off his mortgage, and Sanger would lose his chance to get the 682 spread.

Sanger was not the sort to forgo his grudge without all possible effort. If he lost out, his hate would be greater than ever.

The Kid wondered, as he rode toward Conejo over the sage and beneath the stars, whether Sanger, Curly, and their pards had had anything to do with the rustling, especially of Richards's primes. It looked that way.

Then Sanger's hand had been forced by the other owners, and he had written, as their chairman, to the association. Naturally he would be careful, be wary of any stranger.

Richards had told the Kid that he could trust his men to say nothing about the Kid's visit. They did not know, as Richards did, that the Kid was a range detective, but they would talk among themselves and, as the Kid had said, there were always leaks.

He purposely did not ask Richards if he knew a man who worked for Sanger, called "Curly." It would only stir up things, and he could find out in Conejo.

He found out sooner than he expected.

III.

It was close to midnight when the Kid, softly whistling his favorite tune, loped into the cow town over the soft dust of its main street.

Conejo was the usual sort of place. A spur railroad connected it with the main line. The seldom used rails were rusty. There was a depot that needed painting, shipping chutes and corrals, then scattering houses, and finally the buildings of the town. There were few lights showing, but one window blazed out into the night through drawn curtains.

It was a building of three stories, with a porch in front, reached by half a dozen steps. The top of this was railed off for a long balcony. There was a hitch rail and a watering trough. Half a dozen ponies dozed on three legs apiece, waiting the will of their masters.

The Kid saw the sign above the porch:

THE CACTUS HOTEL

Good Beds. Good Grub. Good Liquor.

He hoped the first two promises proved true, but was inclined to doubt it. The third did not interest him.

He did not hitch Speed to the rail. There was a corral, with a shed that stood against the wall of the hotel. That would be the place for the buckskin for the night, with water and hay, and a feed of oats; if the Kid elected to stay there.

He thought he would. He was sure of it, when he looked at the brands of the horses and found that four of them were CS mounts. And he was fairly sure that none of them had been ridden by Curly.

The blazing window evidently belonged to the barroom, probably also as a general room for gambling. There might be a dance hall at the rear.

The Kid could hear the voices of the men inside, now and then a coarse laugh.

A dim light showed through the window of the office, which was the other side of the entrance. The Kid went in and roused up a man asleep behind the desk. He asked for a room, for hay and oats and water for Speed.

The man gave him a key. The Kid set down his name on the register as Prentiss, of Laramie.

"You're a long way from Laramie, mister," said the frowzy, unshaven clerk.

"It's my home town," said the Kid shortly.

"Knew you was a stranger," said the other.

"How about my horse?" replied the Kid.

Fifteen minutes later he had left the buckskin fixed up, rolling the sweat off his back in the dust. The Kid returned to the office with his saddle, took that up to his room,

came down again, and went into the bar.

Four men stood at it. The Kid figured they had been drinking steadily for some time. Two others sat at a table with liquor in front of them.

The man at the bar who stood nearest the door took off his sombrero and was scratching a head of brown and very curly hair, though it was cropped closely.

All four stared at the Kid, their eyes cold and their brown faces expressionless. Yet something seemed to pass between them.

They seemed to shake off the hold the whisky had on them, as they shed their interrupted congeniality.

The two men at the table looked up and stared. The bartender stopped mopping the bar and stared with them. There was a tension, as if they had been waiting for him to arrive. And not with any idea of welcome.

The Kid had only seen the CS men at dusk, but their horses had announced them already. This man was Curly. The one next him was almost certainly his partner in the brand faking.

The Kid passed the four, walked to the other end of the bar, and called for cigars. He set a five-dollar gold piece on the bar.

"For the house," he said.

It was a general range custom not to expect change from the first purchase. A man might put down a dollar, if he was short of dinero. The idea was the same.

"What'll you be havin', gents?" asked the barkeeper in a flat tone.

"Me, I ain't drinkin' to-night," said Curly.

He had replaced his Stetson. He looked like a younger edition of Sanger, almost as hard. The Kid figured him for Sanger's son. The

likeness was striking. And that did not help the riddle of the three cows.

Curly's answer was plainly an intention to state his low opinion of the newcomer. "I don't know if the rest of you hydrophoby skunks want any," he went on. "I'm fussy who I lick with."

The words the Kid had flung back at them had rankled, as he had expected them to. Now they meant mischief. The Kid knew he had made a dangerous enemy of Sanger. Here were four more.

Curly strolled over. His eyes and his breath announced his condition. He was of the type who get very drunk, but up to the last minute, are keyed up and nerved to viciousness.

"Which way did you come into Conejo, cowboy?" he asked, his bloodshot eyes glittering between slitted lids, looking more like Sanger than ever.

So, that was it, the Kid told himself, as he selected a cigar, took off the band, bit the end and set the smoke in his mouth. They meant to pick a quarrel, not only because of what had happened at the ranch, but because they suspected him.

"They told me there was a range detective comin' down here," Curly went on, as the Kid did not answer. "I might think you was him," he continued with a sneer, "only you ain't dry behind the ears. You're too young to be smokin' seegars, sonny. You'll be plumb sick."

It was coming to a climax sooner than the Kid had expected. Curly's liquor fumed in his brain and let loose the venom stored there.

He should have remembered that draw of the Kid's, drunk as he was. Perhaps he did, for the man beside him at the bar now backed him up, thumb hooked into his belt, fingers actually touching the butt of his

gun. The two other CS riders stood the same way.

They meant to get him. The two at the table would not interfere with four drunken CS cowboys, and neither would the bartender.

Curly snatched the cigar from the Kid's lips, broke it in half, and tossed the two ends on the bar.

The Kid saw the muzzle of Curly's pal's six-gun showing under Curly's armpit.

Curly grinned in his face. The Kid wiped off the grin. His right hand flashed in a blurred streak of motion. This time it flashed upward, not down, as he side-stepped. His fist crashed Curly's jaw, it sent his head back and his eyes rolling.

The one gun that was in the open roared as the Kid's left drove into Curly's body, at the pit of his stomach. The bullet had smacked into the wall.

Curly fell backward, a senseless hulk of a hundred and sixty pounds, reeling into the man who had fired, sending him back against the two others, all in confusion.

Then the Kid's six-gun was in his hand. There was a glint in his eyes. His lips were puckered. He was whistling, just above his breath, a dirge of the frontier: "The Cowboy's Lament."

Oh, beat the drum slowly, and play the fife lowly;

They all knew that song of the dying cowboy. They stared at the man who would whistle at a time like this. They saw the gleam of his eyes and read the resolution there, as well as a certain grim amusement.

The scene at CS headquarters, with Sanger's six-gun slammed from the holster by a slug, was very vivid now.

He could shoot all four of them, while they tried to get out of the tangle he had sent them into.

Curly's pal let Curly slump to the floor. But he made no effort to shoot again. He was hypnotized by the muzzle of the Kid's Colt, as a bird is held by the flicker of a snake's tongue.

The Kid picked up the two pieces of the cigar with his left hand. He tossed them into the air, and his gun spoke twice.

The tobacco was shot to snuff.

Then he passed down their line, taking their guns from them, one by one, winding up with the still unconscious Curly.

"I suppose you all come in for that shootin' lesson I promised you," he drawled. "Well, I ain't chargin' for this one. The next might be plumb costly. Now vamose, an' take your curly-haired pard with you. *Git!*"

IV.

Two out of the three weeks before Richards shipped his 682 primes on the beef contract had passed.

Richards had seen nothing more of the Kid. Nor had Conejo, nor the CS outfit. He had left the cow town the day after he arrived, buying grain, and also a small grub outfit before he left.

The general idea in Conejo and at the CS was that he was a roving puncher who had realized he was not welcome and had decided to drift rather than stay and give the CS men a chance to get even with him.

Richards wondered a little what had happened to the range detective, but he kept his own counsel, and he was busy getting ready to ship, keeping watch day and night over his beef herd. He knew Sanger's disposition. He expected

some move from him, and it kept him a bit nervous.

Sanger would strike in secret, in the dark, like a masked assassin. It was not like him to keep so quiet.

All the time, the Kid was camped up in the hills, close to the ravine, where the three scrub cows lived the life of Riley while their scars healed up. They had shade and water. Every other day, a CS rider would come out and spread out feed for them.

Once it was Curly, then his pal, a third time Sanger himself. They were taking a lot of interest and trouble over those cows, and it bothered the Kid.

He kept his own close watch on them, getting along without much sleep. He had powerful field glasses with him, and through them he could watch the healing process.

What was going on he could not fathom, puzzle his brains and whistle as he might. It was something utterly new to his experience, and he had had plenty of that, young as he was.

All he was sure of was that these three cows, soon not to be recognized as other than 682 stock, had to do with some clever plan of Sanger's to do dirt to Richards, to take his ranch and water. They were like so much dynamite.

He could not get into the ravine, save from the main canyon. He did not want to risk that for fear of being seen, and letting Sanger know his play was being watched.

On the day the scabs dropped off, Curly came. He brought a small sack with him. He did not spread out any of the baled hay, but opened up the bags of chopped feed. The cows were not hungry and paid little attention to him.

The Kid saw him sprinkle some stuff over the chopped feed, mix it

in. Through the glasses it showed as dark crystals. It looked as if he had brought in rock salt in the small sack.

Cattle needed salt, but it seemed a bit of a luxury to bring it in to these fifteen-dollar scrubs.

After Curly had gone, they sniffed at the chopped feed and finally began to eat. Soon they drank plentifully, as if extra thirsty. The salt would do that. They drank so often that they kept the trough empty.

Now, for the first time, the Kid began to see light. It was clever, fiendishly clever, if he was correct. He had to be sure. There was moonlight now, and he watched the cows without thought of sleep. It was late before they lay down.

They ate the next day and continued to drink steadily. They looked a bit bloated, but the Kid, through his glasses, was looking for other symptoms.

He saw them. And he knew that Sanger was ready to make his play. He had shuffled the cards of a fixed deck. He meant to win his game by fair means or foul.

Even a fixed deck of cards may have a joker in it. The Kid meant to be just that.

He was not surprised when three men rode into the side ravine two hours after sunset. Sanger, Curly, his son, and Curly's pal. They threw down the bars, left them down. They were driving off the three pampered cows, now with the brands healed.

The three scrubs did not move very fast. And the three men did not hurry them. That pleased the Kid. For he had to let them get well away, and then enter the canyon and the ravine to get what he wanted.

After all, he was not *sure*. He had a hunch. He had guessed. And he could not afford to guess wrong.

When at last he rode out of the side ravine, he had some of the chopped feed in a bag, he had the empty sack that Curly had brought in. There were a few crystals along the seams, and they were not rock salt. The Kid tasted them.

The moon was well up when Sanger with his son and rider reached the line wire of the 682. There were no cows in sight. This was summer range, and it had been eaten off. The stock was well away, the prime beef herd in a selected valley, where the water was sweet and the buffalo grass thick.

The Kid was half a mile behind the three CS riders. It had been easy to catch up with them. He kept to the shadows of the cliffs.

He heard the snip of wire cutters, in the still night as the wire went down and the three cows were driven through. Then the wire was swiftly mended. The cows found nothing to tempt them. They strayed off, seeking water.

The three men turned and rode away. They were laughing.

"That fixes the 682," said Sanger. "We'll make a good ranch out of it."

The Kid came up at a gallop, riding with his reins about the saddle horn, guiding Speed with knees and voice. He was whistling the "Lament," and he had a six-gun in each hand, poised, with muzzles held aloft, ready to flip bullets as a boy flips clay pellets from a stick.

"You three are under arrest," he said. "This is Prentiss, of the Cattlemen's Association. Each of you unbuckle your belt, and let it drop behind you, with your gun. Don't get in line. Don't try any-

thing funny, or you'll get another shootin' lesson."

They did not ask him why he wanted to arrest them. They *knew*, and they knew the penalty they would draw. Long years in prison, loss of everything.

They were desperate and they made a desperate play.

Sanger said something in a low, sharp voice, and they dug their spurs deep, Curly and the third rider swinging out to left and right, while Sanger stayed back. So they would get the Kid in a triangle, surround him, shooting from three sides.

It was a trick they had tried before, but not on such a man. Before their horses got into full stride, the Kid's guns began to bark, to spurt streaks of flame left and right.

The horses were easy targets, but the Kid did not shoot horses or dogs. He got Curly's pal first, and saw him sway in his saddle, fall from it, as the spurred mount galloped on, dragging its master, now its victim.

Sanger was shooting from straight ahead, but the Kid did not answer until he saw the first man go down.

Curly had clipped him through the fat of his upper left arm. It silenced the Kid's left six-gun, though he managed to holster it. He swerved Speed aside and shot Curly in the cheek with his other Colt. The slug went through both jaws, smashing bones and teeth.

It was not a fatal shot, unless gangrene set in, but it was a crippling one. It took all the fight out of a man, with shock and pain. It made Curly drop his gun and curb his horse, in the agony of defeat and disfigurement.

The Kid took another wound. It was high in the left shoulder. Sanger was charging, his gun spitting flame and lead.

The Kid swung Speed in to meet him. He had, he knew, two cartridges left in this gun, two more in the holstered one.

He fired one, uncertain if he had scored when Sanger doubled up, cried out, as the two mounts came close together.

"I quit! You got me in the belly. Stop my hawss, before I fall apart."

The Kid swung Speed across the path of the other mount. Sanger was hunched over his horn, moaning.

"I can't ride," he said in a hoarse whisper. "I'll die. Help me off. I'm dished."

His voice died away. He groaned, as the Kid holstered his own gun, used his one good arm to help Sanger.

He saw the move just in time, as Sanger straightened up, unwounded, his six-gun between the horn and his stomach which he had claimed was drilled.

"Got you, you range dick," he cried exultantly. "Got——"

The cry died in his throat. His gun exploded, and its slug tore away the buckle of the Kid's belt, ripped it apart. It fell, with both the Kid's weapons, to the ground.

But the Kid had chopped Sanger with the side of his hand across his Adam's apple. He broke the small bone there, choking Sanger into silence and submission.

It was an hour later when he reached the beef herd. He was challenged by Richards himself.

"I've got Sanger and his curly-haired boy over by your line wire," he said. "They ain't in good shape, but I tied 'em to make sure. There's one more, but he didn't get his stirrup loose in time, and he don't count."

"Dan, here, said he heard shootin'," said Richards. "I thought it was thunder."

"It was," said the Kid. "Thunder an' lightnin' both, but that lightnin' ain't goin' to strike twice in the same place. You'll find three cows, faked from CS to 682, by Curly, right close to the line. I killed 'em."

"Why?" asked Richards, his night-herders crowding in.

"Sanger had mixed sulphate of copper—blue vitriol—in their feed. Makes their mouths sore. Makes 'em froth an' drool. Any inspector, especially the one he'd bring in on a tip, would condemn 'em for foot-and-mouth disease, likewise any stock that was exposed to them. It would have been good-by to your beef contract, Richards—good-by to the ranch."

"They ought to be hung. Let's hang 'em." The chorus grew.

"They're my birds," said the Kid. "I caught 'em, an' I aim to cage 'em. Hangin' 'em would be a favor to 'em, right now. One's dead. Sanger an' his son are quite some messed up. This is my play, boys. I aim to see it through."

Richards backed him up. He marveled at what the Kid had done. He marveled more as the Kid, patched up, whistled while they rode back with the prisoners and the dead man, to the 682 quarters.

But the tune quite fitted the occasion. It was "The Cowboy's Lament."

Thet Sanger skunk is shore one lucky hombre ter git out o' thet ruckus with the Kid with nothin' worse'n a busted Adam's apple. Howsomever, his luck has run out complete now. An' the Kid is still on the job. Watch out fer what happens when he starts out on his next rustler hunt. There'll be a story about it in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.



Skunk Tracks on the Bar L

By Nelse Anderson

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CHAPTER I.

A DESPERATE WADDY.

THROUGH the grim iron bars of the one window that let light and air into his musty cell, Tod Lester could see the funeral procession. It was winding up the rocky hills that lifted above Corillo town. Tod Lester could also see the grim new scaffold that was built in the jail yard just beyond his window.

Tod's lean, sun-bronzed face twitched as he looked at that scaffold, and hot lights came into his blue eyes. He was due to hang from that stout crossbar—hang for the

murder of that man who was being carried up to Boot Hill by grieving friends.

Tod turned from the window sharply, pacing over the cement floor of his cell like some caged animal. He ran long, tapering fingers through his sandy brown hair in nervous gestures.

He heard footsteps in the narrow corridor outside the cell, but paid no attention until a voice lifted in a thick, sneering chuckle. Tod whirled then, lean body stiffening, wide lips jerking hard across his firm teeth.

There at the grilled door which led out into the corridor stood a

big, thick-bodied man, who looked at him with hooded yellow eyes that were anything but pleasant. The big man made a gurgling sound in his fat neck—thick, wet lips peeling back from broad teeth as he leaned against the iron-barred door.

"Get out o' here, Abe Moffat!" Tod Lester snarled harshly. "Drag yore big carcass out o' here, so's I won't have to smell so much skunk."

Abe Moffat's beefy, heavy-jowled face flushed crimson, and his thick-lidded eyes seemed to change from yellow to green.

"Lippy, ain't yuh?" he snarled hoarsely. "Waal, yuh'll swing fer murderin' Depity Roy Stone. They're cartin' pore Roy up ter the graveyard right now."

"Yeah, looks like I'll swing," Tod Lester growled through locked teeth. "Thanks to the blasted lies yuh an' that gun-swift foreman o' yores told, Moffat, I'm in a tough spot. So tough that they're buildin' the scaffold even before my trial."

"Don't fret none, younker," Moffat sneered. "Yore trial is scheduled fer to-morrer. They're callin' quick justice in yore case an' aim ter make an example out o' yuh. Too much rustlin' an' killin' around these parts lately."

Abe Moffat chuckled evilly as he talked, hooded eyes glowing with keen delight. He removed his wide black Stetson and stood running thick, crooked fingers through kinky yellow hair as he grinned through the bars at Tod Lester.

"Listen, Moffat. What's behind all this?" Tod asked suddenly. "Why did yuh an' yore ramrod, Tutt Warner, swear that yuh seen me come foggin' up out o' that canyon where Deputy Roy Stone's body was found three days ago? Yuh never seen me around that canyon, an' yuh know it."

Abe Moffat jerked his hat on, then glanced quickly up and down the jail corridor. He could see out into the sheriff's office, which was at the front of the building.

There was no one in the sheriff's office, and no other prisoners in the jail except Tod Lester. Yet Abe Moffat pressed his thick face close to the iron bars of the cell door and spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"Shore me an' Tutt lied!" he growled. "But didn't I tell yuh, when yuh settled on Silver Crick a year ago, that yuh'd move on if yuh was smart?"

Before Tod Lester could answer, the big man was gone, sliding along the hallway with surprising speed and silence for one of his weight and size. Tod stood there for a long time, face white and working, eyes blazing wrathfully.

Since he had bought out a small spread on what was known as Silver Creek, the year before, Abe Moffat had been after him almost constantly, telling him to move out, offering to buy him out.

"An' now the skunk just admitted that him an' his foreman framed me!" Tod cried suddenly. "If I could jist prove that——"

His voice trailed off abruptly, for he realized that his chances of proving things were about over. Jailed, charged with foul murder, he had little chance of doing anything about it.

He turned back to the little window, after several minutes, and watched men and women moving about Boot Hill, high up on the rocky hillside. Then those people were coming back toward town. Tod still stood there at the window, brain working swiftly, blue eyes puckered and hot.

If he could only get out, get a horse between his knees once more,

he might have a chance of digging up some evidence that would clear him. From the first, he had suspected Abe Moffat and Tutt Warner of having killed the good-humored old deputy sheriff. Why? Tod could not so much as guess. Nor could he understand why Moffat had been so strong on driving him out of the country.

"My measly hunk o' range couldn't be what he wants," Tod growled aloud. "He's got more grass an' water than he needs now. Still, he's allus wanted me out o' the way for some reason. An' it looks like the skunk has succeeded."

Tod turned from the window then, for once more the sounds of booted feet came from the corridor. He turned slowly to see Sheriff Sam Lowry standing there, glowering hotly at him through the iron bars.

The sheriff was a big rawboned man, with rock-hard features and a pair of black eyes that blazed coldly right now. The sheriff lifted one huge hand to tug savagely at the ends of a sweeping black mustache that partially hid the hardness of his wide-lipped mouth.

"Well, yuh ornery little side-winder, we jist planted pore ol' Roy," the sheriff's voice boomed into the musty little cell. "Yuh ready to tell me why yuh shot him in the back?"

"I've told yuh ever since yuh come out an' arrested me, sheriff, that I know nothin' about Stone's death." Tod shrugged helplessly. "What reason would I have for killin' him?"

"That's what puzzles me," the sheriff growled. "But yuh'll hang, whether yuh ever tell why yuh done that murder or not. An' fer once, I won't mind hangin' a man."

"I know how yuh feel, an' don't blame yuh a bit," Tod answered

quietly. "But, sheriff, I shore wish yuh'd do some investigatin' in that case, instead o' feelin' that yuh have got the guilty man. Abe Moffat an' Tutt Warner are lyin' about seein' me come up out o' that canyon where yore deputy was found dead. Moffat admitted that to me not ten minutes ago."

The sheriff started, then laughed mirthlessly. "Say, do yuh think I'll swaller any such lies as that?" He almost bellowed his words in sudden anger. "Yuh murderin' young snake, I wish yuh had offered some resistance when I come after yuh the other day. If yuh had——"

"Moffat told yuh what to do in that case, did he?" Tod cut in coldly.

"Abe Moffat is a big man in this country, but him or nobody else tells me what to do," the sheriff bawled. "If yuh've got any sense——"

In the three days he had spent in jail, Tod Lester had watched for a chance to make a break, willing to take any risk for an opportunity to get out of that musty cell. He saw a chance now, for Sheriff Sam Lowry had come close to the bars in his rage, lifted both mighty hands, and gripped the slim steel bars up high.

Tod Lester leaped with the speed of desperation driving him. He shot both hands out between the cross-bars. His left hand went high enough to grasp the stout black silk neckerchief about the sheriff's thick throat.

His right hand dived through a square down low, and his sinewy fingers wrapped about the butt of the sheriff's big Colt even as he brought the officer's head and face against the steel bars with a terrific yank on the black neckerchief!

The sheriff reared back savagely, shoving mightily against the steel

bars with his left hand, while his right drove down in a desperate attempt to reach his gun. But he was late, for Tod Lester had that Colt, and was boring the muzzle of it deep into the sheriff's flat middle.

"Steady, Johnny Law!" Tod snarled savagely. "Make another move, an' this trigger finger o' mine might get the itch. An' if yuh make a holler, I'll shore see that yuh regret it. Want a slug from yore own gun through yore middle?"

CHAPTER II.

A TOUGH BREAK FOR TOD.

COLD sweat stood out on Tod Lester's brow, despite the fact that a cold spring wind whipped through his cell from the hills beyond the town. The gun in his hand trembled, and there was a prayer in his throat that the sheriff would be bluffed into obeying.

Tod Lester would not have squeezed the trigger of that Colt under any consideration, for he certainly was no murderer. Yet Sheriff Sam Lowry did not know that. The big sheriff stood there, stiff and tensed, hard face white with rage. No man likes the feel of a cocked gun boring his middle, especially if he happens to believe that the man holding the gun is a cold killer.

The sheriff's tenseness left him slowly, and a look of mingling rage and alarm came into his black eyes.

"Yuh tricky cuss!" he croaked. "Tod Lester, yuh'd better kill me hyar an' now. If yuh leave me live, I'll foller yuh to the jumpin'-off place or put a slug through yore murderin' heart!"

"Save yore gab, feller, an' unlock this jail cell," Tod snarled, trying to sound as savage as possible. "I could drop yuh with a slug an' get the keys by reachin' through these

bars. Do what I say, if yuh want to keep yore health."

The big sheriff groaned an oath, but reached for the keys on his belt, found them, and began fumbling at the cell lock. Tod Lester trembled like a roped colt, hardly daring to breathe.

The sheriff was noted for his cold nerve and daring—a man who had seldom been bluffed by any odds. He might get over this jolt at any moment and call the bluff.

But he did not. Swearing in hoarse whispers, the sheriff got the cell door opened, then allowed himself to be forced back with it as it opened.

Tod Lester leaped then—leaped out into the hallway, twisted as he landed, and jammed the muzzle of the gun he held against the sheriff's spine.

"Inside!" he grated. "Move, yuh big ox, or I'll bend this iron over yore noggin!"

He gave the sheriff a hard jab with the gun muzzle. The big officer flinched, then stalked grimly into the cell.

Tod slammed and locked the door, shoved the sheriff's weapon into the waistband of his trousers, and went racing toward the little office up front. The sheriff's voice lifted in a mighty yell, but Tod only grinned at that.

The jail sat on a knoll overlooking Corillo town, and the stiff wind was blowing from the town up to the jail. It would be some time before any one heard the sheriff and came to his rescue.

Yet Tod was wasting no moment. He leaped into the sheriff's office, saw his own twin guns hanging by their crisscrossed belts from a peg on the wall, and snatched them down. On another peg hung brown leather chaps, a thick fleece-lined

short coat, and a pair of long-shanked spurs that were also his.

He snatched the chaps and coat, donned them swiftly, and tucked the spurs into a coat pocket as he stepped swiftly toward the door. A glance outside showed him that the winding trail which led down to the town was empty of life. He grinned, stepped outside, and hurried along the wall of the jail that was farthest from the town.

He chuckled a little as he passed the tiny window of the cell which had been his for three miserable days and nights. A bellow of rage came from that cell as the sheriff sighted him. But Tod made no reply. A corral and shed were out back of the jail, where the sheriff kept his horse. Tod's own powerfully built black cow horse was there, and he found his saddle, blanket, and bridle on a peg inside the shed.

"Come on, Gila hoss!" he called sharply. "We've got some travelin' to do, boy."

The black whinnied softly as Tod approached to pile on the riding gear. He grinned happily as he mounted and rode away, realizing that it certainly felt mighty good to be out of that coop and galloping across the open country once more.

But Tod Lester's grin held little mirth, for his keen mind was already leaping ahead, picturing a future that was anything but promising. He would be hunted by every man in the country, trailed and shot at like some animal.

His eyes swept toward the tall pine-clad mountains to the north. He had hunted wild horses up there last fall, and knew the silent, gloomy forest fairly well.

"I'd better head for the forest pronto," he decided aloud. "It'll be a week or so before it's safe for me to ride back down here an' start

checkin' up on Abe Moffat an' his crew."

But first, he knew, he must have supplies. It would be cold up in that pine country, and he would need bedding and grub if he lived there. Since he was already headed in the general direction of his Bar L, he felt that getting the things he needed would be a simple matter. But Tod's plans were due for a severe jolt.

He glanced back, and saw a long line of horsemen stringing out of Corillo after him! Some one had heard the sheriff, after all, and a posse was already on his trail.

But the worst jolt came when Tod topped a low ridge and saw his own little adobe house hunkered in a shallow basin below. Smoke curled lazily from the chimney, and there were saddled horses in the front yard. Yet Tod had hired no punchers, since his ranch was so small that he could easily enough do all his own work.

"What in blazes?" he yelled hoarsely. "Now who's down there?"

He had no time to waste on wondering, however, for a backward glance told him that the posse was closing in fast. They were scattering, too, which meant that they aimed to surround his place in the hope of trapping him.

Realizing that he had mighty little time in which to escape that trap, Tod went thundering down into the shallow basin where his house sat, a feeling of uneasiness riding with him. He had no friendly neighbors who might be calling, and those three saddled horses worried him.

He saw a man come out onto the porch now, look toward him, then dart back into the house. Tod knew then and there that his callers, whoever they were, would bear watching.

He changed his course sharply—and a rifle bullet sang through the air where his body would have been if he had not changed his course. With a growl of anger, Tod swept his right-hand gun out, aimed as best he could, and sent three slugs hammering at the front window, from which a puff of rifle smoke had come. Three guns answered from the house, but Tod gave them no further heed.

Skirting past the little corral he had built with such back-breaking labor, he was about to fog on into the hills when he noticed that the corral was full of mighty fine-looking horses. He reined in sharply at the back side of the inclosure, keeping low in the saddle so as not to draw fire from the house. Through the poles of the corral he studied the brands on the horses, a slow frown forming on his brow.

"Diamond 8!" he muttered. "No brand like that in these parts. I wonder——"

Tod never finished, for guns began crashing at the house again. But no slugs came whistling over the corral, and Tod was hard put to understand until he heard the sudden chatter of more distant guns.

"Huh!" he grunted. "Them three jaspers in the house have opened up on the posse. Which gives me a good chance to skin out before the sheriff discovers that I'm not helpin' sling lead at him.

Tod was lifting his spurs to send his Gila horse roaring ahead when the sharp drumming of hoofs caused him to hesitate. The sound came from toward the house, and he hastily drew his second Colt.

"Them three gents that shot at me are runnin' from the posse," he growled. "If they find me here, there'll shore be a sweet mix-up, with the sheriff copperin' all bets."

The three riders hove into view a moment later, and Tod Lester let out a yelp without realizing it. The riders were cutting down into the wash that coursed through the center of the sink, no more than fifty yards from him. And in the lead was Abe Moffat, riding his spurs cruelly.

