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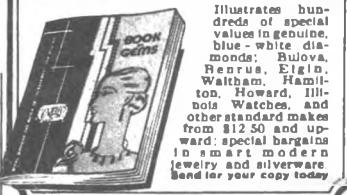
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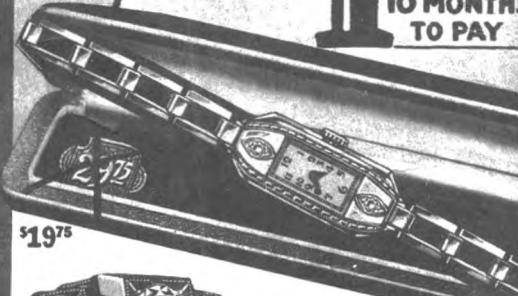


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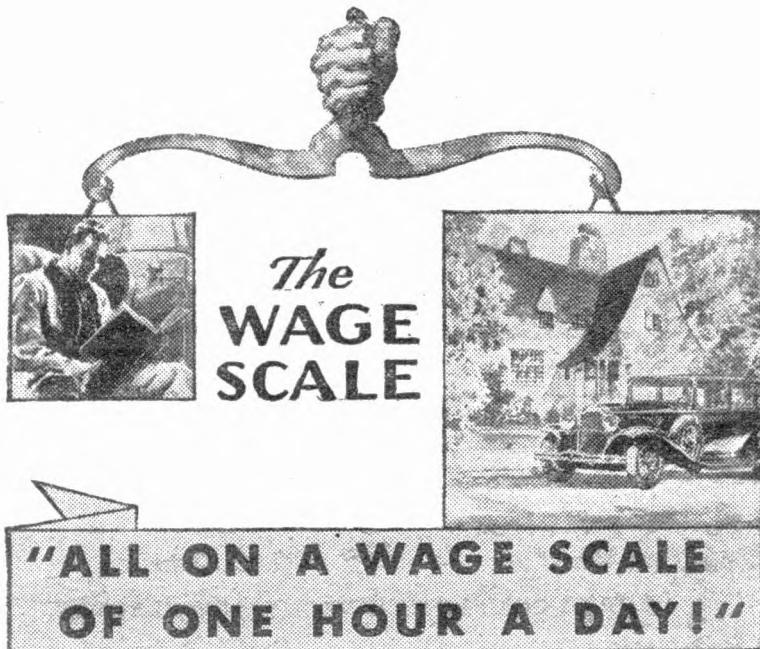


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Vol. 66, No. 3 CONTENTS FOR APRIL 2, 1932 Whole No. 1537

Cover Picture—Scene from

“Señor Red Mask” *G. C. Delano*

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

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A mysterious caballero declares war on the border wolves.		
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He made a mistake when he dubbed it on Circle J cows.		
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An' a gun-wise young waddy's .45s put teeth in it.		

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Pervide plenty of exercise fer a young puncher's six-guns.		

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They Laughed When I Mailed This Coupon

..But It Brought Me The Book That Showed Me How to Make \$10,000 a Year!

AS I walked up to the mail box, Joe nudged Ed and winked broadly for my benefit.

"Sh!" he hissed in a loud stage-whisper. "This is going to be the big turning point in Frank Parker's life! He's writing for a book that tells how to get into salesmanship. Pretty soon he'll be earning so much that he'll make the rest of us look like pikers!"

Ed snickered.

"Won't it be grand!" he grinned. "Now he can quit punching time-clocks and eating 40-cent lunches." He raised his voice. "Drop me a postal sometime when you get out into big business and start making \$10,000 a year, will you, Frank?"

They both laughed uproariously. And probably it did seem like a joke to them that a \$30 a week clerk would have the nerve to think he could get anywhere or make real money without some special "gift" or "pull."