Abe Moffat saw Tod at that very moment and jerked upright in the saddle. Moffat yelled something, swept out a gun, and blazed away. He could not have taken any aim from the back of a lunging horse.

Yet luck was with the tawny-eyed rascal, for Tod Lester felt a terrific blow along his ribs, and knew dimly that he was toppling sidewise from the saddle. Even as he fell, he thought of the posse and the noose that would end his life if he was taken back to jail.

CHAPTER III.

TOD FINDS A MAN.

TOD LESTER struck the hard earth there at the back of the corral, rolled half over, then lay groaning. But the thought of that posse and what it meant to be caught again was already taking hold in his pain-numbed brain. He locked his teeth against his suffering, forced himself up on one elbow, and groped weakly for the corral poles.

The dull hammering of shod hoofs came to his ears, and he knew that he had to act and act quickly if he was to escape. He saw his guns lying where they had fallen, managed to get them back into his holsters, then dragged himself to his feet by using the poles of the corral.

Gila had pranced away, and was standing there snorting softly, eyes rolling uneasily. Tod spoke to the black in hoarse whispers, reeled to-

ward it. The horse shied a little, and Tod almost fell. But one groping hand found the saddle horn, and a moment later he had pulled himself up into the kak.

He was weak and sick from pain, and could feel sticky moisture flowing down along his wounded side. But the thoughts of that posse and his end with a noose about his neck if they captured him drove Tod on relentlessly.

He leaned far over, gouged at Gila's flanks with dull rowels, and went hammering away from the corral. The jolting ride brought new tortures, yet he hung on grimly, heading toward choppy hills.

Gila was fast and tough, yet it was Tod's knowledge of the rough country that actually saved him. Roaring yells came from behind, and once he heard the deadly patter of bullets striking the sun-baked earth over which he rode. He reached a draw, however, and got into the mouth of it without further mishap.

Then it was that his knowledge of the surrounding country came to his aid. He knew that the draw into which he had ridden ended in a deep pocket from which no horse could climb. He turned into a side wash, worked his way farther back into the hills, and slowed down finally to ease the pain in that wounded side. The posse, he knew, would lose time when they ran into that box canyon.

He found a spring, dismounted beside it, and hastily stripped to his waist. Across his ribs there was a deep blue-edged gash that pained with every movement of the torn muscles. But Tod Lester had felt the puckering pain of bullet wounds before.

Teeth set grimly, he tore the unsoiled portion of his undershirt into strips, then bathed his wounded side

clean with ice-cold spring water. The shock of the cold liquid on his flesh cleared his head completely, and by the time he had tied the strips of undershirt tightly about his ribs, he felt much better.

"But I've got no grub an' no beddin'," he growled as his eyes lifted to the dark forests high above. "Dang that Moffat snake! I wonder what he was doin' at my place."

Tod mounted again and began working his way toward the mountains proper. Once, from a high hogback, he sighted men riding the hills below and behind him.

"Posse has split up into small groups," he grunted. "Which means I'll have to keep my eyes peeled plenty sharp."

Tod had ridden this rugged country almost daily for a year, however, and knew trails that his pursuers could find only by accident. He came at last into the scrub-cedar country, and stopped for a long time to study his back trail.

He glimpsed riders below him, and from their actions, judged that they were cutting for his sign. They would find it, of course. But Tod had been thinking of that since leaving the spring where he had bandaged his wound.

He grinned wanly now, knowing that it would take a mighty good sign reader to figure out whether he had come up into the cedar country or continued on along the lower hills toward the bad lands proper which lay a few miles to the west.

Seeing that he had nothing to fear from the posse just now, he turned Gila along a well-screened route and rode to where the first pines lifted above the squat cedars. A forest stretched away up the slopes now—a forest that glistened with patches of snow that had not melted. The ground was spongy

with moisture as he rode into the trees, yet the thick carpet of dead pine needles would effectively hide his sign.

"Dang the luck! I'll freeze stiff as soon as that sun goes down," he grated. "If I'd only had time to get some grub an' blankets——"

Tod's voice broke off, and his right hand swept down with darting speed. A big buck jumped from behind a windfall, slender legs hurtling its sleek body forward at terrific speed.

The deer was lunging straight away from Tod, and would have been an easy target at such close range. Tod needed that buck for meat, for it might be his only chance of getting food.

Yet his trigger finger eased up suddenly, and the deer flashed on into the forest. He dared not fire, for the roaring blast of his .45 might carry back down the hills to some of those prowling posse men. With an angry growl, he holstered his gun, blue eyes fairly blazing.

"Dang that fool posse!" he grumbled. "That buck—— What in blazes?"

The fat buck had bored straight into the forest, antlered head rocked back as it flashed away. And now there came the crack of a rifle from the timber somewhere ahead.

"Somebody got that buck!" Tod cried excitedly. "Now, who could be up here huntin' meat?"

He sent Gila forward at a cautious walk, eyes straining to penetrate the gloom of the forest. His ears were keenly alert for sounds, yet after that one whiplike rifle report, there were no sounds other than the sighing of the sharp wind through the tall pines.

Gila snorted softly after a quarter of a mile, and Tod reined to a dead halt. Just ahead of him lay

the big fat buck, shot fairly through and through just behind the shoulders.

But what brought a gasp of sheer amazement from Tod's lips was the sight of a gaunt old man dragging himself slowly and painfully toward the fallen buck. The man's legs seemed paralyzed, for he moved himself forward over the ground with hands alone, with the slow, dogged motions of a man who suffered greatly.

Tod spurred forward suddenly, calling out as he rode. The old man stopped crawling, to fall flat upon his stomach. Tod saw a gnarled old hand streaking toward a holstered Colt, and reined in abruptly.

"Steady, ol'-timer!" Tod called sharply. "I shore mean yuh no harm, man!"

The darting hand smacked against the gun grip, but the gun was not drawn. Tod slid quickly from the saddle, wincing a little as pain shot through his wounded side. He hurried to the old man, knelt swiftly.

He found himself looking down into a drawn, pinched face, from which bloodshot gray eyes studied him narrowly. Tod's own troubles were instantly forgotten as his eyes flashed to the old man's useless legs.

"What—what's wrong, ol'-timer?" he asked suddenly. "Yuh hurt?"

"Hoss thieves!" the old man croaked wildly. "Four days ago, they raided my place. I follered 'em, an' some skunk drilled me from ambush. The rifle ball grazed my backbone, an' my legs won't work. I'm so nigh gone, son, that——"

"Steady!" Tod cut in, for the old man was trying once more to crawl toward the fat buck. "Yuh'll be all right, pronto. I'll skin out some o' that meat an' hang it to cool. While

the meat cools, yuh'll get a bait o' roasted liver. Who are yuh?"

"Me?" the old fellow asked weakly. "I'm Toby Weston, boy, owner o' the Diamond 8 hoss—— Say, what's the matter?"

Tod Lester had cried out as if a knife had jabbed him. He was suddenly remembering that his Bar L corral had been full of Diamond 8 horses, and that Abe Moffat and two other 4M cutthroats had been there, apparently guarding those Diamond 8 brones.

CHAPTER IV.

TOD SLINGS LEAD.

TOD LESTER sat for a long time, studying the lean, pain-racked face of old Toby Weston. Tod had dressed the buck, carved the meat so that it could be easily carried in his rolled slicker, and left it hanging to drain and cool.

He had also dressed a deep, swollen wound that was low in old Toby Weston's back. That wound needed strong medicines applied to it, for the flesh was already swollen and hot with fever. Tod had broiled strips of the venison liver and fed them to the sick man, who wolfed the food in hungry gulps.

The old fellow seemed a little stronger after eating, or perhaps it was merely the sense of security that had come with finding aid. He talked more clearly, and told Tod of the raid that had been pulled on the Diamond 8 by a dozen masked men.

"My place is down the other slope o' these mountains," old Weston finished grimly. "I follered them snakes up to the top, three days ago, an' got drilled from the brush. Since then, I—I've been crawlin' around, tryin' to find some kind o' grub."

"Yuh'd find no berries or such at this season." Tod nodded grimly. "An' I reckon game would be pretty hard to get. The deer go down lower in cold weather."

"They shore do," the old fellow answered. "Outside of a few wise old bucks that know how to paw down through the snow fer food, there ain't no deer up hyar. That ol' buck come jumpin' in sight a while ago, an' he's the fust one I've seen. I left my rifle layin' over yonder where I had stopped crawlin' to rest. I did have sense enough to bring it along when I come to the other day an' found myself layin' beside my dead hoss."

"Kilt yore hoss, too, did they?" Tod growled. "That'd be like——"

Tod checked himself barely in time. He had almost mentioned Abe Moffat's name, for he was pretty well convinced that Moffat and his hirelings had raided the distant Diamond 8 and shot old Toby Weston from ambush.

Something else was slowly dawning on Tod, too. It had been three days before when Deputy Sheriff Roy Stone was killed in a deep canyon on Tod's range. And that particular canyon cut back through the rugged foothills to the base of these very mountains where Tod now sat.

"Golly! I believe I've got it!" he thought excitedly. "Abe Moffat an' his gang was drivin' those Diamond 8 hosses down into the foothills through that steep canyon. They met the deputy sheriff an' had to drill him. Moffat, wantin' me out o' the way, framed them lies that got me in jail an' had the gall to pen them stolen brones in my corral!"

Tod was so excited that he got up to pace about nervously, blue eyes watching old Toby Weston.

The old fellow needed shelter and medicines, no doubt of that.

But Tod Lester was certainly in no position to offer the wounded man much aid, for by now, his break from the jail would be well known over the range land, and he dared not approach even a ranch house, much less Corillo town.

"I'm in sort of a jam, Weston," Tod blurted suddenly, and told the old man bluntly of his own troubles.

Toby Weston's eyes puckered thoughtfully as Tod talked, but he did not interrupt until the youth had finished.

"I thought yuh was actin' mighty funny, younker," the old horse raiser commented dryly. "So my missin' stock is in yore own corral, eh?"

"They was a couple of hours ago, anyway." Tod shrugged. "An' I reckon they're still there, for Moffat would be afraid to move 'em after that posse got on his trail."

"From what yuh say, it shore looks like this Moffat hombre is the skunk we both want to snag," the old fellow said grimly. "But how we going to do it? Me, I'm plumb useless the way I am. An' from what yuh say, that posse will be scourin' the country fer yuh. If I could use these legs o' mine——"

"I figure a sawbones can straighten yuh out," Tod growled. "The sun's settin', which means it'll be dark before long. I'll load yuh on my Gila hoss an' take yuh to Corillo."

"Nothin' doin', Tod Lester!" old Toby Weston snapped. "Yuh've got trouble enough o' yore own without borryin' any o' mine. I'll make out, so fergit that crazy stunt o' ridin' back into Corillo."

But Tod Lester was as stubborn waddy. As the sun sank, he loaded the helpless old man into Gila's sad-

dle, then mounted behind, Weston's Winchester in one hand.

"Yuh can rein the hoss, amigo," Tod called. "Not that Gila will need much help, for he knows these trails right well."

"Yo're loco, I tell yuh!" Toby Weston growled. Nor did he stop telling Tod Lester that he was loco until they were at the outskirts of Corillo, a few hours later.

Reaching around the old fellow with one hand, Tod took the reins then and guided Gila along the edge of the little town until he came to an adobe house surrounded by a whitewashed adobe wall. Tod dismounted, opened a gate, and led Gila through into a big yard. From the adobe house there came a blaze of lamplight, and Tod moved swiftly toward the front porch.

"Doc Lewis lives here, an' it looks like he's home," Tod called. "Yuh've got to keep under cover. Weston, onless yuh want Abe Moffat an' his outfit to do a better job o' killin' yuh than they did the other day."

"What yuh drivin' at?" the wounded man asked sharply.

"Just this," Tod explained. "I'll get yuh inside an' in the doctor's hands. Then yuh keep out o' sight. Send for the sheriff an' tell him what yuh know. Mention the thing I think I've got figured out, if yuh want to—about what happened to Deputy Stone, I mean."

"Shore I'll tell the sheriff, son," the old fellow agreed. "An' I reckon yo're right about it bein' best fer me to keep hid until I'm able to attend to some skunk killin'."

Tod strode up three steps, crossed a wide porch, and rapped smartly on a stout door. From within the house there came the muffled sounds of footsteps. Then the door jerked open.

Tod Lester blinked in the lamp-

light and opened his mouth to speak. But from somewhere beyond the end of the porch there came the blatant roar of a Colt, and Tod felt the wind of a bullet against his lean throat.

He dived straight at the portly, gray-haired doctor who had opened the door to greet him just as the hidden marksman fired again. But that second slug had barely whacked into the door facing when Tod spun on the threshold, hands whipping down and up.

From the tail of his eye, he had located that powder flash as the ambusher fired the second time.

Tod's twin guns hammered out a double blast, and from the end of the porch there came a strangled oath. Tod leaped back onto the porch, guns poised. But a grim chuckle came from the darkness, and Tod's guns lowered.

"Yuh got him, son!" old Toby Weston called. "Me, I was already close enough to see the skunk when—— Good gravy! I jumped offn that hoss an' *walked* over hyar!"

CHAPTER V.

DANGER AT THE BAR L.

EVEN after he had suffered through the doctor's probing, cleansing, and bandaging that ugly cut across his back, old Toby Weston still looked dazed and uncertain. He kept mumbling hoarsely, simply unable to understand how he had been able to leap out of a saddle and walk toward a hidden gunman after being unable to walk for three whole days and nights.

Doctor Lewis saw the old fellow's perplexity, and proceeded to explain. "You had some nerves along your spine paralyzed by the bullet that cut through your flesh, Weston." The medico smiled. "Either

the trip to town on horseback or seeing your friend in danger awakened those nerves, which gave you back instant use of your limbs. Nothing so strange in that case, either. It has happened many times before."

"Dang!" old Toby croaked. "Doc, I thought shore I was crippled fer life. When I found out I couldn't walk, I shore got a scare. But now——"

The old fellow's voice trailed off, for Tod Lester came stalking through the door just then. Tod had been outside striking matches to examine the man who had tried to kill him only a few minutes before. Tod nodded grimly at the unvoiced question from the two pairs of eyes that swung to his face as he stepped into the room.

"My slugs caught the gent through the head an' neck, so he won't need any doctorin'," Tod grated.

"Know him?" the doctor asked.

"Shore do." Tod nodded. "He was a sawed-off, mean-faced jigger that worked for Abe Moffat. I've heard him called 'Gopher,' but don't know his last name."

"Bailey—Gopher Bailey." The doctor shrugged. "Mean sort of fellow. He was in here three days ago, getting a bullet hole in his thigh dressed."

"Three days ago?" Tod cried. "By gollies, doc, that sort o' fits in with a few other things. Weston's hosses come down into this country about that time, Deputy Stone was found dead on my range, an' I was arrested for murder. Yuh see that deputy when he was brought in?"

"Yes, I did." The doctor bobbed his white head sharply. "Stone had been shot through the back, and had lived for some minutes, I'm pretty sure."

"Did yuh look at his gun?" Tod asked in a tense voice.

The doctor smiled slightly, shook his head. "No, I did not look at the dead man's gun," he said quietly. "My job is humans, not guns."

"Just the same, I'm bettin' that the deputy's gun had been fired," Tod cried. "If it had, an' one o' Moffat's men come here with a wounded leg, it looks like I'm about to get some real evidence strung together."

"How come that Gopher Bailey jigger to be hangin' around hyar, yuh reckon?" Toby Weston asked, wriggling into a more comfortable position on the couch where the doctor had put him.

"That's easily enough explained," the medico answered. "Bailey has been here each evening to have that wound dressed. In fact, I expected to find him at the door when I answered your knock, Tod."

"Uh-huh." Tod nodded absently. "Bailey come to have his wound dressed, seen me in the light from the door, an' decided to bowl me over with a slug. But he's out o' the picture now. If I could 'a' only wounded the sidewinder, mebbe he would 'a' talked some if coaxed."

But that possibility of gaining much-needed information was gone now. And Tod Lester knew that each minute he remained here was dangerous. He moved toward the door, frowning darkly, brain racing at top speed. He was thoroughly convinced now that Abe Moffat and his 4M hirelings had murdered Deputy Roy Stone.

Gopher Bailey had been there when the murder was done, and had been wounded by the dying officer. But who else had been with Gopher? Tod Lester would have

given much to know the answer to that question.

"Doc, I don't know whether yuh think I'm guilty o' murderin' Roy Stone or not," Tod called from the doorway, "but I wish yuh'd not mention that I was here to-night ontill yuh have to. An' whatever yuh do, don't let any one but the sheriff know that Toby Weston is here an' alive."

Before either of the men could answer, Tod was through the doorway and across the porch. He took the saddle in a single lithe leap, turned Gila, and rode out through the big patio gate, which he had thoughtfully left open in case he needed to leave in a hurry. The lights of Corillo's one main street beckoned from a short distance away, and Tod heard voices coming toward him.

"Some hombres are comin' to find out what the shootin' was about, I reckon," he grated. "Good thing I got out o' there."

He skirted wide of the talkers, and angled in toward the backs of the buildings on his side of the main street. But long before he reached the backs of the buildings, he heard the churning of many shod hoofs in the main street beyond them, and knew that the posse was returning to town.

Swerving sharply again, Tod rode into the night, knowing that to prowl around the town was to invite certain trouble.

"One thing I shore can do, though, is go to that deep canyon where the deputy was kilt an' see if a band o' hosses has traveled down it lately," he muttered as he galloped away from town. "If there have been hosses drove down that canyon, I'll know for almost certain that Gopher Bailey an' some o' the other 4M gang kilt that deputy."

Provin' such, howsomever, will be one sweet job."

Frowning bitterly, Tod galloped on and on into the night. He would have to wait until morning, of course, to examine that canyon where the deputy had been murdered. In the meantime, he must find some good hide-out, for it might be days, or even weeks, before he could uncover evidence enough to clear himself and pin the blame for the deputy's murder on the guilty parties.

Or, for that matter, Tod thought bitterly, he might never be able to clear himself. But as long as he was free, he could try, which most certainly beat sitting in a jail cell and waiting to be hanged for something he had not done.

He had headed toward his own spread, wanting to see if those Diamond 8 horses were still there. He also needed bedding, camp tools, and such things as salt, flour, and coffee. With the venison he had left up in the pine timber to cool and drain, he would not suffer for food.

"But I've got to have a bed if I hang out in that pine forest," he growled. "It's freezin' that meat I hung up there right now."

He came to the rim of the shallow sink where his ranch house sat, but did not ride down immediately. There was no light to be seen, yet somehow Tod was strangely uneasy as he sat trying to peer out and down through the darkness. He heard the squealing of horses, and knew that old Toby Weston's missing broncs were still there in the corral.

But would there be men guarding them? Tod had no way of knowing the answer to that question. However, he meant to find out who, if any one, was down there.

Riding along the rim to a spot

directly opposite his house, he dismounted, stripped off chaps and spurs, and left Gila ground-anchored. It was a long walk, yet Tod felt safer, for he knew the place well enough to feel his way among ever so many guards. But as he approached, there were only the squeals and snorts of the penned horses.

He saw the house now, a dark bulk in the night. He went to it in cautious strides, ears keened to catch the slightest sounds, eyes straining to see through the black night. His hands crept down to the butts of his guns as he circled the house slowly.

Satisfied at last that there was no guard posted about the outside walls or porch, he stepped to the door, opened it softly, and moved inside. He took one step forward, then halted in his tracks.

"That yuh, Tutt?" came a hoarse whisper from somewhere before him. And Tod recognized the voice as that of Abe Moffat!

CHAPTER VI.

MOFFAT GETS THE DROP.

WITHIN the briefest part of a second, Tod Lester thought of many things. His hands dropped, slid his guns noiselessly from holsters. Somewhere just ahead of him was Abe Moffat, perhaps already suspicious.

Tod knew that the door was just behind him, and felt sure that he could ease back, open the door, and get outside before Moffat became too suspicious. But it suddenly occurred to Tod that this might be his chance of getting the evil 4M owner and making him talk.

But was Moffat alone? If there were others with him—

"Say, that yuh, Tutt?" Moffat's

voice sounded stronger, more uneasy.

"Shut up!" Tod snarled thinly, trying desperately to remember just how Tutt Warner's voice sounded. "Want to tip him off that we're here?"

"Huh?" Abe Moffat gulped from the darkness. "Tip who off, yuh fool? An' why ain't yuh out at the rim where that trail comes down?"

Tod silently thanked his lucky stars that he had come into the basin by a back way rather than the main trail which led to town. He knew now that Tutt Warner, 4M ramrod and one of the fastest gunnies in the country, was well out of the way, for it was almost a half mile to where that trail lifted up to the rim of the little sink.

"Tod Lester is around hyar right close, Abe," Tod growled in that raspy, thin voice. "He come down a while ago——"

"Dang yuh! Why did yuh let him pass?" Abe Moffat almost yelled. "If that fool sheriff was to foller him back out hyar, we'd be in a fine fix, wouldn't we? I made the tin-star think yuh an' Gopher an' me had been tryin' ter capture Tod Lester this afternoon when we was seen hyar. But if we're found hyar again, that tin-star will git suspicious."

"Mebbe," Tod grunted, and lifted one gun high.

Heavy steps were sounding across the room, and he knew that Abe Moffat was coming toward him. Tod heard a stout chair rattle, and heard Moffat swearing over a barked shin. Then Tod saw the burly cutthroat dimly outlined against a pale light that was a window.

He leaped, and the gun in his hand swept down. He felt the barrel land solidly, and the next instant a wailing bawl of pain lifted within the house.

Tod missed Abe Moffat's big head, thanks to the poor light. But he leaped in, found the huge bulk of the 4M owner, and struck again and again.

A fist caught Tod in the chest, hurling him back as if a mule had kicked him. Then a gun blared, and in the brief, ghastly flash of blazing powder, he saw Abe Moffat's pain-and-fright-twisted features. The slug cut dangerously close to Tod's own face. But he had regained his balance and was circling cautiously.

"Yuh ain't Tutt, blast yuh!" Abe Moffat roared. "But whoever yuh are——"

His voice was drowned out by the roar of the gun he gripped. But Tod had circled, and was close. As the powder blaze flared winkingly, Tod struck, laying the barrel of his Colt fairly across the crown of Moffat's head this time.

The big man grunted, pitched forward. Tod was over him instantly, wrenching the gun from his lax fingers and lifting the cutthroat's second gun from its holster.

"My first lick caught him on the left shoulder, fixin' that hand an' arm so's he couldn't draw," Tod panted. "But the skunk shore got his good gun hand into action, an' now that rat-eyed foreman of his will come runnin'."

Tod holstered his gun, grasped Abe Moffat about the middle, and lifted the limp bulk to his shoulder. But he was weak from lack of food and from the flesh wound he had got across his ribs early that day.

The bulky weight of the 4M owner made him stagger like a drunken man as he plowed toward the door and out onto the porch. He wished now that his horse was closer, yet there was no time to be spent in idle thought.

The bawl of a voice came to his ears, and the rapid *chug-chug-chug* of a man running toward the house. That, Tod knew, would be Tutt Warner, coming on the jump to see what the trouble was.

"An' if I have to stop an' swap lead with that skunk, I'll likely never get Moffat away from here," Tod panted.

He ran staggeringly toward the dim outline of a little outbuilding which was only a few rods away. Yet by the time he had gained the little shack, the 4M ramrod was already in the yard, yelling Abe Moffat's name.

Tod's breath was coming in whistling gasps, and that wounded side was paining so badly that red lights danced before his eyes. Yet he locked his teeth grimly and started on, heading this time toward the corral and barns, hoping that the noise made by the milling horses would drown out the chugging of his own booted feet as they struck the sun-baked earth.

But luck seemed frowning on Tod then and there. He was still several yards from the corral when his feet became entangled in a wad of baling wire that had been carelessly tossed aside.

Tod fell heavily, throwing Abe Moffat forward and down. Already breathless from carrying such a load at the speed he had been traveling, Tod lay panting a moment while his reeling brain cleared and the pain in his side became less severe.

Then it was that he became aware of the low, rumbling pound of hoofs. He stiffened to attention, snarling under his breath as he realized that many riders were swarming into the little basin from toward Corillo.

"That sheriff an' his posse!" Tod croaked. "Dang the luck! If I

could get this Moffat skunk away before——"

His voice trailed off, for from down the sink there came a long-drawn wail—a poorly imitated coyote's cry. An answering wail sounded from the ranch yard, and Tod realized that the men coming to his place were Moffat's friends instead of the sheriff and a posse.

"Got to light a shuck out o' here now, for shore!" he rasped. "Hope I didn't break that skunk's thick neck. He'll talk if I have to——"

Whapt!

Tod sailed backward, hardly realizing just what had happened. One moment, he had been stooping over, groping for Abe Moffat's thick form. Then something had hit him along the cheek and head with such force that he was too stunned for the moment to realize that a booted foot had shot through the darkness to land that terrific blow.

But Tod understood who had struck him, at least, for he saw a huge form lift from the blackness to tower above him, and heard Abe Moffat's hoarse, gloating voice.

"Wallop me over the noggin, will yuh?" Moffat was snarling. "Soon as I kin git a bead on yuh, I'll make shore that yuh don't escape no more jails, Tod Lester!"

Tod saw the huge form lean forward, felt a booted toe prodding, locating him. Then Moffat's voice lifted in a chuckle that was instantly drowned in the roar of the gun he had held ready.

CHAPTER VII.

"LIFT 'EM!"

ABE MOFFAT had lifted a gun from Tod's holster as he was being carried into the darkness. He had hung there across the youth's shoulder, gathering his wits, know-

ing that he could shoot down the man who carried him at any moment. In fact, he had been about to press the muzzle against Tod's back and pull the trigger, when Tod tripped and fell.

Moffat had waited then until he had Tod well located, knowing that if he let it be known that he was not unconscious, Tod would start watching him. Moffat's plan worked out nicely, for when Tod stooped, he was able to deliver a kick that sent the youth spinning backward.

And it still seemed that Moffat's plan was working, for by feeling with one boot toe, he located Tod, took careful aim at the spot, and began squeezing the Colt trigger.

Tod Lester had come to understand a few of those things, however, even as he felt that boot toe prodding him. He was dazed and a little sick from that blow to the head and face, yet he had sense enough to jerk up his knees and lash out at the thick legs before him with both booted feet.

With the roar of the Colt, there came a hoarse bawl of pain, for Tod's feet landed fairly on Moffat's shins, hurling him backward. Tod felt the impact of a bullet striking the dirt close to his body, but gave that little heed.

He forced his leaden muscles to act—forced himself to leap up and dive at the wallowing man on the ground. His second gun was out as he leaped, and for the second time that night, he clubbed frantically at Abe Moffat's head. But there in the darkness, he could not be sure of his licks, and Moffat fired again at such close range that Tod felt the searing sting of powder as it flashed into his face.

He felt, too, the hissing of a bullet that ripped through his tousled

hair, and knew that he had escaped death by the narrowest margin.

But he had located Moffat's head now, and slapped at it with the barrel of his Colt. The 4M owner went limp, and Tod reached hastily for the gun, wrenching it from the thick, powerful fingers.

Moffat was snarling weakly and trying to rise, for Tod's blow had only dazed him. But Moffat was out of the picture, just the same, for he was too weak to offer any real resistance.

But even as Tod realized that, he knew that his plans were spoiled, and that he would have to leave Abe Moffat behind. From the ranch yard there came the pound of many shod hoofs and the wild yells of riders who were charging toward him.

"Hey, boss!" a voice lifted wildly. "This is Tutt, boss. The boys an' me are comin' ter help. Where are yuh, an' what's wrong?"

"Answer, yuh snake, an' I'll bend this gun across yore teeth!" Tod snarled at Abe Moffat. "Keep quiet, feller, if yuh value yore hide any."

Abe Moffat snarled an oath at Tod, and struck out blindly with one fist. Tod took the blow on the shoulder, then struck out with his fist at Moffat's face. The blow caught him on the jaw. He went out cold.

Tod plunged against the corral gate before he realized where he was. He was about to race on around the corral when an idea suddenly occurred to him. Yanking the corral gate wide, he got inside, worked to the far end where nervous horses stood snorting, and got in behind them.

He could hear the 4M men racing around outside now, still mounted and yelling for their boss.

Tod slanted his guns and raked both hammers back.

"All right, boys!" he yelled shrilly. "They're close enough now. Let 'em have it! Ride the skunks down!"

Tod's guns roared, and from outside there came the frightened squawking of men. But the voices were instantly drowned, for those Diamond 8 broncs left the corral, and left in a hurry.

Tod saw red streamers of powder blaze stabbing the darkness beyond the corral, and knew that Moffat's hirelings had fallen for the trick. But it would take them only a moment to discover that there were no riders on the horses sweeping toward them.

Tod hastily reloaded his hot guns, holstered them, and climbed the back corral fence. He dropped to the ground outside and trotted away, grimly angry because his plan of getting Abe Moffat and making him tell what he knew had failed.

Tod crossed the sink swiftly, climbed to the rim where he had left his horse, and donned the chaps and spurs he had left hanging on the saddle horn. He stood there for several minutes, listening to the hubbub below him.

From the yells and angry oaths that were coming up out of the sink, Tod knew that the 4M cutthroats were trying to corral those Diamond 8 horses again. But that would be some little job to perform in such darkness, and Tod decided to ride on.

He was aware now of a gnawing hunger, and realized that his only hope for food was to ride back up into the pine forest where he had left the venison hanging. He turned Gila and began the long climb, listening for sounds of pursuit as he rode.

Once he thought he heard horses

galloping behind him. But after a minute's listening, he decided that he had been mistaken. He rode on then until he came into the dark forest, and spent the better part of an hour looking for the spot where he had left the meat.

He finally located the little clearing where old Toby Weston had felled the buck, turned his horse loose to graze, and hunted about until he had found wood under the near-by trees and built a fire.

From the timber he now brought thick venison steaks, which were spitted over a special bed of coals near the main fire and permitted to roast until they were golden brown. Tod turned the steaks slowly, mouth watering as the savory odor of the meat lifted in the sharp air.

He had no salt for seasoning and no food other than the meat, yet to him it was one of the best meals he had ever eaten. But with a full stomach came drowsiness, and only when the chill bit through his heavy clothing would he arouse himself enough to pile more wood on the fire.

When the sky finally turned gray, then red with coming dawn, Tod was so heavy-eyed and numbed from the cold that he could barely move about. Yet he roasted more meat, ate it ravenously, and rolled a generous amount of the chilled venison in his slicker, which he lashed behind his saddle. He caught Gila after that, saddled, and rode through the forest until he came to a great bluff which overlooked many miles of the lower country.

Tying Gila back in the trees, Tod crept out onto the barren stone rim rock, stretched himself out in the sun, and slept soundly for three hours. He awoke much refreshed, but found that the meat he had eaten had given him a burning thirst.

He got his horse and rode back through the forest and started down toward the lower country, eyes keenly alert.

A grim smile tugged at his lips when he saw tiny puffs of dust lifting far below him. There were alkali flats down there, and Tod knew that riders were working across those flats, no doubt looking for him.

He dropped off into a canyon where a sickly stream ran, quenched his thirst, and was about to ride out again before he realized that the canyon was the same one in which the deputy had been murdered.

Tod snapped to attention instantly, and began working back and forth across the canyon on foot, eyes glued to the ground. Nor did he have to look long before he knew that a band of horses had traveled down the canyon a few days before.

"Which shore checks with other things," he cried. "Deputy Stone run acrost them 4M snakes drivin' the Diamond 8 hosses, an' they murdered him to keep him from tellin' what he knowed. Now, if I could *prove* that, I'd be a free man. As it is——"

"As it is, yo're the same as a dead man, yuh tricky skunk!"

Tod whirled toward the voice, and found himself looking into a pair of cocked .45s that were leveled and ready to flame. Behind those guns was Tutt Warner, 4M ramrod.

Warner's thin, sallow face was wreathed in sarcastic smiles, and in his beady little black eyes there were ugly lights as he stepped boldly from behind a big boulder that had hidden him.

Tod Lester felt the impact of those beady eyes, and knew that the slightest false move on his part would bring Tutt Warner's slim fin-fiers down hard against those flat gun triggers.

CHAPTER VIII.

BULLET SETTLEMENT.

TUTT WARNER edged behind Tod, holstered one gun, and disarmed him. He stepped hastily away then, opened his thin red lips, and emitted that coyote yap. An answering yap came from down the canyon, and a few moments later Abe Moffat rode into view.

At sight of Tod, Moffat's battered, swollen features went dark with fury, and his mighty hands swooped his guns up and out in a lightning-swift draw.

"Hold it, Abe!" Tutt Warner yelled sharply. "Want to draw the sheriff an' them others this way?"

Abe Moffat winced, let his guns lower. But from between those puffy lids, his tawny eyes glowed like yellow coals of fire.

"So yuh got the snake that has dealt us so much grief, huh, Tutt?" Moffat growled. "Boost him on his hoss an' bring him on ter the hide-out. I reckon we kin settle him thar without that fool sheriff hearin' us."

"I seen him comin' down from the high spots an' watched until I was shore he aimed 'to ride down into the canyon." Tutt Warner chuckled thinly. "I figured where he'd hit the canyon, an' danged if he didn't ride right past my hidin' place. I could 'a' kilt him easy, only I didn't want that blasted posse ter hear."

"We'd better give up the idea o' capturin' one o' them posse men, fer the time bein', anyhow," Abe Moffat snarled. "We've got this blasted slick-ear, an' I aim ter enjoy whittlin' him up in little chunks afore I finish him off."

Despite the seriousness of his own plight, Tod was badly puzzled. Why would Moffat and his foreman be

trying to capture a posse man? They had unquestionably been hiding along this deep canyon for that very purpose. And why were the two 4M cutthroats so set against meeting the sheriff?

"Git a wiggle on, younker!" Tutt Warner snarled. "Yuh've shore throwed a kink into my an' Abe's plans. Head fer yore hoss!"

Tutt Warner swung a booted foot against Tod's off hip pocket that almost knocked the young waddy down. Tod half whirled, then thought better of it and headed for his horse. He mounted, eyes blazing coldly, anger coursing through his nerves like hot needles.

"Yuh an' yore flea-bit boss are brave enough when yuh've got the drop, Warner," Tod snarled. "But if I had a gun——"

"Shut up, blast yuh, afore I put a bullet through yore middle an' take a chance on dodgin' whoever comes ter see what the shootin' is about!" Abe Moffat rasped.

The beefy jasper was not bluffing in the least, for cold murder glowed in his ugly eyes. Tod settled himself in the saddle, picked up Gila's reins, and waited for his captors to name the direction he was to ride.

"Yuh lead the way, boss," Tutt Warner called. "I'll sort o' mosey along behind this skunk an' see that he follers yuh."

That pleased Tod well enough. Thinking that he would be taken to the 4M ranch house, which was several miles distant, he felt that he had plenty of time to do some scheming. Gila was much faster than either of the horses under the 4M men. Given half a chance, Tod could dodge into a draw and escape. That possibility seemed the best bet, for he knew the country well, and saw instantly that Moffat was holding to the canyon bottom.

The 4M owner turned after half a mile and entered a side draw, which twisted sharply back into rugged hills. There were many side gulches to this draw, and Tod almost grinned when he thought of one certain gulch that would join this one a mile or so farther up. The draw he had in mind was as crooked as a snake's track, and was walled on both sides by sheer bluffs that ranged anywhere from ten to fifty feet in height.

Tod had used it to trap wild cattle, and felt pretty sure that he could make a break into it by pretending that his horse was acting up. But those plans were barely laid when Abe Moffat led the way into a little side canyon.

"Steady, feller!" Tutt Warner snarled, when Tod stiffened to attention. "Yuh make a bad move, an' I'll blow yore heart out!"

Tod growled through locked teeth, wishing now that he had called a show-down when Tutt Warner first got the drop. This side draw, Tod knew, led back to a blind end, where there were three caves hidden beneath an overhang of sandstone. Tod knew, even before they sighted the place, that he would be taken to one of those caves.

What he did not know was that those caves had been used for months, now, as a meeting place for horse and cattle thieves. His eyes fairly goggled when, a half hour later, he was dismounted and marched up under the overhang of sandstone.

The three caves yawned before him, and even as Tod looked, two greasy-looking individuals came slinking out, snarling at sight of him and gripping gun butts.

One of the evil-looking pair was a squatty, thickset hombre, with black-stubbed jowls and a pair of

grayish-white eyes that were as savage as a wolf's. The other man was lanky of build, with a long, crooked jaw and a pair of evil black eyes that stared unwinkingly from his grimy face.

"Scrub, yuh hustle them three hosses in out o' sight!" Abe Moffat rasped at the shorter of the two men.

"Shore, boss." The man addressed as "Scrub" nodded. "But yuh wait until I git back afore yuh finish this snake off, will yuh? Some o' them boys that the posse downed last night was my pards. I want ter see this blasted kid squirm afore yuh finish him."

"I seen Bat, my own brother, go down under them posse guns whilst the rest of us was gittin' away," the lanky man with the staring black eyes croaked. "Leave *me* handle this Lester snake, boss!"

"Mind yore own business, Herb White!" Abe Moffat snarled. "Yuh an' Scrub Tolson kin both git a laugh watchin' this kid beg fer mercy afore I'm done with him. He's the cause of our gang bein' busted up, blast his hide!"

"What's eatin' yuh vinegaroons?" Tod growled. "The only posse I know anything about is the one that was after my scalp yesterday. An' I reckon said posse still wants my hide, judgin' from some dust clouds I seen in the lowlands a while ago."

Spat! Tod saw Abe Moffat's huge fist coming, but was too late to duck.

The blow caught him at the corner of the mouth, splitting his lips, hurling him back and down into the mouth of one of the caves.

Moffat stood above him, swearing wildly, huge fists balled. Scrub Tolson, who had started away to care for the horses, came rushing back, evil eyes shining with delight as he watched.

Tod spat crimson from his crushed lips, shook his head sharply to clear his brain of shock fog.

"Try lyin' out of it, will yuh?" Abe Moffat snarled down at him. "Yuh brung that posse out last night an' trapped me an' my boys at yore blasted spread. We thought it was a bluff when yuh turned them hosses out o' the corral on us an' rode around thar like fools until the real posse had us hemmed in."

Tod was staring, realizing suddenly that a posse had come to his place looking for him, found the 4M men there, and started shooting at them. But how had it happened?

"We heard the sheriff callin' yore name as we snuk out o' that sink," Tutt Warner growled. "Like the boss says, there ain't no use in yuh lyin'. How'd yuh manage ter put the sheriff wise that we was holdin' them Diamond 8 hosses at yore place?"

"I didn't." Tod grinned mirthlessly. "But I'm beginnin' to see some light, anyway. Yuh gents didn't finish ol' Toby Weston the other day, like yuh figured yuh did. He's in town, an' I reckon it was him told the sheriff where ter find them missin' Diamond 8 bronses."

Abe Moffat and Tutt Warner swore in unison.

"We—we started slammin' lead at that posse, when all we needed to do was set pat an' say that we was tryin' ter take this skunk!" the 4M owner groaned. "The way I was beat up would 'a' convinced the sheriff that we'd had this younker cornered thar."

"We lost all of our gang except us four," Tutt Warner rasped. "Jist the same, it's this blasted slick-ear's fault. Drill him, boss, afore I do it my own self!"

"Shore, yuh'll shoot me down like yuh did that deputy who caught

yuh drivin' them Diamond 8 brones onto my range," Tod growled.

"That blasted depity had ter be put out o' the way," Tutt Warner sneered. "The boss drilled the skunk, but danged if the tin-star didn't live long enough ter drill pore Gopher through the leg, at that. After that——"

Tod was not even listening now. Abe Moffat had stooped, and was dragging a wicked-looking bowie knife from the top of his boot.

But in stooping, Moffat came much closer to his intended victim. Tod fastened his eyes on the gun that bulged at Moffat's left thigh, coiled his lean muscles, and lunged up and out with every ounce of his strength.

The crown of his head crashed into Moffat's chin, jerking him up and back. Tod's hand clawed at the holstered gun, found the smooth butt, and brought it up and out.

Moffat slashed at him with the knife, and Tod felt the sickening pain of cold steel ripping through the muscles of his chest. But it had been a slashing blow rather than a stabbing one, and although the cut was painful, it was far from dangerous.

With a tug and a heave, Tod reeled backward, Moffat's gun in his hand. Through pain-blurred eyes, he saw Tutt Warner crouched, saw the slender gunman's hands whip to his holsters and come up with glinting weapons.

Tod fired point-blank, and Tutt Warner crashed sidewise against Abe Moffat, just as the 4M boss drew his second gun and fired.

The two men fell in a tangled heap, and for the moment Tod switched his attention to Scrub Tolson and Herb White. They had both drawn, and were firing wildly,

their slugs humming into the cave behind Tod.

He snapped a shot at the squat Scrub, saw the fellow stagger, and switched his gun to Herb White, in time to see that jasper legging it toward the three waiting horses.

A gun boomed then, and Tod felt as if his feet had been jerked out from beneath him. As he crashed down, he saw Abe Moffat rearing up, a smoking gun in one huge hand, battered face twisted into a hideous mask of rage and hate.

A bullet had cut along Tod's temple, numbing him. But the shock was passing swiftly, and he forced himself to roll sidewise just as Moffat fired again.

Tod sat up then, lifted the Colt swiftly, and took quick, sure aim. The big gun roared, and Abe Moffat spun halfway around, his gun arm flopping at his side. He belled a mighty oath and stooped, grabbing at the Colt with his good hand. But Tod's gun roared again, and the Colt went skipping down the hillside.

"Steady, Moffat, or I'll have to kill yuh!" Tod began. "I'd rather save yuh for the hangin' yuh deserve. But if yuh force me——"

He broke off, for to his ears there came the sudden hammering of guns. Tod glanced about sharply.

Tutt Warner was down for keeps, with a slug through his brain. Scrub Tolson lay panting hoarsely, clawing at a broken shoulder, too sick even to think of fighting. That shooting had come from close by, yet none of those 4M jaspers had done it.

Tod stood up suddenly, for to his ears there came the pound of hoofs. Then he saw men reining in before the overhang—grim-eyed, dust-caked men who took in the scene

in swift, searching glances. Sheriff Sam Lowry and old Toby Weston were in the lead.

"Thar!" old Toby yipped suddenly. "I told yuh Tod Lester would ride skunk sign ontill he nailed that hoss-thievin' Abe Moffat!"

"Sheriff, I tried ter ketch this snake fer yuh!" Abe Moffat gulped, jerking a hand at Tod. "But—but he slickered us, kilt pore Tutt, an' then——"

"Shut yore mouth, Abe Moffat, afore I fergit that I'm an officer an' drill yuh!" the big sheriff roared. "Some o' that skunk-scented crew o' yores we snagged last night has talked, an' talked plenty. Yo're under arrest fer murderin' Depity Roy Stone!"

"Then—then I'm free!" Tod cried. "Sheriff, that frees me, don't it?"

The sheriff turned slowly as posse men rushed past him to take charge of Abe Moffat, who had dropped to the ground and was moaning miserably from pain and fright. The sheriff's face was still badly swollen from coming in such violent contact

with steel bars the day before, and in his hard black eyes there were baleful lights.

"Yuh ain't free of everything yet, yuh slippery young jasper!" he boomed. "Hittin' an officer an'—an' breakin' jail is bad charges."

Tod gulped uneasily, the sweet taste of complete victory suddenly sour in his mouth.

"Aw, sheriff, what's eatin' yuh?" old Toby Weston put in. "Countin' that Herb White ranny we jist run into down the canyon an' smoked up, the hull 4M gang was brought to justice. An' yuh can't thank anybody but Tod Lester."

"I—I heard shootin' a minute ago," Tod gulped. "So yuh got that Herb White jasper, eh?"

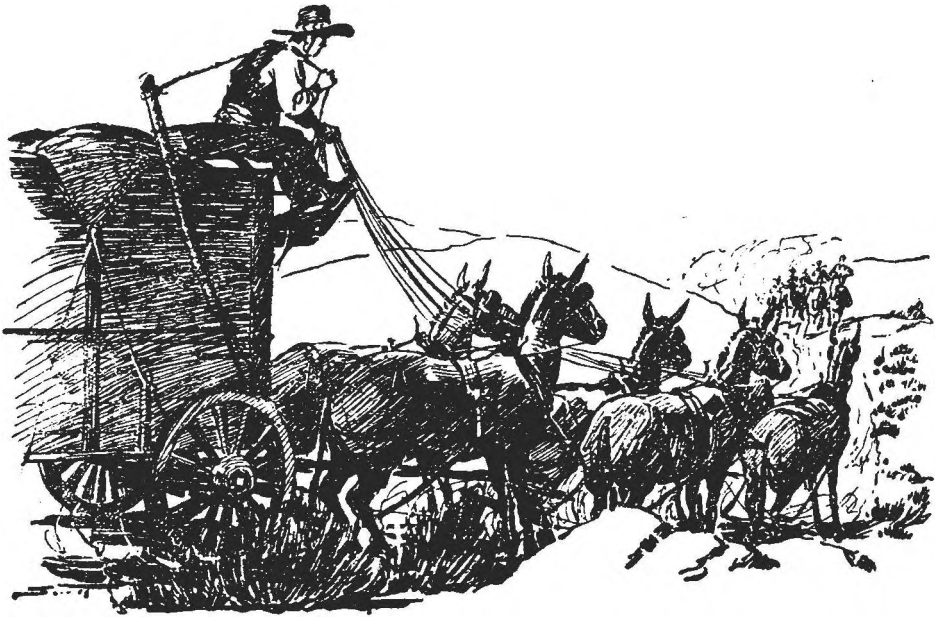
"We did." The sheriff frowned. "An' I reckon I'll have to admit that yo're the man to thank fer this clean-up, Tod. Mebbe, if yuh was to be my head depity, I'd overlook what yuh done to me yesterday. Besides, yuh scrappin' young galoop, the salary will help yuh build up that spread o' yores."

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Mix-up At Maverick Canyon

A "Shorty Masters" Story

By Allan R. Bosworth

Author of "Ten-gallon Boots," etc.

THE furious clatter of hurrying hoofs swept up from the flat where gray mesquites cast lengthening shadows over the grass. "Shorty" Masters, M.D. (Mule Driver), reined in his team at the rim of the divide and peered down into the purpling dusk.

"I reckon that's Willie and the sheriff's posse," he told the nervous mules. "Of course, it might be trouble o' some kind. But I figure it ain't."

The six freight animals shot their
WW—6E

long ears forward and champed at their bits. Shorty frowned, and rested his freckled right hand on the butt of his holstered .45.

If the mules smelled danger, there was a good chance of something being wrong. These were no ordinary jacks. Foaled by a mare known as Lucy, they had acquired the title of the "Sextet from Lucia" from the music-loving Shorty, and each was named for a great composer.

But Willie Wetherbee—the mule skinner's tall cowboy pard who was

better known as the "Sonora Kid"—had ridden ahead to the Padre Silver Mine, to tell Sheriff Jim Sands that the freight outfit was hauling enough explosive to blow half of the Big Bend country into the Rio Grande. And it was time Willie was coming back.

Shorty half-hitched his reins around the brake handle, and waited. Now he could make out the horsemen as they streaked up the treeless slope of the divide.

Six—seven—nine of them. Well up in the lead was a tall waddy on a sleek sorrel cayuse.

Shorty grinned with relief. That was the Sonora Kid, riding Tumbleweed.

"I told yuh so, mules!" the freighter said aloud. "Now we can keep right on rollin'. Ought to make the mine before midnight. Gosh! I shore will be glad to git rid of all this dynamite and blastin' powder."

He glanced back over the three heavily loaded wagons. There were provisions and a few crates of machinery destined for the Padre Silver Mine, but most of the load consisted of explosives.

Even the water keg had been removed from its rack on the side of the last wagon, and a huge keg of black powder sat in its place. Spring rains had filled all the water holes, and Shorty knew neither he nor the mules would suffer from thirst.

The horsemen arrived in a swirl of dust. Shorty climbed down from the wagon seat and grinned at his pard.

"Howdy, Willie!" he said. "I see yuh found him. Who's the sheriff?"

The Sonora Kid jerked his thumb toward a huge man who wore a yellow slicker buttoned tightly around his massive form. The sheriff rode

a horse that seemed several hands too small for a man so heavy.

"That's him," drawled the Sonora Kid. "Sands, this here is my pard, Shorty Masters."

The big man climbed carefully down from his horse and smoothed out the slicker. Shorty saw that he wore a pair of wicked-looking six-guns strapped on the outside.

"Glad to know yuh, Masters!" boomed Sands. "Sonora tells me yuh are haulin' dynamite. Well, I told Sonora somethin', too. I reckon yuh might as well know it now. There's a gang of outlaws hangin' around in this part of the country, figurin' on holdin' up the next shipment of bar silver. We may run acrost 'em to-night."

The freighter grinned as they shook hands. "In that case, it's a good thing Willie went for yuh," he said. "Did yuh have to go all the way to the mine, Willie?"

Sands answered for the tall puncher. "Nope. He met us this side. I reckon we can git movin' now. These boys are all my deputies. This here's Charley Ward, and this is Juan Gonzales. The skinny hombre is Bird-leg Schiller, and this is Pete Martin. I'll interduce yuh to the others later. Right now, we'd better ride. Got a match?"

Shorty handed one over, while Sands licked a cigarette paper into shape. He tried in vain to strike the light on his slicker, then grunted and stepped to the nearest wagon wheel. The flame sheltered by his cupped hands revealed a coarse, lined face which wore a pallor that was peculiar for a man in the cattle country.

"Mebbe he's been workin' in the mine, instead of out in the sun," Shorty thought. Aloud, he said: "I cain't savvy that slicker. It's

plenty warm, and it shore ain't goin' to rain. Yuh want to put it in the waggin?"

Sands tossed the match away and whirled on Shorty. "Say, yuh—yuh——" he roared with a burst of temper.

Charley Ward stepped forward and grabbed the big man's arm.

"Hold it, sheriff!" he cautioned. "Never mind, Masters. Sands has got a hot temper. Jest don't poke yore nose into his business, and yuh'll git along all right."

"Yeah, I didn't mean nothin'," growled Sands. "Let's go!"

Shorty climbed back to the wagon seat, puzzled by the sheriff's outburst over a matter so trivial. As he took the reins, Willie Wetherbee pulled himself up and sat down beside his pard.

"Tumbleweed's kind o' tired," announced the tall puncher in an unnecessarily loud voice. "I tied him on behind fer a while. Mebbe I'll have to show yuh the road, anyway."

"Tumbleweed tired?" Shorty began in surprise.

An elbow jabbed him in the ribs. The freighter clamped his jaw shut and shook the reins over the mules.

Eight men strung around the wagons, Sands riding near the front. The wheels rumbled on the rough divide descent; Shorty had to put on his brakes, and the shoes squealed against the dry wagon tires. There was enough noise now to drown talk.

"What's the matter?" Shorty asked out of the side of his mouth.

"I dunno," drawled the Sonora Kid, looking straight ahead. "Mebbe nothin'. But this hombre who says he's the sheriff looks kind o' funny to me. He ain't wearin' boots. He's wearin' hobnail shoes. And I cain't savvy the slicker, either."

"Has he got a badge?"

"Shore. He showed me that, the first thing. Totes it in his pocket. But I can buy a whole slue of badges and stars—any kind I want—in San Antone."

Shorty nodded. "I reckon mebber everything's all right," he said. "Yuh see, Sands ain't only the sheriff o' this here county, but he owns a part interest in that silver mine, and he owns the Bar S Ranch this side of it. I've heard of him and his temper, all right. He and the ranchman this side o' Bar S range—Wheeler, the hombre's name is—have been carryin' on a kind o' feud fer years."

"Gun feud?" asked the Sonora Kid.

"Not lately. But they've got a double line o' barbed wire between their property. Did yuh go through two gates close together?"

"Yeah. There is a bridge between 'em—a bridge over the draw. Gate on both sides."

"That's the Bar S and Flyin' W spite fence," Shorty chuckled. "We'll be comin' to it after a while. This here is Flyin' W range we're on now."

Wetherbee was silent for a little while. Then he shook his head.

"I still don't like the looks o' things," he said. "Them hobnail shoes, now. Yuh don't see many like——"

Braang! Without warning, a gun roared from the mesquites.

One of the posse howled with pain and twisted out of his saddle. Sands roared, his voice the bellow of an angry bull:

"After 'em, boys! Sonora, grab yore hoss! Charley, you and Juan stay here and help guard the wagons! Come on, the rest of yuh!"

II.

Br-raang! Braang! Br-room!

Swift, vivid stabs of orange-colored flame knifed the fast-gathering darkness. Lead slashed the wagon sheets and slammed with a clamor against the steel tires.

Shorty Masters whipped out his gun as the Sonora Kid ran back to get his horse.

"Come on!" bellowed Sands. "After 'em!"

Braang!

Shorty suddenly realized that only one gun was blazing courageously at the freight outfit and the ten men who rode with it. He saw Sands's horse strike the brush with the queer, half-sidewise motion the broncs of the chaparral country learn. The other riders also tore into the mesquites, hot after the mystery gunman.

"I'll git yuh yet, Potter!" somebody shouted. Then another blast from the posse's guns ripped through the brush. Horses' hoofs were hammering frantically into the night.

"Looks kind o' like that hombre got away," Shorty told himself. "Don't know as I feel so sorry fer Sands, at that. All these men after jest one—the odds is too big."

Sands was coming back, swearing, ranting at his men. The chase had not been successful.

"Should have plugged that buzzard," declared the burly rider. "Shore should have got him. What's the matter with all of yuh? Lost yore nerve?"

Nobody answered. Shorty Masters watched the leader as he approached the wagon.

"Who was it yuh was shootin' at?" inquired the freighter.

"Why, that—that was Bill Potter!" Sands declared. "He's a tough hombre. Escaped from the pen last

week. He's leadin' the bunch o' coyotes that's figurin' to rob the mine."

"I savvy." Shorty nodded.

The freighter had heard of Bill Potter, railroad dynamiter, whom Jim Sands had sent to prison. He was no longer sorry for the hombre with the odds against him.

"Brush is thicker'n molasses at Christmas time!" growled Sands. "That's why he got away. Mesquite snaggin' at yuh, nearly knockin' yuh out of yore saddle. Who's got a match?"

The Sonora Kid passed one across, and Sands struck it on the saddle horn and cupped the flame against the wind. Shorty, looking down from the wagon seat, sucked in a sharp breath and tensed his muscles. Sands tossed the match aside and exhaled a mouthful of smoke.

"Let's git goin' again," he said. "We'll make it to the Maverick Canyon bridge, and mebbe we'll camp there. I've got a hunch we'll run into Potter if we wait there. How about it, boys?"

A shout of laughter greeted Sands's remark. Shorty's head was whirling with surprise. The Sonora Kid tethered Tumbleweed behind the wagons again, and climbed to the driver's seat.

Once more, the freight outfit rumbled forward behind the Sextet from Lucia.

"Guess this hombre Potter must be plenty tough," observed Wetherbee. "I've heard of him. He blowed up all the railroad bridges between Del Rio and El Paso, robbin' the trains. He finally got sent to the pen by Jim Sands, and he swore he'd kill Sands if he ever got out."

"Well," Shorty drawled in a voice so soft that it was lost to all but his tall sidekick, "he's out. What's

more, he's got plenty dynamite to blow up all the railroad bridges between here and Halifax, this time. Would yuh like to lay yore peepers on him?"

The Sonora Kid's hand caressed his six-gun. "I shore would!"

"Take a look, then. There he is!"

Wetherbee looked as his partner pointed with the stock of his big mule whip. Shorty was pointing at Jim Sands!

"What yuh mean?" demanded the tall puncher. "That's—that's——"

"That's Bill Potter!" Shorty went on earnestly. "When he struck that match, I saw why he's wearin' the slicker. He tore it in the brush—and there is stripes under it!"

"Gosh!" gasped the Sonora Kid. "Gosh! We was right, then, about the hobnails and everything. I savvy why most of these hombres' clothes don't fit. This is the convict gang that got away from the prison last week!"

Shorty nodded. "This is them, all right. They rustled hosses and guns somewhere. They're smart, otherwise, they never would have fooled us so easy, makin' us think they was the posse. Why, they even made yuh help chase an hombre that was probably Jim Sands hisself!"

"I can plug Potter, and——"

Shorty gripped the tall waddy's wrist. "Take it easy!" he advised. "This calls for a trick. If yuh don't let on yuh suspect nothin', mebbe we can figure a way out."

For a couple of miles, the outfit plodded along in silence except for the jingle of the trace chains and the rumble of the wheels.

Shorty was thinking hard, desperately. There were still seven able-bodied men in Potter's gang—seven to two. Not much chance of getting out.

"Hold it!" the big man suddenly ordered, lifting his hand.

Shorty jerked leather on the mules; the other riders reined in their mustangs.

"We're comin' to Maverick Canyon," announced the leader. "Now here is what I figure. Yuh know there is two gates—one at each end of the bridge. The first one lets us out of the Flyin' W range. After yuh cross the bridge and go through the other gate, yuh are on the Bar S—my property."

"Listen to him!" whispered the Sonora Kid. "He shore lies well!"

"Well," Potter resumed, "I figure that the outlaws will come root-toot-in' down the road acrost the bridge. They *have* to cross the bridge to git over Maverick Canyon, which is plenty steep, as all of yuh know. They figure on holdin' up the stage which will be totin' the silver, and they figure on holding it up on the bridge. I know that much."

"Yeah!" croaked the skinny hombre who had been introduced as "Bird-leg" Schiller. "That's the place. The stage has to stop on the bridge while the gate is opened."

"That's right. Well, we could blow them skunks sky-high with the dynamite Masters is haulin'—blow 'em up the minute they ride onto the bridge!"

Shorty gasped with horror. Bill Potter was plotting revenge upon Jim Sands, the sheriff who had sent him up for dynamiting. Plotting the sort of revenge he knew so well how to execute—loud, mangling death! And the freighter knew the explosion would be timed to wreck the stage, so the convicts could seize the bar silver it carried!

"Is that clear to all of yuh?" demanded Potter, looking around at the shadowy figures of his men.

They nodded in unison.

"Sounds like a good plan to me," Shorty chimed in. "But how about my waggins and mules when the blast goes off?"

"I'll take care o' that," Potter promised. "Yuh can drive on around the hill from the canyon, after we unload the dynamite. I'll send somebody with yuh to show yuh the way and help yuh smooth things over, in case yuh meet the robbers. All right. Let's go. We'll have to hurry!"

III.

The thin moon crept up over the ragged rim rocks as the Sextet climbed on the mountain road. Shorty and Willie did not talk; each was busy trying to think of a way to save the posse and the stage driver.

The partners had their guns. But there were seven men riding alongside and in front of the wagons. They might kill two or three of them, but the others would get the pair on the wagon seat in the next loud blast of fire. And then the wagons and dynamite would be theirs to use in their plot.

Shorty licked dry lips and wished he had a drink. He remembered the keg of black powder that stood in place of his water keg.

"I might go back and git on Tumbleweed," whispered the Sonora Kid. "If I could git through ahead o' these hombres and warn Sands, mebbe things would come out all right."

"If yuh switch to the hoss now, they'll know yuh suspect somethin'," Shorty objected. "Set tight! I'm beginnin' to git an idee. We've got to use brains. Look! Here's the bridge!"

The little mule skinner drew in a long breath. The mules halted while one of the gang swung from his saddle and opened the gate.

Here the road clung dangerously to the side of the mountain, and crossed the deep gash in the hill by means of the wooden span Jim Sands had constructed. This was Maverick Canyon—so named because it was claimed neither by the Bar S nor the Flying W. It was No Man's Land.

"What yuh waitin' fer, Masters?" demanded Potter. "Move them jacks up and stop 'em on the bridge while we unload that dynamite!"

"Shore, I'm comin'!" answered Shorty. "Giddap, Tschaikowsky!"

"That shore is a jaw-breakin' name fer a mule," Potter commented. "There, stop 'em! All right, boys. Git out the dynamite! Where is it, Masters?"

Shorty climbed down, hitching his reins on the brake handle. The wooden bridge resounded to the tread of his boots and the hollow thump of hoofs. He strode back to the third wagon.

"It's in here," he said. "Better handle it with care, or——"

"Yuh cain't tell me nothin' about dynamite," retorted Potter, and the gang burst into laughter. "I've been in the minin' business too long not to savvy it, haven't I, boys?"

Shorty watched with a sinking heart. Any one of those cases would blow up the bridge. The outlaws were taking a half dozen, stacking them on the bridge until they could place them below and rig the fuse.

The mule driver went back toward his mules. As he passed the keg of black powder on the side of the wagon, he lifted his heavy .45 from his holster and slammed the butt of the gun against the keg.

"What yuh doin'?" demanded Potter.

"Looks like somethin's comin' loose here," Shorty answered, striking the keg again. "Now—that's got it!"

Something *was* loose—the plug in the bunghole of the keg dropped to the bridge and rolled over the side into the canyon. Black powder began to trickle out, as noiselessly as snow falling on the bridge.

Shorty went back to the driver's seat. The Sonora Kid climbed up beside him.

"What are yuh goin' to do?" whispered the tall puncher.

"Plenty!" Shorty grinned. "Jest wait!"

"That's enough!" he heard Potter say. "All right, boys. "Take yore hosses back into Flyin' W territory and tie 'em to the mesquites. We'll wait here on the bridge till we hear the bunch comin'. Then we'll stick some dynamite under the beams, light the fuse, and duck. Savvy?"

The gang understood. Shorty wondered how many of these ruffians had been with Bill Potter's old dynamite gang, before Jim Sands put them in prison.

"Charley, you and Pete go on with the freight outfit," Potter ordered. "Take care o' the mule skinner and his team."

"We'll shore take care of 'em!" Charley Ward answered. "We'll show 'em where to turn off so's the gang won't see 'em."

Ward and Pete Martin rode up, one on each side of the wagons. Shorty started the mules, and an outlaw who was on foot opened the gate at the Bar S end of the bridge. With a hollow rumble of wheels, the freight outfit passed through and reached solid ground again.

"Come on—right up the road!" Ward ordered. "It ain't far. Side road turns off up here, halfway around the mountain."

Shorty nodded. Once before, he had hauled supplies to the Padre Silver Mine. He hadn't met Jim

Sands on that occasion, and didn't know what Sands looked like.

But he remembered the double-gate bridge over the box canyon, and he knew how the road almost doubled back on itself after it turned the hill.

"Git ready!" he whispered, nudging the Sonora Kid. "We can't make no noise. I'll jump Ward, over here! You knock Pete Martin out of his saddle!"

Wetherbee's lean figure tightened, and Shorty knew he could depend upon his cowboy pard. The Sonora Kid was like a wild cat in a rough-and-tumble fight.

They were turning the hill now. A few more yards, and they would be well out of sight of the men on the bridge, and the hill would shut off anything but a loud noise.

"Wait a minute!" Ward exclaimed. "Listen!"

The mules halted. On either side of the wagons, the outlaws leaned forward, intent on the distant sound that came to their ears.

Shorty and Willie heard it, too—whirring wheels and the beat of hoofs. Still a half mile away, perhaps farther. The stage—and the posse that was sent along to guard the silver! Heading for a death trap on the bridge at Maverick Canyon!

"Now!" whispered the teamster, and flung his compact body sidewise. *Crash!*

There was a double impact as Wetherbee leaped upon Pete Martin and bore him from the saddle. Shorty heard the man he struck grunt with surprise and the shock of breath leaving his body. Then they were falling off the frightened horse, in danger of being trampled under cutting hoofs.

"What's the——" began Charley Ward. Fingers made muscular from the constant handling of reins closed

on his throat, and he got no further with speech. A clubbed gun came down back of his ear.

Ward collapsed, one arm hooked through his bridle reins. The horse reared, dragging him into a prickly pear. Shorty reached out and freed the unconscious man.

"Whoa, boy!" he told the mustang. "I reckon mebbe I'll be ridin' yuh in a minute. How yuh comin', Willie?"

The Sonora Kid crawled under the wagon and emerged grinning.

"I'm comin' on all fours!" he chuckled. "That Martin hombre is takin' hisself a long nap. What are we goin' to do now?"

Shorty listened. The approaching stage was nearer. The sound of hoofs and wheels rose and fell on the night wind.

"Pull the waggins up a little, after I tend to that powder keg!" the freighter explained. "Grab yore hoss, and hold this one fer me! We've got some ridin' to do."

"What's the matter with the powder keg!" Wetherbee wanted to know.

But Shorty had already walked back to examine it. The last of the contents was dribbling to the ground. The freighter smiled grimly and went back to the mules.

Without climbing to the seat, he drove the Sextet forward for fifty feet, then came back. Wetherbee had the two horses in hand. The riderless mount of Pete Martin was champng on its bit as it tried to crop grass at the steep side of the road.

"Ain't yuh goin' to clear the road?" Willie wanted to know.

"No." Shorty grinned. "But I'm goin' to shoot around the mountain, like the windy hombre in the story says he did with the bent rifle barrel. Here goes! Git in yore saddle!"

IV.

The Sonora Kid forked Tumbleweed, watching with a perplexed frown. Shorty straddled the outlaw's horse, then leaned over toward his pard.

"Got a match?" he asked. "Potter took the last one I had."

"Shore. Here's one. But yuh don't smoke——"

"No, but I shore burn. Look at this!"

Shorty scratched the match on his boot sole, and leaned from his saddle. There was a little heap of black in the road. He dropped the flaming sliver.

Puff! Powder ignited with a flash that sent the horses jumping in fright.

Around the turn in the road, a flaming, writhing serpent twisted at great speed, heading for the bridge over Maverick Canyon!

"Come on!" Shorty yelled. "Head the other way! Go around the hill and meet 'em from the rear—that is, what's left of 'em!"

"Yip-eee!" chortled the Sonora Kid as he hit spurs to Tumbleweed.

The smell of powder lifted to the wind on a cloud of smoke. The partners pounded leather furiously, leaving the road and taking across the treacherous slope of the hill. There were no box canyons on this side, but they would have two barbed-wire fences to climb.

Broom! A tremendous, ground-shaking explosion split the night.

Above the ragged rim rock, the partners saw flaming debris shoot skyward on a billowing cloud of reddish smoke. Smaller blasts crackled in the wake of the deafening clamor.

Shorty jerked rein at a fence, dimly gleaming in the moonlight. He flung himself to the ground and

ripped at the top strand of barbed wire, pulling it free from the post.

"Git yore hoss over!" he exclaimed. "Pull the next one down for me! These double fences are shore bad."

"Yeah, and we go around wreckin' 'em and blowin' up bridges!" drawled the Sonora Kid. "What will the real Jim Sands say?"

"He'll say thanks fer savin' the silver and his neck," retorted Shorty as he hammered a staple loose with the butt of his .45.

The partners were in Flying W territory a minute later. Springing back into their saddles, they raced at breakneck speed down the slope, dodging cedars and stunted live oaks, skirting boulders. As they neared the mesquite flat, two riderless horses shot in front of them.

"There goes the nag Potter was ridin'!" Shorty exclaimed. "That blast scared every cayuse in ten miles. I reckon all of the outlaws that had to leave that bridge in such a hurry had to pull out on foot."

"That'll make it easier to round 'em up," agreed the Sonora Kid. "Mebbe some of 'em——"

Br-raang! Bang!

A bullet whipped hot wind against Wetherbee's cheek. He jerked the sorrel to a sliding, dust-fogging stop, and his own gun split the swirling gloom.

Braang! Br-room! Bang! Braang! A volley broke out of the mesquites as six-guns unleashed flaming thunder.

Lead howled around the partners. They triggered in answer.

"Come on!" bellowed Potter's voice. "It's jest that dang mule prodder. Kill him!"

Murderous fury tinged the outlaw's voice. He came charging out of the brush, blind with rage, sling-
ing lead before him.

A slug cut through Shorty's jumper sleeve. He whipped up his gun and cracked down at the burly, slickered form.

Braang!

Bill Potter buckled, rolled and lay sprawled in death. The Sonora Kid triggered at a flash of flame from the mesquite clump.

A tall, thin man staggered into the open, lurched against a tree, and slumped to the ground. It was Bird-leg Schiller.

"Rush 'em!" panted Wetherbee. "Come on!"

He spurred the sorrel toward the thicket, hurling hot lead before him. Shorty swung after him—and then three men scrambled out of the brush with their hands in the air, yelling surrender.

"Keep 'em up!" Shorty ordered. "Let's see—three of yuh. Two back there at the waggins, and two left here fer the buzzards. That's all seven. I'm kind o' glad nobody got blowed up in that blast, because we might have got the real sheriff mixed up in it. Now mosey along, back up the road! And keep grabbin' fer a handful of stars!"

The partners came back to the brink of Maverick Canyon to find the Flying W gate blown off its hinges and the fence sagging. A heap of splintered, smoking timbers lay at the bottom of the gulch.

Men and horses appeared on the other side, and stage wheels rolled out of the night.

"Stick 'em up, or we'll plug yuh!" roared a voice. It was the same voice which had threatened Potter earlier in the evening.

"Yuh don't need to, Sands!" called Shorty. "We got yore convicts—that is, what's left of 'em."

"Who're you?"

"Shorty Masters, M.D., the which

stands fer 'Mule Driver.' And my pard—the Sonora Kid. We got three of the outlaws. Yuh see, we was with the gang early to-night when yuh plugged one of 'em. Only then we thought that Potter was you, and you was Potter, and——”

“What kind of infernal mix-up is this?” roared Jim Sands. “I’m comin’ around the hill and look into this here tangle. Keep yore guns on them hombres till I git there!”

“We’ve got ‘em covered!” Shorty chuckled.

“And listen, Masters!” the sheriff began again.

“I’m listenin’!”

“Don’t yuh blow up nothin’ else, savvy? Yuh are the most destructive feller I ever seen! I reckon I ought to thank yuh, though. Yuh ain’t only destructive—yuh are dawg-goned smart!”

When Shorty Masters gits in a jam, he’s plumb apt ter do jest what no one reckons he will. Even his pard, Willie Wetherbee, gits a surprise from him now an’ then, but allus turns out ter be right thar with his six-guns when Shorty’s in a jam. Shorty knows mules, but he knows hombres even better, an’ thar ain’t many thet kin git ahead of him. Him an’ Willie will be back right soon in another grippin’ story in Street & Smith’s Wild West Weekly.



DUMBBELL

THE MULES DIDN'T STAY LONG

A MAN was driving a mowing machine in a field of the Cimarron Ranch near Fort Dodge. It was pulled by two magnificent mules, named Puss and Jennie, that had been bought shortly before from the United States Mail Company. Their owner, A. J. Anthony, had been a messenger on the Overland routes, and had sat many times behind those two mules. He was mighty proud of them, and thought they were worth even more than the six hundred dollars he had paid for them.

The first morning they were hitched to the mowing machine, Mr. Anthony, as proud as a peacock, remarked to one of his men, “Do you hear how Puss and Jennie are making that machine hum?”

Something certainly was humming, but it was soon discovered that the noise was made by two Indians, one on each side of the mules. They were pounding them on their backs with their bows, and making them run their fastest.

A bunch of cowboys were shooting

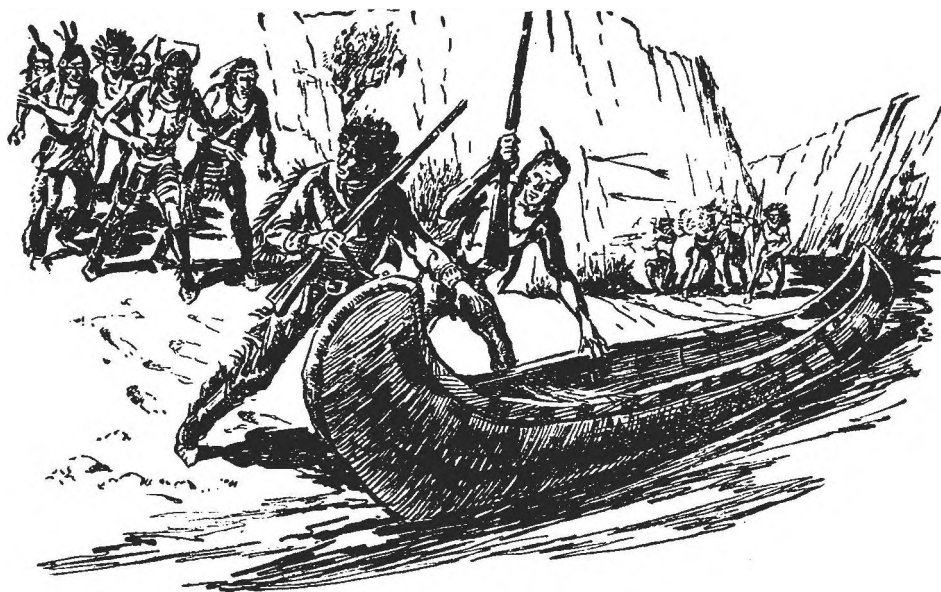
at the two Indians, while about twenty redskins were running after the driver of the mowing machine, uttering the most unearthly yells.

The two Indians who had the mules, had attacked the driver before he had any idea of their presence. They had rushed out of the brush near the river, unhitched the mules, and run off with them.

The driver’s two six-guns were strapped upon the machine, and all he could do was to drop off behind his seat, leave his Colts, and run for his life.

When the ranch hands got too close to the thieves for comfort, the latter turned and galloped away, and the mules, Puss and Jennie, were never seen again.

The Indians made so many attacks on this ranch that, after a few years of it, Mr. Anthony, by order of Major Douglas, the commander at Fort Dodge, abandoned it, and the day after he left, the redmen set fire to it and burned it, with several tons of hay and everything that was on the place.



Cougar Fang on the Warpath

By Walker Tompkins

Author of "Torture For Cougar Fang," etc.

CHAPTER I.

ARROWS OF DEATH.

HALTING in his stride at the point where the mountain trail dipped into the mouth of the canyon, "Cougar Fang's" blue eyes narrowed. He gazed down on an eagle feather, half hidden in the tall grass.

A prickling sensation of danger slid up the young American's spine and down again. He stooped and picked up the white-and-brown feather, turning it over in his hand. An untrained observer might have supposed it had fallen from an eagle's wing in flight.

But Cougar Fang, who had lived his twenty-two years on the untamed Western frontier, saw the single strand of jet-black hair which was caught on the feather's quill, and read its meaning instantly. That feather had come from an eagle originally, but of late it had adorned the scalplock of an Indian warrior.

"Was he friend or foe, Sleeping Buffalo?"

The young woodsman's query was spoken in the Sioux language to the tall young Indian brave who was his trail companion. Despite his name, Sleeping Buffalo was an Indian whose every sense was wide awake and keen.

The Sioux took the feather from Cougar Fang's hand and examined it closely. His beady black eyes snapped as he pointed out a tiny smear of red paint, which dyed the white part of the feather. To Sleeping Buffalo, that dot of color told a story.

"Feather came from Sioux warrior," grunted Sleeping Buffalo. "Red paint near tip means warrior scalped paleface like you. Bad medicine, Cougar Fang."

The white youth nodded soberly. He looked up the cliff-sided canyon, trying to pierce the blue shadows which pooled in it, blotting out the trail they were following.

Cougar Fang was not the young American's actual name. Back in Rainbow Valley, where he lived in the white settlement, this handsome-faced young fur trapper was known as Ted Booth.

But Booth was on a mission to the heart of these Thundergust Mountains, living with Indians, far from any white man. So used was he to hearing his Indian name of Cougar Fang that he had almost forgotten that he had been christened Ted Booth.

"We're in Pawnee country now," reminded Cougar Fang, with a note of worry in his voice. He doubled the Sioux feather and put it into a pocket of his fringed buckskin coat. "And this feather was dropped since last night's rain, Sleeping Buffalo."

His savage comrade nodded. They were making their way from the Sioux village at Peril Pass, over the mountain divide to a Pawnee camp on the White Rock range.

In Cougar Fang's raccoonskin cap, he carried an important message to the chief of the Pawnee nation. Sleeping Buffalo was his trail guide.

The two had traveled far from the Sioux hunting grounds, and this fresh sign of a member of that tribe being ahead of them was indeed "bad medicine." For their worst enemies were Sioux.

"Here comes Whiskers," went on Cougar Fang, shifting the weight of his long rifle to one elbow. "Mebbe he's sniffed somethin' out o' the ordinary."

Out of the tamarack bushes growing just inside the canyon came an ugly-faced mongrel dog, brown of coat and dripping from the rain water which covered the foliage through which he had been rummaging on a marmot's scent.

Wagging his stubby tail, Whiskers trotted up to Cougar Fang and then sat down to scratch at a flea in one ginger-colored ear.

That ear held a bullet hole. More than once, Cougar Fang and this shaggy, unkempt mongrel had fought side by side out of perilous adventures.

They were inseparable, this buckskin-dressed trapper and Whiskers. Ted Booth relied a great deal on what the sensitive nostrils of his canine partner told him.

"The dog no smell bad medicine," said Sleeping Buffalo. "Feather drop from Sioux hunter returning to Peril Pass, maybe."

Cougar Fang adjusted the elkhide belt which supported his hunting knife, in a scabbard made out of a clawed wolf's foot, and a shot pouch containing balls for his long rifle. With another anxious glance up the trail, he started forward.

"Anyhow, it won't do tuh linger here," he commented, as the trail scout fell into step behind him. "But keep yore eyes peeled fer Injun sign, Sleepin' Buffalo."

The two proceeded along the animal trail they had been following,

no traces of concern showing on their set faces. Yet their every sense was keenly alive, alert, and tingling.

Sleeping Buffalo had identified that feather as a war trophy of one of his own tribesmen. And the only Sioux who would have occasion to follow them would be a dangerous group of red-skinned outlaws, whom Cougar Fang had helped banish from the Sioux village.

The outlaws were led by Black Buzzard, the wicked medicine man of the tribe. Black Buzzard had led his feathered gang down to massacre the whites in Rainbow Valley, and it was for the purpose of making a peace treaty with the red men that Cougar Fang had come to the Peril Pass village.

Due to Cougar Fang's work, a new chief was being installed over the Sioux tribe. He was Fleetwing, a popular brave who was Cougar Fang's closest friend.

At Fleetwing's request, Cougar Fang was now on his way to invite the chief of the Pawnee nation to come to Peril Pass and take part in the ceremonies which would make Fleetwing chief. The Sioux also wished to smoke the peace pipe with their powerful neighboring tribe, exchange gifts, and talk in typical Indian style.

"Run ahead along the trail there, Whiskers, an' bark if yuh see anything suspicious!" ordered Cougar Fang in a low voice. "I don't like the looks o' things!"

The young trapper knew that no Indian would lose his feather—a trophy that meant as much to him as a medal of valor to a frontier cavalry rider, for instance—without stopping to pick it up. The savage who had lost that emblem of having slain a white enemy, had been in a hurry.

Cougar Fang's keen blue eyes roved over the canyon, taking in every detail. No sign of moccasin print could he see on the overgrown trail, no bent reeds, disturbed moss, or other marks which an expert woodsman would read as indication that some one had traveled this same path recently.

Whiskers, knowing his duty, hurried on ahead, nostrils alert to pick up the scent of possible danger.

"Black Buzzard an' his Injun gang is somewhere in these hills, honin' tuh peel off my scalp!" thought Cougar Fang. "But we been travelin' by night, an' it don't seem possible they could have discovered us."

Young Ted Booth had a reason for wanting to meet Black Buzzard, but not on this trip. It was the medicine man who had murdered Ted's father. The dying statement of his only brother, Chuck Booth, had proved that.

"Just as soon as Fleetwing's duly installed chief o' the Sioux, an' I've smoked the peace pipe with 'em, I'm goin' tuh pick up Black Buzzard's sign an' trail that skunk to his den!" swore Cougar Fang to himself. "I'll git him fer murderin' my dad, if it's the last——"

Woof! Garough! A sharp, pealing bark rang angrily out of the canyon ahead. Whiskers, snarling the danger cry!

Instantly, Cougar Fang leaped sidewise, at the same time throwing back an arm to knock Sleeping Buffalo flat on the grass.

Whizz! Something like a wasp droned by Cougar Fang's ear.

Spinning like a panther, he dropped to one knee. As he did so he caught sight of a feathered Indian arrow projecting from the trail, back down the canyon.

"Back to the cliff wall, Sleepin' Buffalo!"

With the words, Cougar Fang rolled into a thicket of cottonwood, at the same time cocking his long rifle. Sleeping Buffalo cried out in agony, then jerked a barbed arrow from his naked thigh. Snatching a sharp tomahawk from his breechclout, he came limping after his white companion, crimson streaming from his leg.

Cougar Fang's rifle sights had lined themselves on the head of a feathered Indian warrior, crouching on the rim rock of the cliff overhead. A second later, the ambusher came tumbling down to bounce with a grisly *clug* among the bushes.

"Ambushed! An' danged lucky Whiskers warned us in——"

He got no further. The dog's quick warning had kept them from walking into the trap which had been laid for them, but the ambushed Sioux were making an attack, now.

From all angles of the compass, fiendish war whoops split the air. Arrows came like a shower of needles through the brush, and Cougar Fang saw Sleeping Buffalo wilt with a flint barb embedded in his stomach.

Brush crashed as red-skinned warriors slogged out of their hiding places, yelling their war cries, eager for scalps.

Cougar Fang crawled deeper into the thicket. He uncorked his powder horn, spilled gunpowder into his rifle, loaded the barrel with shot and wadding from the pouch at his hip.

Crash! The gun exploded, to catch the first visible redskin between the eyes.

The savage fell backward and vanished, to die in the weeds.

The brawny savages were surrounding him before Cougar Fang

could reload. Snatching out his bowie knife, he slashed the throat of the nearest enemy, then swept into a grapple with a furious warrior in bright paint who was clearing the brush away to chop the white man's head off with his tomahawk.

The two wrestled through the thicket and crashed down over the wounded form of Sleeping Buffalo. Booth's Indian guide was done for; the young trapper got a glimpse of Sleeping Buffalo's eyes glazing. Then a tomahawk, meant for Cougar Fang, hurtled out of the brush and shattered Sleeping Buffalo's skull.

Yelling like a lion, Cougar Fang wrenched free from the tomahawker's grasp and plunged home a crimson-bladed knife. His mongrel dog, Whiskers, came burrowing out of the brush and sunk his teeth home in another warrior's throat who had crept up behind the battling white man, scalping knife ready for the kill.

Diving into the brush with the dog behind him, Cougar Fang fled during a lull in the *mêlée*. More Indians were sliding down the slopes of the canyon's brushy pit, closing in on the spot where they knew Sleeping Buffalo had met his death, and where they supposed Cougar Fang to be.

But Cougar Fang's buckskins made him almost invisible among the brown, dead leaves which hedged the canyon, as he fled from the Indian trap.

His brown hair rippled in the wind as he sped out of the canyon. That meant he had lost his coonskin cap, and with it the message intrusted him to deliver to the Pawnee chief. But only the keen ears and nose of his dog, Whiskers, had saved the

Sioux from getting messenger as well as message, just now.

Muttering under his breath, Ted Booth reloaded the long rifle he had snatched up in his flight, and raced on.

CHAPTER II.

INTERCEPTED MESSAGE.

BLACK BUZZARD, the medicine man, came down into the canyon which he had selected as the place of ambush. He found three of his henchmen draped like red laundry on the bushes. Three more he found standing over the arrow-riddled corpse of Sleeping Buffalo. But there was no trace of Cougar Fang.

At the medicine man's side strode a Stetson-hatted white man with a pasty, evil face and shifty eyes. He was "Blade" Slankard, the crook who had joined forces with Black Buzzard and was one of Cougar Fang's worst enemies.

"But where is the white whelp, Cougar Fang?" roared Black Buzzard, his eyes flashing with rage. "This trail scout, Sleeping Buffalo, means nothing to me!"

The warriors trembled before their leader's wrath. The medicine man was a horrible picture as he gazed down on the crimson-spotted leaves at the Indians whom Cougar Fang had slain.

Black Buzzard wore a huge Indian war bonnet of eagle feathers, with a train dangling down his back and reaching the ground at his heels. About his neck he wore a necklace of human finger bones, dyed red and yellow in symbol of his magic office.

His waist was circled by a girdle of wolf tails, human scalps, and wooden charms. He wore buckskin trousers, long fringed leggings, and beaded Sioux moccasins. His savage face was painted hideously.

"Cougar Fang has escaped!" admitted one of the warriors meekly. "His dog betrayed us before he walked into our trap."

The tomahawk in Black Buzzard's hand lifted threateningly. "Pursue him! Cougar Fang must not escape to return to the Sioux village! After him!"

Taking fresh grips on their war bows, the trembling Indians scattered. One soon picked up Cougar Fang's trail and the three were off in pursuit.

Black Buzzard and Slankard squatted over the corpse of Sleeping Buffalo and turned the body over. As they did so, there was revealed a trampled raccoon cap.

"Cougar Fang's cap," muttered the white man. "Skunk!"

The hatred which burned in Black Buzzard's heart for Cougar Fang was as intense as Slankard's. The medicine man had desires to be chief of the Thundergust Sioux. Cougar Fang was spoiling his plans, had already seated Fleetwing in the high office.

With the help of the American outlaw, Slankard, Black Buzzard had murdered the aged chief of his tribe, Running Stag. His first move had been to lead the war party to Rainbow Valley, bent on destroying the whites.

Cougar Fang had thwarted that plan, also. And only a week since, the young trapper had succeeded in banishing Black Buzzard from the tribe. Slankard suffered the same fate.

"Black Buzzard will not rest until he has the scalp of Cougar Fang on his tomahawk handle!" vowed the Indian, as he picked up Booth's cap and spat on it. "I——"

Something brown fell from the fuzzy coonskin. Frowning with puzzlement, Blade Slankard picked

the object up. It was a soft, pliable square of doeskin, painted with Indian characters.

Instantly, Slankard's cruel, harsh face lighted with interest. He held in his hands an Indian message. It was the friendship token which Cougar Fang had been taking to the Pawnee tribe across the mountains. He handed the token to Black Buzzard.

The Indian's tar-black eyes crawled back and forth as he translated the crude charcoal smears of black, the vegetable-root-dye lines of red, the white daubs of wood-ash paste which made up the mystic sign writing of the message.

"Fleetwing is to be named chief of the Thundergust Sioux upon the return of Cougar Fang with the Pawnee chief, Bald Eagle," read the medicine man, knots of muscle playing in his jaws. "They wish the Pawnees to visit the lodge of Fleetwing, to smoke the pipe of peace, to sleep in his wigwam by the river."

Black Buzzard looked up, and stared at Slankard. His face was horrible to see as he crushed the deerskin message in one palm. Emotion boiled under his compressed lips.

"So Cougar Fang seeks to make Fleetwing leader of the tribe!" hissed the Indian through tight teeth. "But it will never come to pass, O white friend Slankard!"

The two men got to their feet.

"You have plans to destroy Fleetwing?" asked Slankard softly.

"Aiee! This message tells me what happens in the wigwams of my people. Fleetwing shall not live to be chief."

At the same moment, a quarter of a mile down the trail, Cougar Fang was peering off through the thinning timber to where the green-

ish waters of a lake shimmered in the October sunlight.

"We got to do somethin' danged quick, Whiskers!" panted the white youth, exhausted from his long run. "Them Injuns is gainin' on us, an' they're readin' our trail sign as if it was on fresh snow. Not enough time tuh back-track an' try to fool 'em."

The situation was desperate. The high slopes of the Thundergusts, which offered safety in their countless canyons, boulder piles, and thick clumps of brush, were too far away to reach before those pursuing redskins overtook them.

Furthermore, Cougar Fang was fatigued from a long day of tramping. He and Sleeping Buffalo had scaled the steep northern slope of the mountain range, crossed the summit, and dipped down the south side since daybreak.

These Indians, on the other hand, had undoubtedly been lying in wait in the small canyon for hours, watching for the two men and the dog to fall into their clutches. It was the only trail leading into the Pawnee country.

Which meant that Indians were fresh. And the scalp of Cougar Fang offered a tempting prize for any warrior.

That they were of Black Buzzard's gang, Cougar Fang had no doubt. Barred from returning to their native village, their hearts would be smoldering with hatred.

They had driven him to the edge of the thin timber now. A half mile ahead it leveled off into a grassy mountain meadow, offering no sign of hiding place.

"That lake offers the only solution I can figure," Cougar Fang decided, glancing back to see if he could catch sight of the Indians he knew to be following him. "But we

got to get you hidden first, Whiskers."

Putting the dog where he would be safe from danger proved to be more simple than Cougar Fang had dared hope. A small cavern in the side of a hemlock-grown knoll presented itself as man and dog worked themselves through the undergrowth, making in the direction of the mountain lake.

It was too small a place for a man to risk hiding in. Besides, Ted Booth had no desire to hole up and chance shooting it out with the Indians. He was not sure how many were in Black Buzzard's ambushing party, but he knew the Indian had a sizable band.

"Carry yore homely mug inside o' that coyote den an' stay there, Whiskers!" commanded the trapper, motioning the dog into the small cavern. "If my plan works, I'll be back for yuh after dark!"

The dog, highly intelligent for a mongrel, had long since been trained to do his master's bidding. In a moment, Whiskers was safely hidden from savage eyes.

And not a moment too soon. Peering back through the timber, Ted Booth caught sight of three darting, feathered shapes, some two hundred yards behind.

He could not take a chance on pot-shooting with his rifle. It would merely betray his position and give the skulking redskins a chance to surround him.

Satisfied that his dog was safe, Cougar Fang vanished into the undergrowth. Moving with a speed only possible to a practiced outdoor man, he hurried toward the lake, taking no particular pains to cover his tracks.

The sun was already settling into the jagged crags of the Thundergust sky line. Darkness would follow

swiftly, this late in the year. And the plan which had taken form in Cougar Fang's head was the only way he saw out of a desperate mess. It was as novel as it was risky.

Ted Booth quickly unslung his powder horn from around his neck. He hurled it behind a bush, which he marked in his mind for future reference. He was sure it would escape detection, for no footprints led toward it.

Then he removed the peculiar wolf-foot sheath with its red-stained bowie knife, and hid it carefully in the grass. The pouch of bullets for his rifles followed next.

Working with feverish haste, Cougar Fang next unscrewed the massive hickory stock of his long rifle. This also he hurled behind the bush where his powder horn had gone.

These mysterious preparations finished, Cougar Fang now held in his hands only the barrel and breech of the rifle. It was over thirty inches long, and of case-hardened metal.

"Now for my plan. If it don't work, my hair will be dryin' from Black Buzzard's belt, afore night!" the youth told himself as he walked quickly to the lake's edge.

He skirted the nameless body of water for a hundred yards. At length he came to exactly the place he desired. The dark green of the water told him that it was very deep.

Making his way to a rocky point overlooking the lake, Cougar Fang pulled up some cottony moss, with which he plugged his nostrils. Then, gripping his rifle barrel, he leaped off the bank.

Splash! The churning water of the lake closed over Ted Booth's diving figure.

When the ripples smoothed out, they showed no trace in their dark

depths of the white man's swimming form.

Cougar Fang let the weight of the gun barrel take him to the lake's bottom—more than fifteen feet, judging from the pressure. Then he swam swiftly for the steep bank, coming up a half minute later some fifty feet from where he had dived in.

His bare head broke the water twenty feet from the bank. Swimming with difficulty because of the heavy gun barrel, Cougar Fang made his way to the land and clung to the wiry water grass with one hand.

Carefully, the young trapper wedged the breech end of the gun against the water-grass roots, at water level. He had first taken the precaution to blow the gun barrel free of any silt.

Then he let his body sink, still holding the rifle, until he could get his mouth on the muzzle end. Putting his lips about the steel tube as he might a bottle neck, he blew out the water and then sucked in a lungful of air, using the rifle barrel as a breathing tube.

Less than a minute later, Black Buzzard's three stalking warriors broke brush to stand on lake's edge. Brows shaded by brown palms, they scanned the sunset-painted water for traces of a swimming figure.

No trace of their prey was visible. The surface of the lake was unruffled, save for the fine ripples caused by the evening breeze. No boat or log broke the placid surface.

Beyond the lake, open prairie land extended for miles; but no figure moved there. Cougar Fang had vanished in thin air!

For several minutes the savages paced back and forth along the lake's bank, picking up traces of Cougar Fang's trail. One savage

even knelt on the shore and peered into the water, but saw nothing. Cougar Fang had either drowned or dissolved in air.

But three feet under the water, his body completely masked by the dark-green color, Cougar Fang lay on the steep bank, breathing in perfect freedom through his rifle barrel. The breech of the gun, projecting a few inches out of the water, was hidden by the surrounding water grass.

Baffled, the three Indians scratched their beardless cheeks and set off along the lake shore. Darkness found them still groping aimlessly, afraid to return to Black Buzzard with the news that again, Cougar Fang had slipped through their fingers.

Fifteen minutes later, Cougar Fang dragged his numb and water-soaked body out of the lake and crawled up on the bank, almost too stiff to move. For many minutes he lay there shivering, until satisfied that the Indians had departed.

It was now dark. Under cover of the night, Cougar Fang hobbled back to where he had hidden his rifle stock and powder horn. A few minutes' work was sufficient to fit the stock and lock of his gun back to the barrel which had saved his life.

He wiped the gun dry with dead moss and reloaded it. A few moments of search and he had recovered his bowie knife and shot pouch. Then, teeth chattering with cold, he headed back through the forest to where he had left Whiskers.

When the moon rose, hours later, it found Ted Booth and his faithful dog companion many miles away. They had avoided the rock-walled canyon of their ambush by a wide circle.

Finding another ravine where he knew it would be safe to light a fire,

Cougar Fang dried out his buckskins and rubbed circulation back into his aching, cold-bitten body. A mountain lake in late October is almost ready for ice!

Next morning found him at the friendly Pawnee village of Bald Eagle, his original destination. He was stiff and sore from his grueling experience in the icy water of the mountain lake, but, as he told the Pawnee chief who welcomed him, "still with my hair on."

CHAPTER III.

FLEETWING.

IT was two weeks from the day of his departure from the Peril Pass village of the Sioux when Cougar Fang returned.

He brought with him Bald Eagle, the gray-haired old Pawnee chief from the other side of the mountains, and a band of thirty Pawnee braves. As a result, they had not been molested by Black Buzzard's prowling band of Sioux outlaws on the return.

Aside from several days of cold-stiffened muscles, Cougar Fang had felt no ill effects from his long soaking in the frigid waters of the lake.

The fact that the banished medicine man, Black Buzzard, was still at large gave Ted Booth plenty of concern, however. He knew that the peace of the Sioux tribe would not be assured until the fiendish medicine man was slain; nor would the whites in Rainbow Valley be safe from massacre while he lived.

Whenever memory came into his mind, it brought a pang of grief and a burning desire to have revenge. He had loved his father dearly, and the thought of Black Buzzard's being the cruel redskin who had murdered "Pay-dirt" Booth filled him with hatred.

The first moment he got a chance, Cougar Fang went to the private lodge of young Fleetwing, his friend who was about to become chief of the Sioux.

"Now that the chief, Bald Eagle, is here to assist you in the ceremonies, you will wear a chief's feathers before another sun dawns," congratulated Ted Booth, looking across the Sioux lodge fire at his host. "I am happy that the tribe has acclaimed you as the warrior to fill the moccasins of your father."

There was no doubting Fleetwing's worthiness for the honor, even if he had not been related to the murdered chief, Running Stag. He was young, having seen but twenty-one summers. But since boyhood, he had excelled his fellows in the use of the bow and arrow, in swimming and endurance running, in games of strength, and out on the hunt.

His handsome Sioux features were framed in twin braids of thick, black hair. A sky-blue band wrapped about his brow and held erect the two feathers at the back of his head.

Fleetwing's body, naked save for the leather breechclout, was tawny and well-muscled. He and Cougar Fang were brothers of the wild, and loved each other with the same inward devotion of blood brothers, though separated by the gulf of race and color.

"Fleetwing knows what burns in Cougar Fang's brain," spoke the young Indian, regarding the American trapper gravely. "He seeks revenge against Black Buzzard, the killer of your father and of mine. The Pawnees tell me you were ambushed by him."

Cougar Fang nodded, and briefly outlined the attack which had cost the life of his Sioux scout, Sleeping Buffalo.

"I will not rest until both Blade Slankard and Black Buzzard are dead," concluded the white youth simply.

"To-night, the ceremonies will make me chief of the Sioux," Fleetwing changed to a pleasanter subject. "I am glad that you will be here to smoke the peace pipe with us, my white brother."

Cougar Fang arose and stretched his muscles. He, too, was glad, for it meant that his mission was at an end, that on the morrow he could head back for Rainbow Valley, bearing with him the solemn pledge of eternal friendship between red man and white.

"I will watch you in your moment of glory to-night, Fleetwing," Cougar Fang said as he left the lodge. "And may the Great Spirit, Manitou, bless your rule as chief of the Thundergust Sioux!"

Cougar Fang thrilled as he stepped out into the brisk sunshine. It was November, now, and the surrounding forest was dotted with yellow and red among the evergreens.

Fall winds were already whipping leaves from the branches. Soon winter would roar down off the Thundergusts, wrapping Peril Pass in a mantle of white.

The Indian village was a picturesque sight, there on the banks of the Whetstone River. White wigwams were everywhere, looking like cones of paper set on the grass. In each one of those primitive homes of poles and animal hides, Cougar Fang knew that a sincere welcome awaited him.

His ginger-brown mongrel, Whiskers, was engaged in the job of taking a fat elk bone away from a pair of indignant Sioux dogs. He, too, found it a pleasant world to live in.

But the smile would have faded

from Cougar Fang's bronzed, wind-bitten face if he had known what was transpiring at that very moment, out in the shadowy forest which rimmed the peaceful Sioux village.

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN THE MOON ROSE.

LESS than a half mile from the spot where Fleetwing's tribe was getting ready for the festival which would make him chief, Black Buzzard was holding a conference with a blanketed old squaw who was gathering wood for her evening fire.

The skinny old woman was ninety-year-old White Pigeon. She was the secret accomplice and spy of the evil Black Buzzard, doing many of his murders. Now that he was banished by the Indians, upon pain of death if he returned to the village, she had been helpful in bringing him food and information.

"Soon the snows of winter will be falling on our shoulders, White Pigeon," Black Buzzard was saying. "My warriors, and our white brother Slankard, are even now back in our cave in the mountain slope, hungering. We must get back to the village before winter comes or starve. Which means that Fleetwing must go!"

The old squaw nodded. "I help you get back, Black Buzzard."

The evil-faced medicine man looked about, as if fearful that the thick forest might have ears.

"Then go to my lodge, in the village," instructed Black Buzzard in a fierce whisper. "Take the pot of secret powders which is marked with the blue stripes."

The old squaw moved closer to the brutal Indian and listened intently as he outlined the details of his scheme. When Black Buzzard

had finished, she stood up and prepared to go.

"It shall be done as you say," she promised. "When the moon rises, all will be ready for you to strike, Black Buzzard."

An hour later, the aged squaw hobbled back to the Indian wigwams on the river, heavily laden with sticks for her night's fire.

The entire village was abuzz with excitement, so that the old squaw's activity went by unnoticed. In the middle of the wigwam city, a pony corral had been cleared away. The entire tribe was gathering there, ready for the rites which would make Fleetwing their chief. Feasting and dances would follow.

Chuckling in her dry throat, White Pigeon set about her work.

Cougar Fang left the lodge which had been erected for his use, an hour after sundown. His tall, erect figure, clad in fringed buckskins and a brand-new raccoon skin cap with the striped tail hanging down the nape of his neck, drew many glances of admiration from the Indian maidens gathered in the crowd.

The American, as representative of the white brothers of Rainbow Valley, was escorted to a place of honor beside the huge fire of pine logs which had been lighted.

He seated himself on a buffalo robe, and accepted a puff at the red peace pipe which was extended to him by a Pawnee. His face glowed with pleasure and satisfaction as he glanced about at the great ring of dusky, eager faces which glistened in the dancing glare of the flames.

Every one of those hundreds of faces sent back a tribute of friendship to the lone white youth, as he looked over the multitude of assembled red men. Behind the fire, occupying the center of this elaborate

outdoor stage setting, was the door of the big bark-slabbed lodge in which Fleetwing was being prepared for the ceremonies. A night of triumph, for Cougar Fang as well as he!

The visiting Pawnees were assembled in places of honor near the fire. This was the greatest festival in the tribe's history. Peace treaties would be drawn up with Bald Eagle's Pawnees, as well as with Cougar Fang's pale-faced brothers. The climax of the evening, however, was the naming of Fleetwing as chief.

Boom-boom-er-room! A dozen tom-toms started throbbing, back in the shadows.

Out through the deerhide door of the council house marched a score of old warriors, bedecked in gaudy paint, feathered war bonnets, and bearing rattles and war bows.

They were the old wise men of the tribe, friends of the old chief Running Stag. They would be Fleetwing's advisers.

One old buck with whitening hair, veteran of fifty warpaths, his body seamed and webbed with the scars of many battles, held aloft a feather-hung spear.

Instantly, a hush fell over the laughing and chatting multitude. Squaws quieted their wriggling papooses. Old bucks and young braves leaned forward, their hawkish faces alight with interest.

Cougar Fang twisted on his buffalo robe seat to look at the Sioux who had been chosen master of ceremonies. It was old Falling Snow, the wise man of the village.

"O visiting Pawnees from the land across the mountain! O Cougar Fang, beloved paleface who is a friend of the red man! O brother Indians of a great and noble tribe, hear my words!"

Wild cheering, drubbing of tom-

toms, war whoops and shrill cries of women and children thundered to the skies. Cougar Fang felt his heart race within him.

"On this great night, the Spirit of the Thundergusts watches over the Peril Pass village, which is soon to see a great and mighty Indian become chief of his people. Join in the chant to Manitou, Great Spirit of our forefathers, guardian of our warpath, friend of the hunter, ripener of corn, and melter of snows!"

The mountain crags caught up and repeated the wild burst of pagan music which leaped from the throats of the assembled savages. The wild, primitive harmony stirred Cougar Fang's veins, and he fixed his eyes on the door of the Council Lodge from which Fleetwing was to step forth in his moment of pride and triumph.

Inside that hut, Fleetwing was grooming himself for the great hour. Soon his handsome brow would be covered with the great white bonnet which symbolized the chieftancy of the Thundergusts.

Whiskers, alone in the vast multitude of celebrating folk, was not enjoying the chant of greeting. The mongrel lay down at Cougar Fang's feet, his doleful brown eyes regarding his master's enthusiasm with disgust, his whiskery head nestled between outspread paws.

The singing ceased at last, and the old warrior again lifted his spear and pointed dramatically toward the door of the Council Lodge. Cougar Fang peered out over the sea of red-skinned faces to where a butter-yellow sickle of moon was sliding out of the black mountains. It was a moment never to be forgotten.

"Behold Fleetwing, son of our mighty Running Stag!" called Falling Snow, pointing to the door of

the Council Lodge. "Behold Fleetwing, our leader and mighty chief! Fleetwing! Fleetwing!"

With his words, two Indian children pulled back the deerhide doors of the lodge, while an ear-shattering roar of applause went up from the wildly cheering Indians.

But the applause died off, burst out again uncertainly, then subsided. Every eye was glued to the black door of the lodge. A spectral ray of moonlight lanced down out of the sky like a spotlight. It added a chill cast to the stiff, glassy-eyed figure who stood revealed in that open doorway.

Cougar Fang gasped and got to his feet, his eyes narrowing. Fleetwing's dramatic moment of entry was here. But the lone Indian who stood in that doorway was not Fleetwing!

Even as Cougar Fang opened his mouth to vent a yell of dismay, the stiff, erect figure suddenly toppled forward and sidewise, to thud on its face with the inert weight of a log.

In two bounds, Cougar Fang was at the door. He stooped beside the body. The naked, coppery flesh was cold and hard as he jerked it over and looked down into a contorted, ghastly face.

It was the dead face of one of the Indians whom Black Buzzard had sent after him, back there by the mountain lake.

Tied about the corpse's neck was a piece of doeskin—the same which Cougar Fang had carried for Bald Eagle, chief of the Pawnees. But this time, the back of that leather message was covered with queer Indian picture-words.

Ted Booth's face worked as he leaped to his feet and left the stiff corpse with Falling Snow, the master of ceremonies. Into the lodge leaped the white man, searching

frantically in the light of a single torch on the wall for Fleetwing, who only five minutes before had been assisted into his robes by kindly old Falling Snow.

The robes were there, in a heap of disarray on the ground. The freshly brushed sand of the Council Lodge floor was trampled with many moccasin prints. But Fleetwing was gone! And a great hole broken in the rear of the hut told how he had departed.

Cougar Fang leaped back to the doorway, to find the council space outside milling with angry, excited Sioux.

Again a hush descended over the crowd, as the old wise man Falling Snow got to his feet, reading the message on the reverse side of the doeskin strip. Then Cougar Fang felt his veins freeze within him:

"It is a message from Black Buzzard!" choked the old Sioux, his stern face suddenly bitter with fear. "He has taken Fleetwing, and will return him alive on one condition only. Black Buzzard must become our new chief—or Fleetwing dies!"

CHAPTER V.

HELD CAPTIVE.

AN hour before time for the ceremonies to begin, Fleetwing had gone into the Council Lodge to prepare himself. Even with the prospects of so soon becoming the chief of a mighty Indian tribe, he did not break the iron restraint which an Indian imposes upon himself.

Yet he had reason to be proud. At twenty-one, he was carrying on the traditions of his father, the wise chief Running Stag.

As he prepared his ceremonial robes of velvet-soft deerskin, richly ornamented with porcupine quills, glass beads obtained from the white

fur traders, and gaudy native paint, he had been assisted by Falling Snow and the other old braves of the tribe, who would give him council in years to come.

Nightfall was approaching rapidly, and he kept inside the Council Lodge, not wishing to face the crowds of tribesmen who were gathering in the vast arena outside.

He saw nothing out of the way when the curtains parted and the squaw known as White Pigeon entered. She bore a stone mortar filled with a thick, steaming drink, which she set down by the door to cool.

The squaw busied herself brushing the sanded floor and arranging the many trophies which hung from the walls and ceiling beams. So quietly did she work that Fleetwing did not even pay her a second glance.

At length came the time for the ceremonies to begin. The wise men filed out of the Council Lodge, and Falling Snow made ready to begin the festival.

Fleetwing's pounding heart drowned out the tom-toms outside. In a moment, he would face his people! Already, he could hear the old warrior engaged in greeting Cougar Fang, the visiting Pawnees, and his own tribal relatives.

Then it was that he became conscious of a timid hand plucking at the feathered train behind him. He looked down, disturbed at the break in his thoughts.

He was looking into the withered, puckered face of the squaw. His heart was moved with pity as he saw the light in the old crone's faded eyes, which he mistook for admiring devotion.

"I have brought my beloved Fleetwing a bowl of liquor made from the juice of the wild blackberry," came the old woman's fal-

tering, timid voice. "It will strengthen your nerves for the ordeal of the evening to come."

A smile broke Fleetwing's frown. He saw the glitter deepen in the squaw's eyes as she spoke of the "ordeal of the evening to come," but at that moment the loud shouts of the assembled multitudes outside convinced him that the strenuous evening ahead *would* take a toll on his already high-strung nerves.

"You are kind, my woman," thanked the young chief, tenderly. "Every one has been kind to Fleetwing to-night, on the eve of his triumph. I will drink, and thank you."

The old squaw hobbled over to get the stone jar of liquor, and when she came back a toothless pair of pink gums were shown through her shriveled lips in a smile.

"Fleetwing is the son of a great Indian. He is worthy of the honor of being chief of the Thundergust Sioux!"

Taking the blue-painted bowl from White Pigeon's sticklike arms, Fleetwing lifted it to his lips and tasted the warm liquid.

"Ah, 'tis good brew, my woman," said Fleetwing. "Truly, I need liquor to-night! I am as nervous as a Sioux maiden while her lover bargains in furs with her father, seeking marriage."

Fleetwing felt an instant excitement as he gulped down the hot, steaming fluid. It was a queer-tasting drink, with a bitter tang which he had never before experienced. But it bolstered his excited nerves and brought a glow of well-being through his entire frame.

"Again I thank you," said the Indian youth, wiping his lips and handing the blue-striped bowl back. "Now I must prepare myself to face

my people. My hour is ready. Soon I will be chief!"

Outside, the Indians had started the triumph chant. When it was finished, he would make his entry.

Fleetwing became aware of a chopping sound, behind him. Turning, he was amazed to see the squaw, White Pigeon, engaged in hewing with a tomahawk at the grapevine ropes which bound the slabs of bark in place on the rear wall of the Council Lodge. A strange, fierce look had turned her eyes into those of a wolf.

Fleetwing took a step forward, only to find his muscles suddenly numb. A stifling sleepiness settled over his brain.

He shook his head in bewilderment and passed a trembling hand over his eyes. A whirling sensation started back in his skull. He blinked his eyelids hard, then grimaced as a stab of pain shot through his body.

The sounds of the singing outside, which a moment before had been deafeningly loud, were drifting oddly away into a whisper. Fleetwing gathered his robe about him and tried to walk, then caught a lodge post to which he clung for support, panting.

Dimly, he saw the squaw removing a log from a rear wall, the sound of her tomahawk muffled under the booming chants outside.

Then the young Indian's drugged nerves revived to a shock—the awful shock of seeing the leering, ugly features of Black Buzzard, suddenly wedge through the hole in the Council Lodge and come forward, a war club swinging in one hand.

The single torch that lighted the lodge witnessed a brief struggle. Strength drained from Fleetwing's muscles as he tried to pull himself out of Black Buzzard's grasp.

Then Fleetwing toppled forward like a dead man, across Black Buzzard's shoulder. A moment later, assisted by White Pigeon, the big medicine man slipped out of the lodge, carrying Fleetwing's insensible form with him.

Instantly later, two of Black Buzzard's henchmen entered, dragging behind them the corpse of the Sioux brave whom Black Buzzard had tomahawked only that afternoon, as punishment for letting Cougar Fang escape at the mountain lake.

The corpse, stiff as a wooden post, was propped up against the skin doorway of the lodge and balanced in place by Fleetwing's ceremonial spear. Then the two were gone, before the roaring chant of the triumphal song was half finished.

Behind the Council Lodge, the squaw White Pigeon lay with Black Buzzard's tomahawk in her skull. The dead corpse they had brought to use as a grim symbol of vengeance had been her son. Her first cry of grief had been stifled by Black Buzzard's ax. He knew no mercy. Her usefulness was over.

The thundering music of the Sioux covered the padding footsteps of Black Buzzard as he and his small band crept out of the village through the blackness, as stealthily as they had sneaked in a few minutes before.

The rising moon gave them enough light to find the trail leading to the bank of the Whetstone. A moment afterward, they were beside a war canoe which bobbed on the water, ready for an instant getaway.

Six naked savages were in the long birch-bark craft, paddles poised in readiness. No word was spoken as Black Buzzard laid his unconscious burden on the bottom of the canoe.

Swiftly, the canoe slid out into the night. Strong paddles dipped into the water with whispery silence, forcing it upstream against the soft bite of the current.

The lights of the wigwam village fell away, then vanished around a bend. Silent, unspeaking, the kidnapers paddled steadily onward through the moonlight.

"This is the place!" spoke Black Buzzard, an hour later. "If the entire army of Sioux braves pursued us—yes, and the Pawnee dogs who visit them—they could not capture Fleetwing back again!"

The canoe headed toward a white strip of beach. On either side of the river, the banks were steep cliffs of clay and rock. A particularly high bluff overlooked the Whetstone at this point, and the brow of that bluff overhung the white beach.

Making a landing, Black Buzzard stood aside while his warriors carried Fleetwing's drugged form ashore.

The medicine man smiled like a well-fed panther as he looked over the spot he had selected as a camp while he held Fleetwing.

Steep cliffs hemmed off the strip of white beach from all angles of approach. It was a mere pocket of flat sand, impossible to reach from the overhanging cliffs or by the river bank to east or west.

Only by canoe could Black Buzzard's cunningly chosen camp site be visited. And the medicine man had made elaborate plans that his unshakable defense was doubly secure.

At either end of the curving shelf of beach, he had a dozen warriors, heavily armed, posted in the brush. That would prevent possible rescue parties from lowering themselves with ropes from the lower cliffs at either end.

The high bluff in the center took care of itself—it would be impossible to climb down. But nevertheless, a squad of warriors were also hidden in the forest at the rim rock, ready for emergencies. Their forces were strengthened by the presence of Blade Slankard, the white man, and his two six-guns.

Dawn was smearing the eastern horizon when Fleetwing began to sleep off the effects of the drug which White Pigeon had fed him. Awakening, he found himself heavily bound, lying on the wet sand inside a wigwam which Black Buzzard had erected. The peaked tent was out of sight from either side of the river, being behind a cottonwood thicket which grew at the base of the bluff.

Black Buzzard explained the situation carefully when he was sure that his prisoner had recovered his brain power once more.

"My people will kill you, not make you chief!" stormed Fleetwing, when he understood Black Buzzard's clever ransom idea.

"This camp is impossible to attack. And your people love you, Fleetwing. Love you enough to pay for your life by making *me* their chief!"

Fleetwing lay back in his bonds and tried to think. Black Buzzard chuckled deep in his throat and fingered his tomahawk. He knew he held the price the Sioux would pay for Fleetwing's freedom.

CHAPTER VI.

A GRUESOME MESSENGER.

WHISKERS, I'm afraid Black Buzzard has got us licked!"

Cougar Fang sat down on a rock near the creek bed he had been following since daybreak, and mopped

his streaming face with the fuzzy coonskin cap. The dog, its pink tongue lolling over gleaming white teeth, settled down on his haunches to rest.

From the very start, things had been against Cougar Fang. The second he discovered that Fleetwing had been kidnaped, he began forming plans for the hunt.

Lights had been brought, and at the rear of the lodge was evidence to prove that the young chief had been taken out of the village by the south trail.

Beside the hole in the Council Lodge wall lay the corpse of White Pigeon, the unlucky squaw who still clutched in her arms the bowl which she had filled with drugged liquor.

The mystery of finding the woman with her skull split by Black Buzzard's war ax did not particularly interest Ted Booth. He guessed immediately that she had been a spy who had sneaked the kidnapers into the village that night.

The fact that the corpse with Black Buzzard's message attached had been her son accounted for the reason the medicine man had in murdering her, after she had served her usefulness.

Tracking had been impossible the night before. The mob of grief-stricken Sioux had milled about the village like stampeding cattle, searching for traces of their young chief's abductors.

As a result, any chance of Ted Booth's finding the tracks leading to the river's edge were gone. Further search must await daybreak—and each minute added to the distance Black Buzzard was putting between him and the town.

With the coming of dawn, the thoroughly aroused village armed itself, and the greatest man hunt in the tribe's history was on.

A huge band of warriors led by Falling Snow got on their war ponies, forded the river, and started combing the opposite bank for traces of Black Buzzard and his party.

Other groups began fanning out to the north, stopping only when they had reached the rocky, snow-clad summit of the Thundergusts.

As afternoon shadows lengthened, all were beginning to drift back to the village, bearing the same news—their keen Indian senses had detected no trace of Black Buzzard or their Fleetwing.

It was Whiskers, the ugly-faced mongrel of the visiting white man, who finally sniffed out a trail which resulted in Cougar Fang's finding a moccasin print bearing a worn sole—identical to one of the prints seen about the rear of the lodge.

Cougar Fang did not know that the footprint belonged to the squaw, White Pigeon, and had been made the day before when she was returning from her meeting with Black Buzzard. And a fall shower, which had left the forest dripping, put Whiskers's usefulness to an end.

"We're five miles from the village, so we better start back," groaned Ted Booth, getting to his feet. "I'd shore give a lot to know what that skunk's doin' with Fleetwing. Who'd 'a' thought Black Buzzard was smart enough or brave enough to steal the chief right out from under our noses? I bet Slankard thought that up."

Cougar Fang knew that in dealing with Black Buzzard, however, he was pitting his brain against the cunning and shrewdness of an Indian who for years had bluffed his superstitious tribesmen into thinking he was a master of the black art of magic.

He also knew that Black Buzzard

was forcing a show-down. The approach of winter made it necessary for the medicine man to make some sort of effort to get back into the comfort and security of the village. And only by buying his way—with the life of their beloved Fleetwing—did he have a chance.

"An' on top o' that, he's got the nerve tuh demand that *he* be made chief o' the tribe!" cried Cougar Fang to the dog at his side. "We got to hand it to Black Buzzard, Whiskers. He's danged smart, an' plenty brave. An' meaner'n pizen!"

Two hours later, just at dusk, Cougar Fang arrived at the wigwam village. Every face told its story of grief—no news had come from their absent chief. No trace had been found of Black Buzzard. Darkness and rainfall had wiped out his tracks.

Cougar Fang sighed and prepared himself a hot supper of Indian corn, venison roasted on a stick over the fire, and wild berries and nuts. Just as he was completing his meal and giving Whiskers a plentiful helping, he heard shouts coming from the river.

Leaving his lodge, he and Whiskers hurried to the banks of the Whetstone, to see two light canoes paddling swiftly out into the stream, striving to overtake a drifting boat which was washing down the river in mid-current.

"Perhaps it is from Black Buzzard!" old Falling Snow spoke in Cougar Fang's ear. "It was seen drifting a mile back the river. Now they hurry to recover it before it is dashed over the waterfall. It is the private canoe of Black Buzzard."

Cougar Fang elbowed his way through the press of silent redskins and gained the water's edge. The Indian boys were paddling back to shore, towing with them the canoe

they had caught. From the looks on their faces, Cougar Fang knew that fresh tragedy was being brought in with that derelict boat.

A gasp of horror went up from the stony-faced Indians higher up the bank, as they got a glimpse into the canoe. What grim cargo did Black Buzzard's birch-bark contain?

Cougar Fang pulled the canoe to the bank as the boys dropped their towing rope. His face went grim and taut as he peered over the bulwark. Then his heart turned into an icy lump as he looked down through the dim light of dusk, to see a prostrate Indian figure, horribly mutilated by tomahawk and knife, huddled in the bottom of the gore-splattered canoe.

For a moment, he thought, as did the Indians, that this was Black Buzzard's method of sending back Fleetwing to his people.

But as Cougar Fang leaped into the canoe and turned the crimson-splashed corpse over, a sigh of relief came from his lips.

The butchered remains in the canoe were not Fleetwing's.

They belonged to another of the warriors who had allowed Cougar Fang to escape from Black Buzzard's ambush. Evidently the evil medicine man used strong methods of punishment on his braves.

Silent Indians waded into the river and lifted the corpse from the gruesome canoe. But Cougar Fang and the older warriors of the village were interested in the crimson pictures painted on the inner sides of the craft.

"It is probably a message from Black Buzzard," spoke Cougar Fang in a low, shocked voice. "Call your wisest men together, Falling Snow, to read the sign language. I think it will solve the mystery of Fleetwing's disappearance."

The grisly canoe was carried to the council fire in the center of the village, while the wise men put feathered topknots together and studied the picture writing which Black Buzzard had sent them in such gruesome fashion.

The entire village was gathered around them, solemn, angry. Cougar Fang, whose knowledge of the sign writing of the Sioux was very slight, retired to his lodge to catch up on his sleep.

That the message would bring on a hard day's chase to-morrow, he had no doubt. Many of the younger warriors, knowing that pursuit would begin as soon as the veteran Falling Snow had figured the meaning of the medicine man's kidnap message, followed Booth's example and retired to their lodges to rest.

As the moon neared the midnight position in the heavens, Cougar Fang was awakened from sound slumber by the growling of Whiskers, who slept always at the lodge door.

It was Falling Snow bringing the report of the wise men, who had solved the riddle of the red-stained canoe.

"Black Buzzard holds Fleetwing prisoner in a distant spot which is very secret," said the wrinkled old savage. "The message tells the Sioux of Peril Pass to send me, Falling Snow, to the Great Spirit's Finger, up in the mountains."

Cougar Fang frowned in the darkness, then relaxed. The Great Spirit's Finger was a towering pinnacle of rock overlooking Peril Pass, which the Sioux had used as a sentinel rock for ages.

"There, Falling Snow is to burn green brush," the old warrior went on. "With a buffalo robe, I am to make the smoke talk. From afar, Black Buzzard will see and read."

Cougar Fang nodded, instantly understanding the cleverness of the medicine man's scheme.

"And if you don't signal to-morrow, he'll kill Fleetwing," responded the white man. "The signal means you accept his terms, and will make him chief of the Sioux in return for Fleetwing's life. A clever plan, wise one—only I do not trust Black Buzzard."

The old warrior spoke from the darkness. "The people of the village are met in council to-night," he said slowly. "We have agreed to Black Buzzard's demand, though we dread sorely to be ruled by his evil heart. I, Falling Snow, will send the signal from the Finger Rock to-morrow at noon. The pledge of Falling Snow will not be broken. If we signal Black Buzzard, it means we will allow him safety to our village and make him our chief. A heavy price, but we love Fleetwing."

With the words, Falling Snow was gone, leaving Cougar Fang shaking his head slowly in the gloom of his wigwam.

"A heavy price, indeed," he mused. "Black Buzzard knows the promise of Falling Snow will not be broken."

Heavy of heart, Cougar Fang sat down on his buffalo-robe bed and commenced talking to Whiskers, as was his habit.

"Whiskers, it's out o' the question that you an' me can sit around an' let that danged Injun magic faker pull over a thing like this on the Sioux. He'd kill Fleetwing anyway, promise or no promise, wouldn't he?"

Whiskers yawned agreement.

"Whiskers, I've been thinkin'. I believe if we follow the Whetstone to-morrow, we'll cross Black Buzzard's sign. Know why?"

Whiskers did not know why.

"Because that canoe came drifting down the river—which means Black Buzzard's hide-out is east o' the village," Booth explained patiently. "An' he wants a signal fire lit on the peak o' the Great Spirit's Finger—which can't be seen from north or west. It means Black Buzzard is lyin' low somewhere to the east or south, waitin' to spot Fallin' Snow's smoke-talk to-morrow noon."

Cougar Fang settled himself on the buffalo robe. He would need sleep, and plenty of it, to-morrow.

"Whiskers, you an' me, single-handed, is goin' tuh save Fleetwing an' kill that Black Buzzard skunk before noon to-morrow," Ted Booth declared as he dozed off. "Mebbe Slankard, too. An' we'll have to hurry, because once Fallin' Snow's signal has gone up, we can't stop Black Buzzard's return. Fallin' Snow will keep his word, but I don't think Black Buzzard will keep his. I think he'll kill Fleetwing. But we'll beat the old skunk of an Injun, Whiskers—we'll do it absolutely fair an' square, with no underhanded tricks."

CHAPTER VII.

BLACK BUZZARD'S CAMP.

AN hour before noon, the next day, Cougar Fang lay on his stomach in the tall grass which furred the north bank of the Whetstone River. His blue eyes were keeping a close watch on a narrow strip of beach sand, opposite.

"We've found the place where Black Buzzard is keepin' Fleetwing, I'm shore o' that!" The young frontiersman was talking to the shaggy brown mongrel who lay by his side. "But danged if it helps us much. They've chosen a spot that the Fort Flintlock cavalry couldn't smoke 'em out of, even."

Cougar Fang's careful study of the opposite bank had been caused by his glimpsing a pair of naked Sioux warriors, moving about in the undergrowth which grew on the beach.

He had seen no cave or lodge where Fleetwing might be kept prisoner, but the heavy cottonwood and willow growth at the base of the cliffs would hide such a building. And the place was a natural hide-out, easy to defend, impossible to attack except from the river.

"We ain't got much time to lose, Whiskers," commented Ted Booth, squinting up to where the sun was approaching the zenith. "It's about noon, an' Fallin' Snow is prob'ly gettin' ready to light his smoke fire, up on top o' Finger Rock. Once he gets his signal goin', it'll be too late to help Fleetwing."

It had been a busy day for the young American. He and Whiskers had set out from the Sioux village in Peril Pass an hour before daylight. They had borrowed a canoe and paddled upstream nearly three miles. Then, for purposes of safety, the young trapper had decided to hide the canoe and take to the north bank.

He wished, now, that he had chosen the south shore, for it was there that he had located what he believed to be Black Buzzard's hiding place.

If he had a spyglass such as the soldiers at Fort Flintlock used, he could rake that strip of beach and make sure exactly where Black Buzzard's lodge was located. From this distance, it took the sharpest of eyesight even to detect the movements of the Indian guards on the beach.

"By gosh!" Booth suddenly exclaimed. "If that ain't the double-crossin' crook, Blade Slankard, up

on top o' that bluff, I'll eat my moc-casins!"

Only a glimpse did he get of the black-coated figure on the brush-hung brink of the clay cliff across the Whetstone, but a tiny cloud of blue smoke lingering on the hot mid-day air branded that person as Blade Slankard, smoking his ever-present cheroot.

"That means I've found the camp, then!" Cougar Fang panted, getting to his knees. "I'll be glad when I can send a bullet through that cuss's carcass——"

Whiskers suddenly tensed, and sniffed the morning breeze critically. Forewarned by the dog's peculiar actions, Cougar Fang flattened in the grass once more. At the same moment, he saw a black birch-bark canoe making its way down the river, from a bend two hundred yards east of the bluff.

Coasting on the current, the black canoe edged closer and closer to the strip of crescent-shaped beach. In it, Ted Booth counted seven redskins, all with feathered bonnets and bows and arrows. One figure, larger than the rest, he made out as Black Buzzard himself.

"An' there's the dirty killer that murdered my father!"

Cougar Fang's mind flashed back in memory to the morning he had returned to his cabin in Rainbow Valley, after a trapping expedition, to find that Black Buzzard and his band had visited the place an hour before. The cabin was in ashes.

Cougar Fang had found his only brother, Chuck, dying. Chuck had gasped out the story of how Black Buzzard had killed their father. But Cougar Fang had never been able to locate his father's body, to give it a decent burial.

He brushed tears from his lashes, and his face went hot. Across that

river was the savage who had done the murder. Cougar Fang would have his revenge, and have it today.

Watching closely from his ambush, Cougar Fang saw Black Buzzard steer the canoe to shore. The Indians got out, bearing with them a buck deer which they had shot on the morning's hunt.

The Indians carried the carcass behind a heavy clump of cottonwoods. Blade Slankard appeared on the cliff above to wave a greeting to the returning hunters. Soon afterward a wisp of smoke began lifting into the sunshiny air.

"Cookin' their venison—figure on fillin' their bellies before they start for the Peril Pass village," surmised Cougar Fang. His eye glanced off to the west, where the mighty pinnacle of the Great Spirit's Finger reared up against the blue.

"No smoke yet," he breathed, in relief. "But we've got to think of a way to save Fleetwing in a hurry, because it'll be too late, once Fallin' Snow lights his pledge fire. They'll kill Fleetwing an' jump in their canoes an' paddle fer the village where Black Buzzard figures to make himself chief!"

The faint sound of an Indian voice floated across the river to reach Cougar Fang's straining ears. In answer to the cry, which came from behind the cottonwood growth, three Indians emerged from the east end of the beach, where they had squatted in the shade at the point where beach ended in the bluff at the river's edge.

"Callin' off their guard, to eat dinner!" exclaimed Ted Booth, under his breath. "Whiskers, I've got a few minutes to work in! If I can get over there while that end o' the beach is unguarded."

Cougar Fang clambered down

through the grass and underbrush from the high knoll which he had climbed to use as a lookout. Before he reached the water's edge, he was bewildered as to what to do next.

It was impossible to approach the hidden beach from the other shore, because of the high, unscalable walls of cliff. Even if the beach was deserted, it would be impossible to reach from that angle. No, the only approach was the way Black Buzzard had used—by canoe or raft, from the river.

"Even if I had a canoe, I'd be spotted before I was half way across," groaned Cougar Fang, in sudden despair. "I could swim it, but in this bright sunlight they'd see me easy. I——"

A movement on the sun-gilded surface of the river caught Cougar Fang's eye as he hid himself behind the bole of a knotty elm. It was a huge stump, floating along in mid-stream.

As Cougar Fang watched the gnarled tree being borne closer to Black Buzzard's bank by the swing of the current, an idea was born in his brain.

"It ain't very original, but it sure solves my problem!" gasped Cougar Fang, alive with eagerness. "Come on, Whiskers!"

Making all possible speed through the undergrowth without creating any noise, Cougar Fang headed up the river. In his mind, he was recalling the details of a famous old Indian trick which an aged warrior had taught him, years before.

It consisted of floating with a drift-log, exposing only the face, on the side opposite which possible enemies might be lurking. The trick was a very common one, but seemed made to order for the job facing him this morning.

A quarter of an hour later, Cougar

Fang was gravely "shaking hands" with his faithful comrade, Whiskers. The time had come for them to separate, and he had ordered the dog to return to the Indian village which they had left that morning.

Booth knew, from long experience, that Whiskers would find his way back without difficulty, and would be waiting for him when he got back to the Peril Pass village.

He refused to think about the chances of his not coming back, but he knew they were not bright. If so, this would be the last time he and the faithful brown mongrel would ever see each other. The parting brought a lump to his throat, and made the dog's stubby tail droop.

Whiskers seemed to know that his master was about to embark on an extremely dangerous mission and appeared hurt that he, too, could not share this perilous adventure.

"I'll be lucky if I can carry out my scheme as it is, Whiskers," Cougar Fang consoled the dog. "If they saw your homely mug swimmin' alongside my log, it'd be a dead give-away. So run along back. I'll see you to-night!"

With a last sorrowful look at its master, the dog turned and vanished in the forest.

Cougar Fang swallowed hard, then made his way through a dense bed of tules until he came to the river's edge. A backwater had edged a number of logs, stumps, and other drift into the quiet water next to the bank, and Cougar Fang selected a large chunk torn from a beech tree by a landslide. He waded out into the river, after carefully hiding his rifle. The log he kept pushed in front of him.

He was upstream around the bend from the Indian hide-out, so that he had no fears of even Blade Slan-

kard's spotting him from the bluff-top. Soon he was out into swimming depth, and the current was catching his log.

Swimming beside it, Cougar Fang grabbed handholds on projecting slivers of wood from the broken end, and eased his body up under the log. He exposed only his lips and nose, for breathing purposes, and was careful that the log did not turn in some midstream whirlpool, exposing him to the south bank.

Considerable other drift was in the river that morning, owing to a large log jam having broken free the night before, farther upstream. This was in his favor. It would not make his drifting log conspicuous.

Five minutes went by, with Cougar Fang completely concealed by the drifting log, sparing his strength and moving his legs only when it was necessary to keep the log headed for the beach where Black Buzzard's camp was located.

As the log rounded the river's bend, the current began helping him by sweeping it toward the nearest end of the crescent-shaped sand spit—that end which had been vacated by the guards, while they went to their meal.

Risking discovery from Blade Slankard on the bluff above, Cougar Fang dived under his protecting log and came to the surface on the opposite side, long enough to get his bearings.

The log had carried him to within twenty yards of the shelving beach. Now was the time.

Rolling under the river like an otter, he went to the bottom, then crawled swiftly up the slanting beach. Like a brown alligator in his buckskins, Cougar Fang slid up to the surface and was crawling out on the rocky beach. With a froglike dive he was into the nearest clump

of bush, panting from his long underwater swim.

Luckily, the beach was rimmed with a bulwark of apple-sized rocks, so that his arrival left no mark except for the water from his streaming buckskins. Before the Indian guards came back, the sun would have steamed off that trail.

The log went drifting innocently on. No war cry rang out to disturb the sunny morning, no yell from Blade Slankard to indicate that he had been discovered. But he could hear the sounds of the Indians, talking about their camp fire off to the right.

The young woodsman hardly dared glance up again at the towering spire of rock from which Falling Snow was to send out his smoke signals which would inform Black Buzzard that the tribe would pay for Fleetwing's life by making the medicine man their chief.

But no smoke was visible yet. There were still a few minutes before the sun would begin westering down the sky.

When the smoke did come, it would be Fleetwing's death sentence. Cougar Fang was sure of that. He did not trust Black Buzzard to keep his side of the bargain.

His eyes lowered, to settle upon the black birch-bark canoe which had been drawn up on the beach. The sand was covered by many mocasin prints.

Crawling through the grass to seek out a better hiding-place, Cougar Fang saved his life by the narrowest of margins. Hardly had he hidden himself again than the three heavily armed savages who guarded this end of the beach returned to their posts and squinted out over the river, watching for enemy canoes.

WW—8E

CHAPTER VIII.

RACE WITH DEATH.

COUGAR FANG'S heart pounded his ribs. The thrill of high adventure fired his veins as he realized that he had got himself into a spot from which there was no possible retreat.

Behind him, any chance of escape was cut off by the return of the look-outs. His rifle was across the river. He had only his knife for protection.

If, by the slightest noises or misstep, his presence became known, he would be trapped on a narrow strip of beach, with at least forty savage redskins to face.

But his nerves steadied. His jaw squared. He had come into this things, knowing the risk; but victory would mean the saving of his friend's life, the salvation of the Indian tribe.

His wet buckskins made no noise as he crept closer to the thick brush screening him from the open space where the camp fire was crackling. And Cougar Fang was too skilled a woodsman to allow a twig to snap beneath his feet or let his shoulder disturb a whippy branch.

He lay down on his stomach and slithered through brown ferns until he found himself on the edge of the clearing. In the middle of the open space was the camp fire, where savages were cooking chunks of venison on turning sticks.

Cougar Fang's eyes darted about the scene, noting tiny details. They came to rest on a crude, hastily built wigwam erected against the base of the cliff, in such a position as to be invisible from any angle, outside.

Even as he sighted the place, Cougar Fang saw the flap door of the wigwam bulge, and Black Buzzard's

stooped body came outside of the tent. The medicine man spoke to his henchmen in clear, ringing tones which reached the ears of the youth in the brush:

"Fleetwing tells me he would die before he sees me made chief of the Sioux!" guffawed the Indian, with a flaunt of his feather-bonneted head. "The Bright Canoe has paddled to the high point of the heavens. Soon we shall see if a smoke signal comes from the Great Spirit's Finger!"

One of Black Buzzard's henchmen spoke from the camp fire, between wolfish bites at a chunk of steaming, greasy venison held in his hands:

"And if the signal comes, we free Fleetwing?"

Black Buzzard swaggered to the edge of the fire and snatched the meat from the warrior's grasp. He tapped the handle of his tomahawk significantly, as he bit off a huge chunk of venison.

"We free Fleetwing, yes! Free him with a war ax, to go to the happy hunting ground!" snarled the Indian. "First they make me chief. I promise to show them Fleetwing as soon as that is done, not before. When I am chief, I send old Falling Snow here to get Fleetwing. He will find the buzzards quarreling over him!"

A rumble of throaty laughter went around the circle of red men. But the medicine man's threat made Cougar Fang boil with rage. He had suspected this treachery all along.

Then a cold dread settled over him. What if Fleetwing had already been killed? But he doubted that. Black Buzzard was the type who knew the torture of mental agony, and he would keep his victim alive as long as possible, knowing that

mental suffering was as bad as physical pain.

Then, too, the savage's tomahawk was clean of blade. Black Buzzard would use that war hatchet on his helpless victim. No, Fleetwing still lived.

But his minutes were numbered. The signal of good faith which the Indians in Peril Pass were about to make from the top of the mountain crag ended Fleetwing's lease on life.

As the Indians busied themselves eating at the camp fire, Cougar Fang's alert eyes and ears lost no details. His brain was busy with plans for rescuing his Indian friend. But as yet, he saw nothing but blank hopelessness ahead.

The longer he looked, the more hopeless the outlook became. The odds were impossibly heavy, in the first place. Besides, even if he could get over to the Indian tepee, he might find Fleetwing drugged or wounded so that he could not move.

But there was one thing in his favor. The Indians, not suspecting that attack from any quarter was possible, were not wearing their tomahawks or carrying their rifles. These arms, for the most part, were piled to one side, near the heaps of balsam boughs which they used in sleeping.

The very number of these beds showed Cougar Fang that Black Buzzard had a considerable group of followers. He recognized Blade Slankard's bed by the white man's black waistcoat. The others were probably standing watch on the bluff-top, along with Slankard.

In case of a pinch, Cougar Fang believed he could get to that stack of rifles and war bows and tomahawks almost as quickly as the nearest Indian. His one aim would be to kill Black Buzzard before sheer numbers overcame him. That there

was any chance of rescuing Fleetwing, he was doubtful.

"*Wah-hoooo!*" An ear-splitting cry rang out behind him, and for an instant Cougar Fang was positive that the lookouts back on the beach had noticed the wet trail where his buckskins had dripped on the rocks, and were shouting out their discovery.

But the second shout settled his mind for an instant, only to plunge him into deeper despair as he realized what it meant:

"O Black Buzzard, mighty medicine man of the Sioux, we see smoke coming from the Great Spirit's Finger! Falling Snow's signal!"

As the sentry's voice shouted out, answering cries rang out from the brow of the overhanging bluff above, together with the harsh, booming yell of the white crook, Slankard. They, too, had sighted the long-awaited signal from the distant mountain crag.

The news stirred the Indian camp into furious action. Lounging redskins leaped up from their balsam couches and ran, yelling excitedly, for the beach to get a glimpse of the smoke-talk.

Even Black Buzzard lost his usual dignity for a moment, and went sprinting for the water's edge, where he could read the signals sent from the towering pinnacle by Falling Snow.

As the space about the camp fire was left empty and vacant by the yelling Indians, Cougar Fang leaped to his feet and sped like a race horse across the ground. He cleared the camp fire in a jump that took him to the pile of Indian weapons.

Scooping up a double armful of war bows and clumsy long rifles such as were traded to the Indians for pelts, Cougar Fang ran back to the fire and dumped them into the

flames. The fire made short work of the gut-stringed war bows.

Back to the weapon stack Cougar Fang leaped, to return to the fire with another load of arrows and tomahawks to dump into the leaping flames.

The last remaining weapons he kicked into the brush, pausing only long enough to select the best two rifles and a powder horn, which he laid aside where they would be handy.

Then he bolted like a startled elk for the door of Fleetwing's wigwam. He dived inside, his bowie knife ready.

"Cougar Fang!" came a startled gasp out of the shadows, and in an instant the young American was kneeling beside the prostrate form of Fleetwing, lying bound and gagged on the sand.

Whack! Whack! Cougar Fang's knife blade severed the young Indian's bonds.

A second later the buckskin-clad trapper jerked Fleetwing to his feet and dragged him outside the wigwam by one arm. From the corner of his eye Cougar Fang saw that Fleetwing was uninjured, though weak from his imprisonment and starvation.

"Quick into these bushes!" hissed Cougar Fang, as he snatched up the two rifles and handed one to Fleetwing. "They'll be comin' back in a second, an' when they find out what I've done with their weapons there'll be trouble!"

Even as the pair dived into the cottonwoods between the camp fire and the river beach, they saw the Indians running back to camp to get their weapons and to settle Fleetwing's fate. Black Buzzard's tomahawk was already out of his belt, ready for murder.

As the Indians trooped back, Cougar Fang and Fleetwing were scuttling on hands and knees through the willow brake not ten yards to their right, and paused only when they came to the outer edge of the thicket overlooking the river.

Cougar Fang's eyes rose to the distant mountain crag of Peril Pass. Dimly etched against the blue of the autumn sky was a thin wash of white smoke. Falling Snow's signal pledging Black Buzzard the chieftancy of the Thundergust Sioux, in return for the life of Fleetwing, rightful leader of the tribe!

"Our rifles! Our bows!" came a frenzied squall from Black Buzzard, who had been the first to notice the strange fuel in the camp fire.

The last of the Indians had left the beach and were thronging to Black Buzzard's side. It was the single moment of confusion in which to make their supreme, daring effort toward escape.

Cougar Fang took a final glance up and down the river's edge to make sure the sentries were not still outside, and then he was grabbing Fleetwing's wrist and pulling him into the open.

"Come on, Fleetwing!" he cried. "We got tuh make every second count now!"

Straight for the near-by canoe at the river's edge, the escaping pair made their way. Panting with excitement, Ted Booth assisted the weak, shaking Indian youth into the black canoe. At that instant a rifle rang out sharply and a bullet hummed by.

Booth squatted on one knee and swept his stolen rifle about, to line the sights on an armed Indian guard who, from the opposite end of the beach, had sighted their get-away.

Brrang! The weapon roared in Cougar Fang's grasp.

The recoil nearly threw him off his feet, but the charge caught the Indian square in the neck and flopped him kicking to the sand.

Then the long face of the willow and cottonwood wall broke open in forty places, as the yelling, enraged Sioux charged out of the brush in a yelling flood.

Out into the water Booth pushed the big Indian canoe. Fleetwing scrambled weakly to take his place in the prow. When the river was knee-deep on Cougar Fang's pumping legs and the keel of the canoe was floating into deep water, the young American threw his smoking long rifle on the thwarts and vaulted aboard.

Fleetwing and Cougar Fang seized paddles from the pile of ten which lay inside the long boat, and plunged the blades deep into the water. Behind them on the shore, Black Buzzard and his weaponless Indians were making the noon air rock with a din of angry oaths.

Some floundered into the water in foolish chase. Others dug up rocks which pelted the water and jolted the canoe, but the desperate pair of fugitives were forcing the big war canoe farther and farther from shore.

A shot or two from the guards who still had their rifles rang out, but the hastily aimed bullets went wild. Cougar Fang did not put much store in Indian shooting.

Then a crackle of rapidly triggered shots rang out, and Cougar Fang twisted to see Blade Slankard standing on the cliff edge above. Both six-guns were blazing in his hands, but the canoe was almost out of range, for short-gun work.

A flurry of arrows came from the

archers on the bluff-top. Like a shower of needles the volley was discharged, most of them falling short with little splashes on the river.

The black-painted canoe was leaving the furious Indians rapidly behind, as the frantic pair drove their huge canoe harder and harder into the main current of the Whetstone.

"We're safe, Fleetwing! They ain't got any weapons, an' they're caught on that beach!" yelled Cougar Fang triumphantly, dashing sweat off his face with a wet buckskin sleeve as soon as he saw they were out of range. "Listen to Black Buzzard an' Slankard cussin' us, will yuh?"

Fleetwing shook his head, and pointed with a shining copper arm back toward the Indian hide-out.

"The Great Spirit has been kind, but we are far from safe," spoke the young chief soberly. "Look!"

Cougar Fang twisted around to squint through the sunshine at the dwindling beach. What he saw wiped the grin off his lips.

Out of the brush, Black Buzzard's Indians had produced a second long war canoe, similar to the one they were using for escape. Even as Cougar Fang watched he saw ten naked savages seize glittering paddles and slide the great canoe out into the water.

Ten powerful sets of shoulders dug paddles deep into the river. The great war canoe's prow lifted from the water as it was shot at amazing speed out into midstream, in pursuit. Standing in the prow of the canoe was Black Buzzard, waving his shiny tomahawk defiantly.

Gasping with sick terror, the two fugitives plunged paddle blades into the stream. A grim race with death had begun, ten paddlers against two.

CHAPTER IX.

SHOW-DOWN ON THE RIVER.

LIKE the winking glitter of a spinning mirror, the paddle blades of Black Buzzard's ten warriors twinkled in the blazing sunshine. The long war canoe was propelled down the river with arrow-like, skimming flight.

Barely two hundred yards ahead—the first minute of the race had seen the lead cut down by a third—two lone paddlers sat in either end of a long and heavy war craft, bending their backs and straining their muscles as they dug paddles into water, fighting desperately to maintain their head-start lead.

Curling white foam fell back from the nose of the pursuing canoe. Evenly balanced, paddled with matchless skill by warriors trained in drawing the last ounce of speed from their racing craft, Black Buzzard's canoe sped over the glassy ripples like a bullet.

"They're gainin'—on us—fast!" croaked out Cougar Fang, on his knees in the stern of their canoe. Sweat rained into his eyes. The sun drew steam from his sopping buckskins, and the wet leather was chafing great blisters on his skin.

Fleetwing, in the prow of the black canoe, was already beginning to lag in his frantic paddle beats. He was exhausted by his long confinement without food or drink and only by sheer will power had managed to summon the strength to escape.

Now, the man-killing exertion of driving a huge canoe through the water was telling on his jaded nerves. Ragged sinew and muscle could not give up the toll of energy the task was costing.

Cougar Fang shipped his canoe to seize his long rifle. Instantly the

canoe's speed slowed by half. Fleetwing's wearied paddle dabbed into the water only enough to keep the unwieldy boat in its course.

Ted Booth had a few musket balls in the pocket of his buckskins. He loaded the long rifle he had seized, and primed it from the stolen powder horn.

Then, twisting, he leveled the rifle over the curving stern of the black canoe, and drew bead upon the foremost man in the pursuing boat—a warrior who had a rifle by his side.

Crack! The ancient rifle roared and spouted a blinding curtain of thick smoke.

Without waiting to see what effect his shot had taken, Cougar Fang laid the smoking gun down and renewed his paddling. The canoe gathered speed under his savage strokes.

The smoke sifted to one side and Ted Booth saw that his first shot had taken effect. Great confusion reigned in Black Buzzard's canoe. The winking paddle strokes had slowed down. Slumped over the bulwark forward was the writhing body of the warrior his ball had drilled.

"Plumb miracle, keepin' an aim in a canoe that's pitchin' like this one!" Cougar Fang discredited himself.

He saw the paddler behind the wounded man get his arm under the warrior's thighs and dump the unfortunate savage into the river. The canoe veered aside to keep from tangling with the threshing arms of the dying swimmer.

"Dumped him off tuh drown!" gasped Cougar Fang, cranking his head about to see Black Buzzard's canoe drawing away from the sinking redskin. "Figured 'his weight was holdin' 'em!"

Fleetwing, striving desperately to keep up his own paddling, let the

blade drag a curving sheet of green water on each stroke. Cougar Fang slid the rifles along the canoe to Fleetwing, tossed the Indian his remaining two bullets, and ordered the exhausted youth to stop paddling and load the guns.

The river took a sharp bend, and for a moment the two were out of sight of the canoe that chased them. With sickening heart, Cougar Fang's eye swept along the clifflike banks on either side of the river. The Whetstone glided along between twenty-foot cut banks, impossible to land a canoe on.

"We can't keep up this lead another mile, with them nine Injuns paddlin' against us!" gasped Cougar Fang to his partner. "Minute you sight a place where we can land, steer for it. Once ashore, we might be able tuh stand 'em off until dark!"

Just then the prow of the medicine man's canoe came bending around the river behind them, and the long, gleaming length of the craft gradually veered about until it was prow-on.

The beat of the approaching paddlers was as even as clock ticks, swift as a pulse beat. Ten paddlers moving in unison—Black Buzzard had seized the missing man's paddle. Ten paddles, five to the side, moving forward, dipping, sweeping back, with the precision of one man reflected in nine mirrors.

Picking up Fleetwing's rifle, Cougar Fang once more prepared to fire. But this shot only tore a white flurry of eagle feathers from Black Buzzard's war bonnet. The medicine man roared out a command, and the war canoe began plowing forward in a heart-bursting sprint which Cougar Fang knew would be the end.

Fleetwing, with a moan, slumped

in a heap on the keel of the canoe, overcome by his exertion under the blinding sun.

A quick, last glance showed that the steep banks offered no escape. Cougar Fang could already hear the panting of the Indians behind, sweeping their canoe up astern in their last mad sprint.

He picked up his own rifle, which Fleetwing had loaded for him. With a groan, he saw it was their last bullet; but he would make it do its bit.

He wanted to shoot Black Buzzard, but that Indian was in the center of the canoe, protected by four bodies in front of him.

The forward paddler, seeing grim death looking at him down the barrel of that leveled gun, yelled and broke the paddle-rhythm. A sudden bob of Cougar Fang's boat threw off his aim just as he squeezed trigger.

The bullet slanted downward, ripping a long gash in the side of the sleek birch-bark canoe behind, an inch below water line. Black Buzzard's big craft careened as water gushed in in a long, shiny ribbon.

The accidental shot had crippled Black Buzzard's boat. But its terrific speed was in itself capable of overhauling Cougar Fang's canoe before it filled with water.

As a bluff, Cougar Fang pretended to load his rifle, filling it only with gun powder. But the paddlers in Black Buzzard's filling canoe threshed the water with their oar blades, and the canoe slid up until only three feet of open water showed between prow and stern of the two boats.

Then the prow of Black Buzzard's crippled boat shot ahead, six feet to the right of Ted Booth's drifting canoe. The buckskin-clad white

youth leveled his long rifle at Black Buzzard.

But the medicine man was not to be bluffed. Yelling in a mad frenzy, he directed his feathered paddlers to veer in alongside.

Brram! Cougar Fang's weapon exploded, but the powder charge was harmless.

Paddle blades sparked through the plunging reek of gun smoke, and in the screen of clouding gray loomed the figure of Black Buzzard, hurling aside his own paddle and balancing himself on the ashwood thwart of his canoe.

The crafts were beam to beam, now. With a snarl, Cougar Fang sent his rifle hurtling, heard it crack a paddler's skull. A tomahawk whistled by his own arm, and then the canoes lurched together, bulwark to bulwark.

With a Sioux war cry, Black Buzzard poised on the edge of his own foundering craft and leaped through the thinning gun smoke to land fair and square amidships in Cougar Fang's canoe.

The big war canoe of the medicine man gurgled drunkenly and plunged beneath the river, as the seam broken by Cougar Fang's bullet suddenly parted, opening its bottom. Nine swimming heads dotted the current, and all turned to watch the second canoe as it was borne off downstream.

In the stern, tense as a crouching lion, was Cougar Fang. In the prow was huddled the limp, unconscious body of Fleetwing. And in the center of the canoe, slowly advancing toward Ted Booth, was Black Buzzard, eyes red-shot with murder.

"All right, Black Buzzard! You called fer a show-down, an' yuh'll git it, right in this canoe!" yelled Cougar Fang, his voice shrill with fight-

ing heat. "You killed my father, an' now I'm goin' tuh kill yuh!"

Yelling their hate and fury, the two leaped at the same instant and crashed together in the center of the canoe.

Down they went, grappling in a fight to the death.

CHAPTER X.

OVER THE FALLS.

THE Indians who lined the banks of the Whetstone River at their Peril Pass wigwam village were never to forget the drama that floated down the river before their eyes, that afternoon.

The first squaws who sighted the lurching canoe bearing down the river could not believe their eyes. Two minutes later, every Indian in the village was on the bank, yelling madly as they recognized the two figures who writhed and grappled, first up and now down, in that drifting boat.

"It is Black Buzzard, coming to be our chief!"

"But he fights with Cougar Fang, the friend of the Sioux!"

At that moment, a naked Indian figure appeared in the prow of the canoe, vainly trying to lift himself to Cougar Fang's aid.

Every Sioux in the village let out a yell as they recognized the third passenger in that death boat as Fleetwing himself!

Young braves scrambled to the water's edge and leaped into canoes. Soon three birch-barks were making out into the river, to get a closer view of the thrilling end of the fight.

Cougar Fang, his side slashed by the blade of Black Buzzard's tomahawk, his nose purpled by the medicine man's fists, was battling like a wild cat in the grasp of the heavier, stronger man.

But Black Buzzard's murderous attack was weakening. A half mile back, Cougar Fang had plunged his bowie hilt-deep in the big Sioux's shoulder, then tore the tomahawk from Black Buzzard's fingers and threw it overboard.

Fleetwing had been too weak to join the thrilling struggle. Now, as the canoe swept by the gaping Indian village, Cougar Fang was summoning his last ounce of strength to batter down the man he had sworn to slay.

The two fighters separated, each struggling to maintain the canoe's balance. Only the fact that it was a wide-bottomed craft had prevented its capsizing long before now.

The canoes from the shore paddled closer, in time to see Black Buzzard stoop and seize a long rifle which lay in the bottom of the canoe. It was unloaded, but in Black Buzzard's mighty arms it was a murderous club.

Still in the stern of the canoe, the battered young trapper shook crimson out of his throbbing eyes and grabbed up the paddle which he had used in his frantic effort to escape. Swinging their weapons, the two lurched drunkenly at each other, hearts primed for the finish.

Whish! Black Buzzard swung the rifle by the barrel in a blurring arc.

Cougar Fang ducked the big walnut stock even as it grazed his skull and knocked his coonskin cap into the river.

Then, as the wicked medicine man screamed an oath and swung the rifle back for a second blow, Cougar Fang swept in with the hardwood paddle shooting upward like a spear.

Out sped the thin-edged blade of the paddle, with every atom of Cougar Fang's wiry brawn behind it.

Slash! The razorlike edge caught Black Buzzard flush on the neck.

The war whoop died in a gargling squawk as the strange weapon clipped the jugular vein.

Crimson gushed down Black Buzzard's shoulder and side. His savage eyes flamed their hatred at Cougar Fang for one last, burning moment.

Then the medicine man who for so long had oppressed the Indians under his control, buckled at the knees. His body toppled backward and hung limply over the spreader of the canoe.

"An' that makes—the world—safe tuh live—in!" gasped Cougar Fang, swaying on his feet. "I've had—my revenge."

For the first time, Cougar Fang became aware of the other canoes alongside. Not until then did he know that the canoe in which he had waged such a desperate battle for life and vengeance, had drifted down the river to the Peril Pass village.

Dimly, he felt strong hands grab his swaying body and lift him into the safety of the canoe. A second boat was alongside, and Fleetwing's exhausted body was likewise put aboard.

Then, leaving the war canoe with its grisly freight to drift on down the Whetstone, the canoes headed back for shore and the cheering throngs of Thundergust Indians. Faintly Cougar Fang could hear Whiskers barking a noisy welcome.

A great peace warmed Cougar

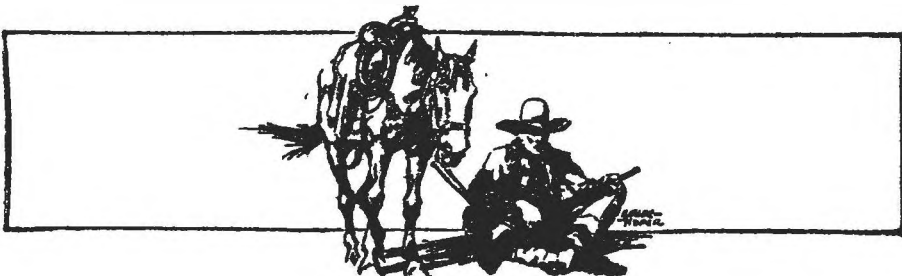
Fang's pounding heart, as he saw the old Pawnee chief, Bald Eagle, waiting the arrival of the canoes. In his hands he held the great feathered war bonnet which he would place upon Fleetwing's brow in a moment, proclaiming the young Sioux the chief of his nation.

A mighty shout went up, and Cougar Fang, barely able to sit up in the canoe he was riding, turned his head about. Down the river from the village, the Whetstone River flowed over the brow of a mighty cliff, to form a lacy, plunging waterfall.

Even as he looked, he saw the war canoe bearing the gruesome corpse of Black Buzzard, sweep into the swift water which flowed like glass over the waterfall's edge.

The shouting Indians suddenly hushed. The canoe's prow sped out and over the dizzy brink. It tilted, hiding from sight the feathered corpse of the wicked Black Buzzard. Then the canoe bulleted from sight down the plunging avalanche of river, and vanished forever in the spray at the foot of the falls.

Now mebbe there'll be a little peace among the Thundergust peaks, with Black Buzzard gone fer good an' his crew o' murderin' skunks either drowned or marooned at their old hide-out. But don't fergit thet Blade Slankard is still on deck. Mebbe Cougar Fang will hear some more from thet skunk. Watch fer another story about the young frontiersman in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.





The Fight On Squabble Creek

By Hal Davenport

Author of "Green Bronc And Redhead," etc.

WHAT was wrong with his cattle? Young Ken Carraway frowned in wonder.

He'd been away a week now, on important business. He knew that he hadn't left his little KC Bar in the best of hands, but just the same, "String" Bowen, his one puncher, was hardly the kind to neglect stock under any circumstances.

Still, there they were, bawling thirstily all over the place in the blaze of sun, as Ken turned off the road from town and broke his roan at an anxious lope for the distant ranch house.

Up there, half a mile ahead, his windmill clanked in the light breeze.

Gaunt critters lowed about it. In weak, yet peevish fashion, they gave way slowly as Ken rode through and gazed down in the water tank. Not a drop of liquid in it!

Maybe String had forgotten to connect the pump or open the valve.

"But those poor red-eyed critters haven't had water for days!" Ken exclaimed. "What's the matter with their gumption, anyhow?"

Why hadn't they simply gone on to the creek, up there in the hills, if String was off the place for some unaccountable reason?

Ken rose in the stirrups, scanning the roll of land to the north, where pine-clad heights came dropping

down from the Culebra National Forest. Sunlight flashed on a silver foam of waterfall far above, where Squabble Creek had its birth up there in mighty ledges.

Where the stream itself cut through his land, aspen and willows fringed it. He could see more cattle off over there. But they, too, were lowing.

Ken shook his head. "Shore beats me!"

Dropping the reins over the roan's head, the young rancher swung to the ground. He was slightly under medium height, slender, but tough and wiry.

His face was red from a life of sun; he never tanned. A faint scar showed upon his chin. A fighting chin, blue eyes, a snub nose. Ken was a fighter.

He strode to the pump and outlet pipe. The clanking shaft was connected, but the valve was closed. He turned it on. No water came.

His glance went up again to the waterfall. "The creek's not dry, that's a cinch!" Yet the underground current that fed the well came from Squabble Creek, he was certain.

He entered the house, two log rooms and a kitchen. Everything seemed in order. Then, propped against a sirup pitcher on the kitchen-table oilcloth, a fold of paper caught his eyes. Ken picked it up. A note from String:

Boss, I sure feel like a skunk leaving the ranch this way. But a certain party stuck a gun in my face, and says never to come back—no time. You know I ain't the fightin' kind. P. S. I don't know what they're up to.

That was all. Ken's frown deepened. It was hard even to read between the lines. String, weak-chinned and gangling, had been

scared stiff, that was plain. He hadn't dared even name the man.

But then, almost any hard-mouthed jigger who made threats behind a gun could have spooked poor String into a panic.

Ken read the last line slowly:

I don't know what they're up to.

"They." More than one, then. That didn't help a lot, though. He had no bitter enemies that he knew. Still, something beyond a doubt had happened to his water.

He went out and climbed his roan. "Hoss, we're headin' for the creek."

Ten minutes later, he sat staring down from a gravelly bank—the stream bed dry before him.

Not bone dry. The bottom sand still held dankness. Mud was gummy in the sun. But the flow of water had ceased—across his land. And to Ken Carraway, that meant ruin.

"No enemies, huh?" His lips set tight. Dollars and greed made enemies. He'd just thought of the Fergus brothers.

Their Double F joined him, to the east and north. They'd never been good neighbors. There'd been no real trouble, though. Time and again, they'd tried to buy him out, at rather measly figures.

Squabble Creek watered both ranges. Had they dared divert the stream, now that drought was on the land? Big "Red" Fergus, the young rancher knew, was the kind to stop at nothing.

Ken headed his roan up the creek. He meant to find out in a hurry. Tortured cattle stood along the banks, miserable, constantly lowing.

He loosened his six-gun as he rode. This was no time to wait for law. His stock had to have water in a

hurry. Either that, or he'd have to sell them.

No market, either, at a time like this. His eyes went over the hills below and the dry, parched flats beyond them. Ranchers there were disposing of stuff as fast as they could, keeping only a little breeding stock to carry on when winter snows should bring more moisture.

The market was glutted; he'd never seen prices so low. Only he and the Double F, both high up, had seemed to have plenty of water.

"Every head I've got," the rancher growled, "wouldn't bring me enough to pay taxes."

The dry stream bed led to the end of his land. There, just within his fence, had been a beaver pond, almost a lake. The little lake was there no longer.

The dam stood gray in the blaze of sun, the beaver house—a huge, humped cone—in the small empty basin behind it. Water had remained there last, of course, but thirsty stock had sucked it dry. The mud was a churn of countless hoofs. The beavers, beyond doubt, had departed.

"Disaster for them, as well as me," Ken muttered.

House and dam had been built to last. Many a time he'd sat his horse upon the edge, admiring the handiwork of the sturdy little engineers. Skill, labor, all gone for nothing.

Maybe they'd done something about it, though. Just as he, himself, meant to do. He had no hint of a plan as yet. He didn't believe in running past himself. But just as soon as he found out what was what—

In three miles more, he found it.

Ken reined in his horse, dumfounded. He'd almost crossed an arm of the Double F, jutting here

between his land and the National Forest. Water roared off to his right—precious water for the Fergus brothers.

Just beyond, water gleamed in a placid pool, then showered high in a flying burst, as a mighty *thwack-k* resounded.

"The beavers! They've done it themselves!" Ken exclaimed. Moved up here, made a new dam, started a new home! And diverted that creek water!

His heart sagged as much as his mouth. There was no law to stop them.

More than that, both State and Federal governments stood squarely behind those little engineers. It was illegal to trap them in any way, to molest their homes, destroy a dam.

"Now wouldn't that make you bite your eyebrows?"

Not a beaver nose was in sight, of course. Just a wave of water running out in ripples toward the shore, from that sturdy whack of a sentinel's tail that had scurried them all to cover.

The dam, here at what had been a bottle neck in Squabble Creek, wasn't yet completed. But it had backed up enough water to turn the flow into that other channel. Ken rode worriedly toward the spot. He didn't notice a man approaching.

Big Red Fergus's thick crook of arm held a cradled rifle. His eyes were green, with little gleams, right now of triumph. A massive tangle of cinnamon beard hid the crafty corners of a smile. His dirty forefinger fondled the trigger.

Ken swung from his horse at the point where a swifter flow whipped around the dam. It would be the beavers' spillway. Aspens cut by long, sharp teeth into various lengths lay along the shore for further work. The beaver house in the

center of the pool had hardly been more than started.

Silvery chips and a stubble of tooth-marked stumps dotted the little slope beyond, where a single strand of rusty wire separated the Fergus land from the National Forest. The slope above was dark with pine, yet it held aspen enough, in great thick clumps here and there, to finish the job ten times over.

"Nothin' can stop 'em," came Ken's growl, as green eyes watched him intently. "Of course, a man might trap 'em out. Or blow that dam with dynamite——"

Thick lips cut through the cinnamon beard: "Fella, just you try it!"

II.

Ken spun about to face the man. Fergus's rifle lifted. Shaggy, thick-set and greasy, he looked like a bear, save for his eyes. They had the craft of a panther.

"Tough break fer you," the fellow growled. "Fine fer me an' Wilt, though." Wilt was the other Fergus. "Beavers are sure queer critters. I don't know what made 'em move, but they've plumb doubled our water. Mean to keep it, too, we do. Kind of a gift o' nature."

"Yeah, gift," Ken sneered.

"Couldn't help hearin' what you said," big Red rasped on. "Don't you never bother them beavers!"

The hand of the law backed the man—backed him in double fashion. Not only were beavers fully protected generally, but now their dam was on his land.

Ken felt hemmed, trapped, some way.

"Sure am sorry fer you." Big Red grinned. "Our luck's kind o' been yore poison. Yore cattle must be in terrible shape. We've talked

it over, me an' Wilt. Got a proposition for you."

"Yeah?" Ken answered him slowly.

"Yore critters'll die in no time," the other said. "No market for 'em, anyway. But we've got plenty water. We'll take 'em off yore hands. Three dollars a head. Provided you throw in yore ranch, too. It's drained plumb dry, anyhow."

"Generous, aren't you?" Ken flung at him. His blue eyes began to blaze. The man proposed downright robbery.

"Try to do better," Fergus rasped. "I'll give you three days to think it over."

Three days! Half of his herd would be dead by then. Yet—Ken thought swiftly—would they?

He wasn't yet seeing a full way out. Anger and suspicion struck sparks in his brain. Big Red Fergus, it was plain, thought he had him in the short wool.

Still, if he didn't sell——

Ken shook the thought.

The thing was slick—far too slick. That beaver dam a gift of nature, huh?

There'd been little reason for them to change their home. And why had String been run from the KC Bar, except to keep him from noticing crooked work?

"You dirty skunk!" ripped from Ken. "I think you trapped those beavers! Moved them here!"

"Jist keep on thinkin'," big Red sneered. "Can't trap beavers without hurtin' 'em. Go git the ranger or the law. Bring 'em hyar to look 'em over."

"You could have padded the trap jaws," the young rancher clipped.

"All right. Try and prove it." Fergus stood there, gloating.

"I don't need to!" Ken Carraway

blazed. "I can see the truth in your crooked face!"

Almost unconsciously, his hand had dropped to his holstered gun. He took a quick step forward.

The other's rifle leaped up promptly. And a cold voice called from the wooded slope above:

"Ain't no need to kill him, Red. If he tries to draw, I'll plug him."

Ken looked over his shoulder. Wilt Fergus stood there in the pines, long and slouchy, always furtive. Little eyes gleamed in a weasel face. An ugly smile was on Wilt's lips.

Gun cocked, the man slouched downward.

"Fella"—he grinned at Ken—"you're all wrong. Them beavers, they jist like us. We shore mean to protect 'em. If that dam's damaged in any way, we'll sure have the law on you."

Ken Carraway said nothing. He'd had no intention of dynamiting the beaver home. They couldn't help having been moved there.

But when he thought of his stock, he ground his teeth. Surely there must be some way.

Big Red Fergus leered at him. "Gittin' back to our proposition, now——"

"I'll see you dead first!" the young rancher flared. Ken strode to his horse, swung aboard.

There was a fighting glint in his eye. But the shaggy man sneered at him coolly:

"See yore cattle dead, is what you mean. We're the only way to save 'em. Yore ranch is lost, anyhow. We'll just buy it in fer taxes."

Ken drove in spurs. "I'm not through!"

But what he meant to do, he didn't know, as the leggy roan leaped the creek there at the new channel. His glance went down.

Spade marks, huh? Those dirty skunks had helped the beavers change the flow.

He didn't come back, however. Charges now would get him nowhere.

"They'd simply plaster the marks with mud," he growled, "before the law could ever see 'em."

The roan took the low fence at a bound. Ken hardly realized he was pounding up the creek, as the National Forest closed him in. Aspen hid him and his anger.

The Fergus pair watched him disappear. They grinned.

"We've shore got him."

III.

Three days later, though, they changed their minds, at least in some measure. Ken Carraway hadn't buckled yet. He hadn't taken their proposition.

"The bull-headed fool," big Red growled. "I'm goin' down to see him." The man saddled up and rode away. He didn't get back till nightfall.

"Wilt," he snarled on his return, "this thing shore beats me! His part o' the creek is still bone dry. I figured to see bawlin' cattle, ready to drop. There wasn't a head, anywhere. He's still livin' there, from the looks o' things. But his critters have plumb vanished."

"You reckon he could've sold em?"

"Not a chance. I went to town. Nothin' been shipped at the stockyards. And local ranchers ain't buyin'. I tried the forest office. No new grazin' permits fer forest land, like we was shore. Washington stopped that months ago, account this drought. But I shore got a cool reception."

Wilt's weasel eyes showed the

barest tinge of uneasiness. "Huh? They can't be on to us."

"No, but they're suspicious. Think one of 'em's been up here. It's a derned good thing we covered them shovel marks right away, after we noticed Carraway seen 'em. The trappin', o' course, they can't prove. But what's become o' them cattle?"

The only possible solution that they could see was that Ken had driven them from the country. But there was no way across the mountain rims, and the great flats below were practically desert now. A drive of any length was suicide.

And Ken, good cowman, would know it.

"We'll watch his place," big Red growled. "I don't think that he's pulled out. But if he has, we'll jist move in, when it's safe, and take the ranch over. No trouble to move the beavers ag'in. But I hate to miss out on them cattle."

Their spying brought them nothing, though, except the realization that Ken was still there, living on a waterless place. They saw his smoke spires regularly.

Only occasionally was he in sight, bringing out small kegs of water bought in town for himself, the roan, and one work team. All the rest of his horses had disappeared, like the herd of cattle.

At first, the Fergus pair guarded the dam day and night, although taking care not to get so close that they disturbed the little workers. When the dam was finished, the vigil relaxed. It had really seemed useless effort. Ken wasn't the kind to flaunt the law. And as Red pointed out:

"Cuttin' the dam won't help him now. Them beavers would jist repair it. We got him down, darn his hide! Stubbornness won't help him."

The new channel seemed to bear him out. It danced and thundered with bigger force, sweeping down past the ranch house. Then, one night at supper, Wilt Fergus suddenly raised his head. He craned his thin neck, listening.

"Red," he cried, "somethin's wrong! I—I cain't hear that water!"

He came to his feet. Big Red, too. "By the blazes! He's cut that dam!" the latter snarled.

They went pounding from the house, buckling on their weapons.

Water still flowed in the channel, but it was lessening rapidly. What had been a roar was a murmur now, dropping steadily toward a whisper. In an hour or so, the bed would be dry.

They rushed to corrals and saddle shed. The dam was miles above them.

Twilight was fading into dusk, when they angrily rode up on it. Rifles were gripped in Fergus hands. They spurred straight to the far end of the dam, where a break would feed the old channel.

But there was no break of any sort. The dam hadn't been molested. Yet the pool beyond was practically dry. And there was no sign of the beavers.

The round, woven base for their little animals' huge winter home stood drying, out in the center. As usual, busy at other labors, they'd deferred its construction till the last, while living in burrows under the bank. A dim blotch now in the settling dark, the beaver house wasn't half completed.

All this the pair took in at a glare and glance. They wasted no time on the empty pond.

"He's turned the creek, up above!" big Red rasped. "By the glory! That gets him nowhere."

A darned-fool move, for law was

law. All they had to do was turn it back, or call on forest officials. They might not be any too well liked, yet a complaint would force real action.

"Come on!" growled Wilt. "Let's go see!"

They headed through low aspen stumps up the little slope to where the sharp, gravelly banks of Squabble Creek cut under their fence from pines above. There wasn't a trickle in it.

Keeping to the bed, they pushed on through the night and forest.

"I hope he's still there," burst from Wilt.

"Not much chance," growled the other.

The early moon soon touched the heights; but it wasn't till nearly midnight that they finally heard water. It roared from the right, a tumbling froth, past tree trunks as white as silver.

"Missin' us, but headed for his land," Red snarled. "That's Pine Gulch it tumbles into."

They hurried to the flow, and turned up the banks. A mile above, they stopped, in wonder.

Big Red's oath curdled the air. "Them beavers! They've double-crossed us!"

There was a dam—another dam—once more diverting water.

"Double crossed, your eye!" came Wilt's snarl. "He jist took a leaf out of our book. Trapped that whole batch, from off our land, and brung 'em here! But I cain't figure when he done it."

The other gnawed his lip and cinnamon beard. "It took us three nights. We've been asleep. We ought to caught him in that time."

Still, there'd been no signs of any traps. Not even human footprints. Yet Red Fergus knew beavers. Human agency must have brought

them here. They'd never have shifted their site on a mere whim, not with aspen growing near the Fergus place for both winter food and building material.

He shook his head. "It's been moonlight, too; yet he boogered us slicker'n a weasel."

They went to the dam. They couldn't complain to the forest office now; only after abandonment might a dam be legally destroyed. Cutting it secretly was a waste of time, for the little engineers would simply rebuild again. Aspen grew thick here, also.

Red's eyes wrathfully took in these great patches of silvery growth. Beaver, he knew, rarely touched pine, because of its pitch and turpentine.

With the aspen all gone, they'd have to move.

"We can't cut it," he growled to himself. "That'd take weeks of labor. Nothin' for it," he grunted at Wilt, "but to trap 'em again. Won't be easy this time, though. They'll be trap-wise and leery."

They turned their horses. A short cut home would get them back before the dawn.

Hours later, their traps were set. This time, they meant to kill each beaver that they took. Once the flow was in their channel again, there'd be no more dam-building.

For the present, they left the water as it was.

"Let Carraway figure himself safe," Red growled.

They rode home, got some sleep. When the sun went down, they saddled again.

Wilt rode for the KC Bar, Red, with his gun, for beaver.

Cagy, that pair. A fleet of clouds obscured the moon. Neither one took chances.

Light broke through once in a

while, but only the faintest touch was on the pond when Red reached the new beaver home. He circled the pool warily, then strode straight toward his traps. Dam, shore, great boulders hid no one.

A beaver tail sounded. Waves ran out. He lifted the first trap, buried well down in the spillway.

"Nothing!" he growled, and set it back, working chain and jaws carefully down into the mud.

A slick spot in the bank, a beaver slide, next engaged his attention.

Disappointed again, the man swore. But when the moon broke through, a moment later, a thick smile split the cinnamon beard. Beneath the water, just above a trap, something floated in limp, lifeless fashion.

Big Red laid down his rifle, drew in the chain. A furious oath broke from him. Clamped in the steel jaws of the trap was a sodden mass—merely a piece of gunny sack, cut in the size of a beaver.

Red whirled and grabbed for his gun. A quickly scooting, rasping sound had streaked down from an aspen trunk. A figure clipped, as it struck the ground:

"Don't move, Red! I've got you!"

IV.

But Fergus's hand had grasped the gun. He took a chance. The weapon roared as it came up. The next instant, Ken was on him.

A .45 barrel lashed the air. Ken struck in savage fashion. The bite of that bullet was in his side. He struck fiercely, again and again, his other hand wrenching the rifle.

Its second shot ripped wide of the mark. Red, staggering, loosed the gun. A throaty roar, and the fel-

low's fist swung. But a final blow smashed home too quickly. The man was all but senseless, as he spun and hit the water.

It flew high, a silvery veil. Ken stepped back. At that last moment, he'd lost the rifle. It, too, was gone beneath the bulge of waves that ran flashing over the pool. But he hardly thought Fergus could find it.

In the moonlight gleam on the beaver pond, a hand shot out, clawed and writhing. The nostrils appeared, the man's eyes, his mouth, contorted. Big Red's head rolled with effort, disappeared. He came up again, struggling. Just that mere slice of the watery face.

"Help!" he cried. "My right arm!" And once again he went under.

The third time up, weakening now. "It's in—a trap—log—fastened!"

Ken stepped into water above his waist, as cold as ice. It struck him at the wishbone. No wonder the man was nearly drowned, if a steel trap had him!

The young rancher's hand shot down and found the other's hair. He put real power behind the heave, yet Red's shining gleam of face wouldn't quite clear the surface.

Just nostrils, eyes, and twisted lips, red-flecked where tight teeth gripped them.

Ken's other hand caught the hidden beard; but the doubled leverage hardly helped. He gazed down into the bulging eyes, and felt his own teeth clatter.

"If I l-l-let go, you drown, my friend," the young rancher said. "Now, if you want to get loose, you'll loosen your tongue. You're going to jail for trappin' beavers! Not only here, but down at my place. You and Wilt—you did it?"

And run String Bowen off, under threat of death?"

"Yes, yes! But only git me out! About that trap chain. If you've got an ax——" the man cried.

"I haven't," Ken returned. "But I'll ask a friend."

He glanced over his shoulder, to where another form, having shinnied down from an aspen, was hurrying up along the bank. "You heard him, Mr. Ramey?"

"Every word," said Ranger Ramey. "If I didn't want to make an example of him, I'd almost say let him drown. Hold the rat for two minutes more. My hand ax is off on my pony."

The ranger disappeared up the stream. Back quickly, he drew a deep breath, ducked underwater, and severed the chain with quick, hard blows.

They had to help Red to the bank. Then, while Ken kept the man covered, Ramey hurried about the pond, taking up traps for evidence. Fergus, recovering rapidly, glared at the pair when Ramey returned.

"Think you got me, don't you? Well, if I go to jail, Carraway does, too. He trapped beavers as much as us. Brought 'em here from our pond——"

Ken said, "Don't bet on it."

"How'd they git here, then? Answer me that! No, sir, you go to jail!"

Ramey clamped the man's shoulder. "Step out!" the ranger ordered. "Those beavers moved of their own accord. You'll find out why, when we go down to arrest Wilt."

"Which same," a voice snarled over the dam, "is plumb going to be never! Hoist your paws, you danged law rats! Step free, Red! I've got 'em trapped! And achin' to burn it to 'em!"

Moonlight gleamed on a rifle barrel, Wilt's weasel face vicious behind it. Little eyes shone along the sights as he spat out:

"Seen Carraway headin' up this way, when I was ridin' toward his place, but he had a big start on me. Anyhow, I'm in time. Jail, is it, huh? I reckon not! And we don't aim to loose that water. Dead men, Red, don't testify. Stand aside! I'll plug 'em!"

Big Red stepped back from the covered men, their hands in air. "Better ways'n that," he said, with a grin. "Bullets kin be told sometimes."

He pulled forth a huge clasp-knife from a dripping pocket. "I'm going to turn this around in Carraway's back. Then we'll knock Ramey in the head, and tote him plenty far from here. The thing won't be connected."

In front of the cornered pair, Wilt's rifle never wavered. His lips were wolfish, his trigger finger tense. Behind them, Red stepped quickly. Two sodden squashes of water-soaked shoes. Then——

An arm like a tree shot around Ken's neck. The knife blade flashed in a vicious drive. Muscles taut, Ken had meant to whirl—mighty slim chance—and go down battling blade and bullet.

But as Red's thick arm curled around his neck, Carraway's desperate plans had an instant shift. He grabbed the wrist, bent and heaved. He didn't have half a second.

Red, whipped to him, missed his stroke. The big knife barely flicked a shoulder. Then the fellow was sailing through the air, heels like a flail above the pair.

Wilt didn't dare shoot till the tangle cleared. Ramey, whirling,

got the full crash of the ruffian's fall. The two went down together.

Ken leaped aside, dug for his gun. Wilt's rifle spat lead a fraction late. Three shuddering reports burst from Ken's .45. But only the first slug took effect.

Wilt was down, rolling over the dam, with a numbed side and shattered shoulder.

Carraway whirled to the others. A drive of his foot smashed Red in mouth and chin. A leap, and his gun barrel finished the job. Ramey crawled out from under the man, holding his own six-gun.

"Glad I didn't have to kill him," the ranger said. "And mighty glad you knocked me down with him, or the other might have got me."

Damaged prisoners, astride their own horses and linked with ropes, were herded down through the National Forest. The little group followed dry Squabble Creek toward Fergus land.

They weren't far from the Double F fence when moonlit aspen began to show amid the pine. Red stared hard at the slender trunks, which should have shone like silver.

"What's the matter with them aspen?" burst from his lips.

"They're all black, for three feet up from the ground."

"Not black, but brown," Ken Carraway said. "Reckon that's why the beavers moved. Took me three nights to do it. Creosote, my friend. Terrible smell, frightful taste. Don't blame the beavers for not touchin' 'em. Since they don't favor pine very much more, they had to pull out for a better stand. Up there where you got your needin's."

"What yuh——" Red began.

"If you want to know about my cattle," Ken went on, "they're all right, too. Ramey's brother has a little spread. When I told him what I meant to do, he let me throw 'em there for a little while. Grazed him mighty short, but that don't hurt now. I'm returnin' the favor right away"—Ken grinned—"seein' I've got plenty water."

"Yes," declared Ramey, "forever. That new creek stays right where it is, since the beavers turned it natural. The Double F is a goner now. Maybe this pair of skunk'll want to sell to you, when they come out. But don't give 'em too much money."

"I wont," Ken said shortly.



A Battle With Rustlers

A SHORT time ago, a band of Mexican rustlers raided the ranch of Elmo Johnson, a border ranchman of Brewster County, Texas, and drove away a big herd of his most valuable horses. It so happens that Mr. Johnson stands high with the Mexican authorities, and is very popular on both sides of the border.

As soon as the loss was discovered, Johnson started out with his cowboys and gathered a posse of neighboring ranchmen. All brought along some of their punchers, who were only too delighted to join in the chase.

Mounted on fast horses they crossed the Rio Grande in pursuit of the rustlers, who had had a good start, having made off with the herd during the night.

After crossing the river, Mexican officials were notified of the rustlers' activities, and a small detachment of Mexican soldiers were sent to aid the posse in running down the thieves.

As over two hundred horses were in the stolen herd, the trail was not easy to hide. It was plain and was followed without difficulty, but high speed had to be maintained as the rustlers were making for the hills, and if they should succeed in driving the horses into the narrow passes and rocky defiles to their hide-outs, all pursuit would be cut off.

One sniper, perched upon a boulder, could shoot down the whole posse one by one, as the riders passed, for they would have to go in single file through the almost impassable mountain trails.

But a crowd of determined Texas cowmen on fast horses can accomplish many things. They caught up with the rustlers and the stolen

stock before they reached the foothills, and a running fight, swift and sure, followed. Seven of the rustlers fell, to rustle no more, and the rest of the band, frightened at the damage done by the bullets of the Texans, surrendered. There were no casualties among the Texas cowboys or the Mexican soldiers.

The captured rustlers were given speedy trials, and each one was sentenced to twenty years in prison. They were placed on burros as soon as sentences were pronounced, and were taken through the streets in daylight, their hands and feet tied, to a jail on the west side of Mexico City.

As this daring raid was made quite recently, it is evident that the rustling of cattle and horses is still an active industry in the West.

Ranches along the Mexican border are given the preference, not only by Mexican rustlers, but also by American outlaws who have taken up this way of making dishonest dollars.

The Americans are usually expert cowboys, who could make a good living on ranches, but who have placed themselves outside the law by some act of their own, and now have no other choice.

Once the stolen animals are on Mexican soil, the rustlers are nearly always safe from pursuit. If Mr. Johnson had not been held in high esteem by the Mexican officials, it is doubtful if he would have risked following the thieves on their own territory.

These rustlers are especially active in stealing good horses, as there is a steady demand for army mounts across the river, and they can always get big prices for them.

in whom yo're interested. I only warn yuh thet yuh should take names o' Pen Pals from the latest issue o' the W. W. W. if yuh want tuh be sure o' gettin' in touch with active ones. Now fer this week's letters:

O' SPECIAL INTEREST

Fer song lovers, collectors, an' sech these letters will prove mighty welcome, I reckon, an' I don't think it needs any urgin' on my part fer yuh tuh read each one o' them.

DEAR SAM: I am writing to see whether you can find some Pen Pals for me. I am a boy, eighteen years old, a senior in high school. My aim is to correspond with Pen Pals all over the United States who can give information on the time when various crops are harvested, because another senior and I are planning to go around after graduation and pick up a little cash. In return, I will gladly give information about the State I live in and possibly trade Indian relics of which I have quite a large collection.

DEAN WHITEHEAD, OF WASHINGTON.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man of twenty. I am interested in obtaining Pen Pals who can play the guitar and who have a large collection of songs so that we may trade them, as well as exchange information about the countries we live in.

JOE SH., OF NEBRASKA.

DEAR SAM: I am an Indian girl, asking for Pen Pals in any State of the Union, especially the Northwestern States. I live on a reservation, and I am spending quite some time in making beadwork belts, fobs, necklaces, and other articles. What I hope for is that some Pen Pals will be interested in that kind of work and accept such articles in trade for anything that I could use. Every letter will be answered.

FRANCES ROBINSON, OF NEBRASKA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, twenty years old, anxious to find Pen Pals anywhere in the country. I am a piano-acordion player and play old-time as well as modern music for house parties and other occasions. If some Pen Pals could inform me where I could find more or less steady work as an entertainer, I would certainly appreciate it.

FRANCIS PODENSKI, OF NORTH DAKOTA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fourteen, and I would be very glad to correspond with Pen Pals anywhere. My hobby is collecting whatever is worth having: pressed flowers, songs, stamps, and snaps of scenery. There surely should be girls who are interested in these things, also, and therefore willing to write.

JEAN GARBER, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am a young woman asking for Pen Pals, and I am especially interested to get in touch with girls who are students of "Unity."

ANNA PERKINS, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I shall be very grateful if you print this request for me. I am a man of about forty-two, having been born in November, 1893, in a small town in Kendall County, Texas. The name of the town may be Bornec or Berne. My father's name was Charles Westerstrom. He was thrown from a buckboard and killed on the way to the burial ground near by. This happened, I believe, in 1894. I should indeed be glad to have information on the past, and I particularly wish to find out whether there are any markers on my father's grave. It may help to identify him, when I mention that our next neighbors where we lived were a family by the name of Thompson. I will send views and newspapers to any one who can give me information on the matter.

EMIL C. A., OF ILLINOIS.

FROM ACROSS THE SEAS

What splendid opportunity tuh learn somethin' about other countries and people by havin' Pen Pals abroad. Just watch the W. W. W. every week, and yuh'll be able to make frien's in nearly every country o' the world.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man of twenty-one, a coal miner. Although I am living in a rather crowded district, I still feel that a few Pen Pals would be more than welcome. I am an ardent stamp collector and would be glad to hear from others for the purpose of trading. All letters will be answered.

B. TAYLOR, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: I have read the W. W. W. whenever I could obtain a copy, and I have become greatly interested in the Pen Pals.

I would be very happy if you could secure some for me, especially in California. Boys around my own age which is seventeen years. ALFRED GORDON, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of thirteen, and I should like to get in touch with fellows who are interested, as I am, in sports and outdoor life in general. Boys in Western States would be especially welcome.

A. TWINING, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: We are four comrades in arms, all in the twenties, lonesome and desirous of obtaining Pen Pals in your country or anywhere else. Pen Pals answering this request, please address letters either to BUCK, HANDSOME, OR BRIG, OF INDIA.

CALLIN' FER WESTERNERS

No wonder thar's a lot o' people writin' fer Pen Pals in Western States. Makin' frien's out thar will give 'em the chance o' gettin' first-hand information on whatever questions about the West they're interested in.

DEAR SAM: I am a lad of fifteen. While I intend to go West some day, I would like first to get some Pen Pals there with whom to exchange information.

HOWARD PAYNE, OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of thirteen. Please get some Pen Pals in Texas and Montana to write to me, especially cowboys so that I can learn more about their life and work. Will answer all letters and exchange snaps. BOB RUSSELL, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of twelve, a regular tomboy. I would like to get Pen Pals in the West and South who are interested in hobbies like mine which are outdoor sports and tap dancing. Will exchange snapshots.

GLENNA LEA, OF OKLAHOMA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fourteen. I would like to have Pen Pals in Western States like Texas, Nebraska, Utah, Arizona, and others. Will answer all letters.

C. L. HAMMONTREE, OF GEORGIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of sixteen. I would like to have some Pen Pals from the West.

ALBERT THOMAS, OF SOUTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: We are girl friends, fourteen and sixteen years old, and we both would like to get some Pen Pals in Western States, especially among cowgirls.

M. AND E., OF NEBRASKA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of eighteen. As soon as school closes, I intend to go out West, at first to Colorado where I have some friends, and afterwards to other Western States. I would like you to find Pen Pals for me in Texas, Arizona, Nevada, and Utah, which are the States I would like to visit provided I can get friends there to bid me welcome. I will answer all letters received.

DONALD PAUL, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of nineteen, full of pep and interested in everything pertaining to the West, so that I most desire to get some Pen Pals there for exchange of information, while I also hope to get correspondents in the South and from abroad.

MARIE D'ALBERO, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of sixteen, and I would like to secure some Pen Pals in the States of Texas, Wyoming, or other Western States. I am greatly interested in the life and work of cowboys and would be very happy indeed if some cowboy would write and tell me all about it.

GLENN H., OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fifteen. I would like to have some Pen Pals in Arizona, Texas, or other States throughout the West. My hobby is baseball, and I will gladly correspond on that or any other subject with whoever is interested.

JOHN V., OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl, twenty-four years old, wishing for Pen Pals who live on ranches, so that I can get all the information I want about life there.

MISS B. C., OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of eleven, longing for Pen Pals of around my own age, from Western States. I should especially like to hear from some one in Colorado, but I promise to answer all letters and exchange snaps.

EDWIN MUNN, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am greatly interested in the West and for that reason, I desire to have some Pen Pals there—girls of my own age, which is fifteen, preferred. Will gladly

give information about the State I live in and promise to answer all letters I may receive.

MISS BETTY MOORE, OF KENTUCKY.

FAR-AWAY FOLKS WANTED

Waal, gals an' boys in far-off countries, hyar's yore chance tuh make frien's quickly. Jest write an' send the letter tuh me for for-wardin'. Howsomever, don't ferget tuh put enough postage on yore letters.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of eighteen, and I am very much interested in obtaining Pen Pals from foreign countries, anywhere in the world, although I am not barring the good old U. S. A. either. Will answer all letters and exchange snaps.

ROBERTS, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I am on the lookout for Pen Pals in England, Australia, Alaska, and Canada, and in the State of Arizona, no matter of what age or nationality. Please do your best to make my wish come true soon, and I promise to answer all letters. I am willing to exchange snaps.

MISS MOLLIE, OF KENTUCKY.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fifteen. My favorite pastimes are swimming and tennis, but dancing is what I enjoy better than any else. B-

about 'em. Thet kind o' letter shore is easily tuh answer, although thet doesn't mean thet they're less interestin' than others.

DEAR SAM: May I join the Pen Pals? I am a girl of sixteen, and I would be glad to correspond and exchange snaps with any one, anywhere.

EDITH S., OF CONNECTICUT.

DEAR SAM: I am a reader of the W. W. W., and I especially enjoy the Pen Pal column. As a matter of fact, I am so interested that I would like to become a Pen Pal myself. I am a girl of fifteen, fond of sports, especially dancing, and now on the lookout for Pen Pals, no matter where from or of what age. All letters will be answered and snaps exchanged.

VERNA N., OF MINNESOTA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of eleven. I would like to have some Pen Pals anywhere in the world, as long as they will write regularly. I promise to answer all letters. FRED WILSON, OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR SAM: I am an ex-marine of twenty-nine, and I hope you will make an effort and give me a break in my hunt for Pen Pals. They're welcome, no matter where they may live, and I think I can satisfy them well with my letters, since having traveled a lot, I have many interesting items to relate. My hobbies are baseball, foot-

may live, but being greatly interested in Florida, I hope some one there will write to me.

MARIE GRAVES, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl, twenty years old, crazy about all sports, although my favorite pastimes are music and reading. Since my mother's death, I am attending to the household, and I get quite lonely, especially during the time that dad is away from home. It is for this reason that I would like to have some Pen Pals. Any one can write and may be sure that her letter will be answered promptly. I will also exchange snapshots.

GEORGIA MARSH, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl, twenty-three years old, and at the present time I am keeping house for my parents. I like to dance, sing, read, and entertain company. My reason for writing to you is the hope that I shall find some Pen Pals around my own age. I do not specify definitely where these Pen Pals should live, but I would like to have girls in the South and in Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana answer this plea.

MARY JANE, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of seventeen, and I would like to get some Pen Pals. Being greatly interested in outdoor life, sports, riding and roping, it would seem natural that my first choice of Pen Pals would be Westerners, but I will gladly cor-

respond with any one who will answer this plea. Western movies are my favorites and in asking for Western Pen Pals, I would like to find fellows who can answer questions about the life out there in detail. Will exchange photos and besides, I will send a surprise to the first ten who answer this plea.

N. R. A., OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, seventeen years old. Everything about the West is of greatest interest to me since I have been reading the W. W. W., and now I come to you with my plea for Pen Pals out West, especially in Texas and Wyoming, because I hope that through them I can get more complete information about things Western. I would prefer to hear from boys of about my own age, but I do not make that exactly a condition, rather I promise to answer every letter I receive, and I will also exchange snapshots with any one.

A. L. THOMAS, OF IOWA.

That's the lot fer this week. Just take yore pick, write—an' the new frien'ship is in the makin'. It might be well fer yuh, howsomever, tuh read carefully the rules we've adopted, because if yuh follow 'em it'll make matters easier all around, an' yuh'll get better service. So long, 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.

HI yuh, Jack?" we shouts, as we comes inter the Corner fer this week's meetin' an' spots Silver Jack Steele a-settin' thar. "Welcome back ter the Corner! Yo're quite a stranger, feller."

The young special officer grins. His hat is shoved back, showin' the streak o' silvery-white thet runs through his brown hair—the which accounts fer his name o' "Silver Jack."

"Yeah," he drawls, "reckon I am quite a stranger, at thet. But 'tain't because I want ter be, Boss. Yuh know thet. I git around as often as I kin, but yuh know these danged crooks! They keep me plumb busy."

The Whistlin' Kid chuckles. Nobody knows better'n the range dick how busy crooks kin keep a lawman. He was plumb busy hisself, this week.

Likewise, Shorty Masters, M.D.—

which same stands fer Mule Driver—an' his pard, the Sonora Kid, has been kind of all tied up with troublesome crooks. All in all, it's been a busy week fer the 3W waddies.

'Bout the only hombre at meetin' who ain't been tanglin' with range crooks an' outlaws is us. But we been havin' our troubles, too. A hull herd o' readin' hombres has been sendin' in their coupons fer Sonny Tabor's pitcher without waitin' till they got all three. An' if thet ain't trouble, we ain't never seen none!

This week, howsomever, we're printin' the third an' last coupon fer Sonny's pitcher. We'll prob'ly be snowed under with mail, come next meetin' night. But we'll be danged glad of it. We hope a lot o' readin' hombres will be askin' fer a pitcher o' the most wanted hombre in the Southwest—Sonny Tabor.

"Here's a plumb interestin' letter,

gents," we says, as we pulls it out o' the sack. "We been savin' it out special, so's ter be shore not ter overlook it."

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my second letter to the Corner, and I hope it doesn't follow the first one into the wastebasket.

I have read the 3W for a long time, and I sure think it is one swell magazine. I live on a real cattle ranch in Arizona, right on Billy the Kid's stamping ground, and I figure that the authors of the 3W stories know a lot about the West.

I like Kid Wolf, Sonny Tabor, Circle J, Señor Red Mask, Calamity Boggs, the Oklahoma Kid, Shorty Masters, the Shoot-in' Fool, and all the others, except Lum Yates and Bud Jones. I think you should fire those two.

Circle J, Sonny Tabor, and Kid Wolf are my special favorites. But Señor Red Mask and the Oklahoma Kid aren't so far behind.

By the way, Boss, I am sending you some brands which are owned by our ranch and some of our neighbors. Maybe you can print them in the 3W.

Yours till Buck Foster quits stealing sheep.

ALKALI IKE.

76 Ranch, Arizona.

An' here are the brands thet Alkali Ike sends in:

 SEVENTY SIX  O BAR O  BENCH V

 BOX A  HK  J6  PM
BOX A HK J SIX PM BAR

 COGWHEEL  AC
COGWHEEL AC DRAG

 QUARTER-CIRCLE WINE GLASS

The waddies pass the paper with the brands around amongst 'em. 'Bout the most interested gent is the Whistlin' Kid. Brands of all kinds are his specialty—they have ter be, in his business. An' he allows as how these are all O. K.

"Some o' them would give brand-

blotters a plumb tough job," he chuckles.

Waal, thanks a lot, Alkali Ike. We like ter git them kind o' letters. Here's hopin' thet rustlers steer clear o' yore 76 spread.

An' now, here's the next letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I shore do like yore W. W. W. It's a plumb swell magazine—the best one on the stands. I know, fer I've tried every one.

It shore does make yuh bite yore fingernails an' tear the pillows apart when yuh read one of Señor Red Mask's stories. And now that he's finished El Hiena, don't drop him.

Let's have some more about Kid Wolf. He is a swell hombre. So are most of the other waddies. But George Krumm—I'd spell it Crumb—he'd be scared of his own hand in front of him in a fog.

The Bar U twins are plumb smart, and I think we ought to hear more of them. They shore know all the tricks for getting into and out of jams.

Calamity Boggs is pretty good, too. He's always moaning and saying he's shore his end has come. Waal, let him keep right on. It probably cheers him up.

Waal, I'll say so long, but I'll be reading 3W every week.

EVELYN "SPEED" SMITH.

Long Beach, California.

Shorty Masters laughs. "Waal, Boss," he says, "nobody kin claim thet the gals don't git their chance at the Wranglers Corner. Yo're al-lus readin' letters from 'em."

"Yeah," we answers, "the Corner's one place where gals are jest as welcome as hombres. An' most allus, they write plumb interestin' letters. Reckon we'll have ter call 'em readin' *muchachas*, after this."

This here's the one we draws out o' the sack next:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I don't know whether 3W is the best magazine on the stand or not, because it is the only one I read, and it suits me. Tell the reading jaspers that have to kick like burros eating briars that there are plenty of other mags beside 3W.

I guess I am about the youngest waddy that reads your book, for I am only thir-

teen years old. The first story I read was "Kid Wolf at Rascal River."

Tell the Kid for me that was one swell story.

I like all of your hombres. I think that Johnny Forty-five is the most happy-go-lucky jasper, and Silver Jack Steele the most serious.

Of the authors, I like Ward M. Stevens, Lee Bond, and Cleve Endicott. All the rest are fine, though.

Yours till 3W costs fifty cents.

JACK BROCK.

Elba, Alabama.

Silver Jack looks some puzzled at thet. But he grins, jest the same.

"I'll be dawg-goned if I kind figure how he figures me as bein' serious," he says.

"Yo're serious enough when yo're tanglin' with an owl-hooter, Jack," we comes back. "Danged lucky thing fer yuh yuh are, too!"

"Right!" says Jack. "There ain't no time fer mirth or laughter when yuh catch up with the gent yo're after."

"Hey!" yips the Sonora Kid. "What the heck? Who d'yuh think yuh are, Jack—Johnny Forty-five?"

Silver Jack grins sort o' sheepish-like. "Sorry, gents," he says. "Thet jest sort o' come out all by itself."

"Mebbe yuh was tryin' ter prove thet yuh *ain't* so danged serious," drawls the Whistlin' Kid.

Laughin', we pulls out another:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I shore hope thet yuh prints this letter, as it is the first one thet I have ever wrote ter yuh.

I have been readin' W. W. W. for about three an' a half years, an' I don't know who likes it most—dad or me. We almost have a fight over it, every week.

I think it's the best magazine on the stands. And any real hombre who don't like it must have bats in his belfry. So don't pay no attention ter the locoed gents who allow as how yuh ain't no good.

I plumb agree with the gents who ask yuh ter bring back the Border Eagle. He was shore one swell hombre an' ought ter ride the 3W range regular.

Cougar Fang an' his dawg, Whiskers, are

two fine characters. Hope we see a hull lot of 'em.

My favorites are Johnny Forty-five, Kid Wolf, Señor Red Mask, Bullwhip Adams, Sonny Tabor, the Oklahoma Kid, Bud Jones, the Whistlin' Kid, and Hungry and Rusty. But all the others are good, too.

Thet shore was a great story about the Whistlin' Kid an' the Circle J pards. Have some more like it.

Yores till Joe Scott catches Buck Foster shearin' sheep.

DONALD LURIE.

Springfield, Missouri.

Reckon yuh'll be "ours" fer a plumb long time, Don! If Buck Foster ever *does* shear sheep—which is plumb unlikely—he'll make tee-totally danged shore thet Joe ain't nowheres around. Yuh kin bet on thet.

Here's the next letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I saw a letter by J. E. B. S. in the February 16th issue of 3W, and—boy!—would I like to smash that hombre on the snozzle! I'll bet that chronic kicker couldn't ride a hay wagon if he was tied on. I'll bet he doesn't know a horse from a mule. And as for .45s—I'll bet if he ever saw one, he'd faint.

When I started reading his letter, I thought he was a girl. It sounded sissy-like, to me.

As for me, I figure W. W. W. is a plumb fine magazine, and I have no complaints to make. Give my regards to all the waddies.

Yours truly,

CANADA JACK.

Olney, Texas.

Thet J. E. B. S. hombre, whoever he is, shore stirred up a raft o' trouble when he sent in thet letter, a while ago. Shore hope he writes ag'in. He ought ter have somethin' ter say.

Now there's just about time fer one more, afore it's time ter adjourn the meetin'. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading your 3W magazine for a long time and like it very much. I find nothing vulgar about any of the stories.

I particularly like to read the Wranglers Corner and am certainly amused at the likes and dislikes of the readers, especially as regards the Circle J stories. If every

one in the world liked the same things, the world would surely be an uninteresting place to live in.

Such persons as O. B. Joyful and Mr. E. Harding should be given a dose of cheer-up medicine and rose-colored glasses. What do they expect? Can't they use a little imagination?

Why don't *they* try writing stories for 3W? The readers of the Wranglers Corner would, without doubt, like to see them do so. Would they get panned? Don't ask!

My one and only favorite—for I like them all—is Sonny Tabor. I guess that's because he was in the first story I ever read in 3W. The rest of the outfit couldn't possibly be better.

Sincerely, LAURA G.
Antioch, California.

By Jupiter, thar's another gal!

They shore are present in force, this week.

Send in yore three coupons, read-in' hombres an' *muchachas*, fer yore pitchers o' Sonny Tabor. The third an' last is on page 140 o' this issue, right at the end o' Sam Wills's Pen Pal Department. If yuh ain't got the other two, yuh kin git the March 30th an' April 6th issues o' 3W fer fifteen cents apiece from our Subscription Department.

Next week, we'll print the first o' three coupons which will entitle yuh ter a swell pitcher o' Billy West an' his pards. Don't miss this chanct!

THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

TRAIL OF THE JINGLEBOBS

Novelette

By SAMUEL H. NICKELS

The author o' the Hungry an' Rusty stories prob'ly knows as much or more about the life o' Billy the Kid as any man alive. This here's a rip-snortin', true novelette about the old West's most deadly gunman.

JOHNNY FORTY-FIVE IN TERROR TOWN

Novelette

By ANDREW A. GRIFFIN

It shore is a weird place, filled with dead men an' ghosts. It nearly scares George Krumm out of a year's sleep, an' supplies plenty o' gun practice fer the rhymin' depity.

THE CANYON OF MISSING HOMBRES

Novelette

By WILLIAM A. TODD

A bunch o' hoss thieves jumps a lone waddy whilst he's drivin' some plumb valuable hosses across the range. When he comes to, he's got a job cut out fer him, findin' said hosses an' the skunks thet stole 'em.

Also stories of Bud Jones of Texas, by J. Allan Dunn; Vincente the Yaqui, by Wilson Campbell; Shorty Masters, M. D., by Allan R. Bosworth—and other characters.

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Mrs. J. M. of Idaho, says, "I am pleased with my son's drawing, and the course is so reasonable."

F. McK. from Canada, says, "Am enclosing lesson for criticism. You will be glad to hear that I received 1st and 2nd prizes in the Paris Fall Fair."

H. R. of Torrington, says, "I have learned so much from your course in the short time I have been studying that I wouldn't dare give it up."

Mr. L. N., Honolulu, writes, "Towertown Course in drawings much easier and more understandable than other such courses."

D. S. B., Charleston, writes, "Have been looking for a course such as yours for quite a while."

J. B. S. of Austin, Texas, says, "I am more than pleased with the course and with my progress. Will praise it highly to anyone."

Mr. W. E. H., Brooklyn, says, "These studies change the human body from mere flesh and bone to a composition of artistic charm and beauty."

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APRIL 13

WILD WEST WEEKLY

SILVER JACK STEELE