But they laughed too soon. Just yesterday I sat down and wrote to Ed who is still at the shop, dragging along at the same old job. "Dear Ed"—I wrote. "You asked me to send you a card when I got into big business and started making \$10,000 a year." Well, here's your card. Yesterday I was promoted to the job of assistant Sales Manager of the Western Metal Works, at a salary that goes with it. I'll loan you my copy of that book on salesmanship you used to think was such a "joke."

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Age Occupation

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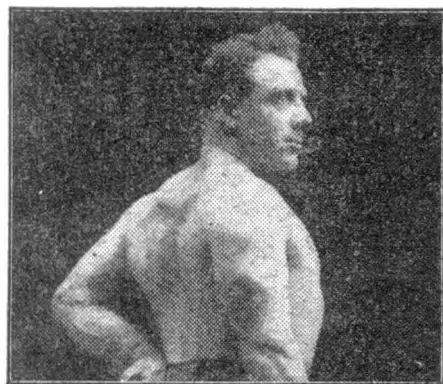
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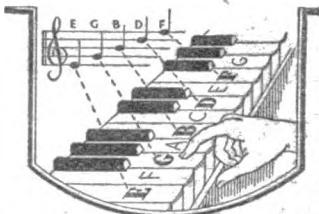
And the spaces—just as easy to remember. The four spaces are always F-A-C-E. That spells "face"—simple enough to remember, isn't it? Thus whenever a note appears in the first space, it is f. Whenever a note appears in the second space, it is a.

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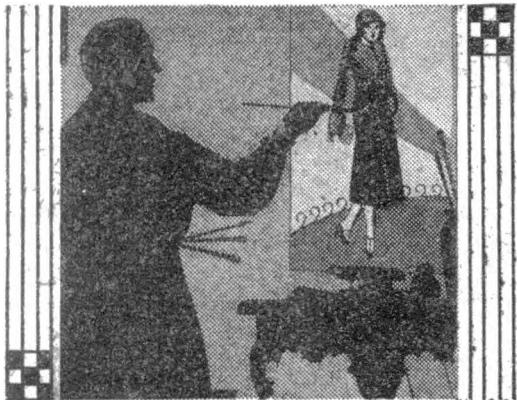
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Under the Big Top of the circus, a fantastic world—"world of the ballyhoo, the shillabab; of hot dogs and popcorn and water-thin lemonade; of horseflesh and grease paint, of glitter and pomp; elephants that served a king in India; a mangy lion born in the Bronx zoo; stray dogs, stray boys, wives, sweethearts, bad men, good men, weak men, brave men, beggar men, thieves."

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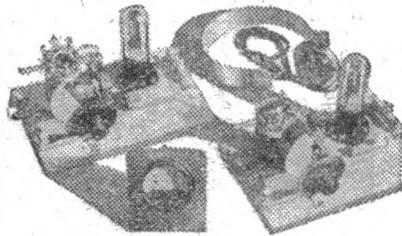
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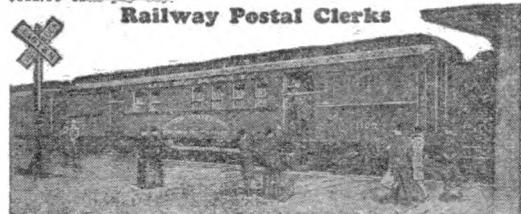


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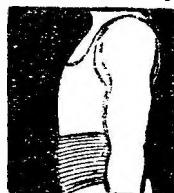
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CHAPTER I.

NIGHT RAID.

LIKE ghosts of the night, "El Lobo del Rio"—the "River Wolf"—and his cutthroat pack slunk through the shadowy chaparral. Only the jingle of bit chains, the creak of saddle leather, and an occasional muttered Spanish oath as some luckless vaquero caught the barbed swish of a mesquite limb across his face, made them human, lifelike.

For many minutes, the ten grim raiders urged their horses, still damp from crossing the Rio Grande, over

the rough New Mexico cattle range. Under the dimming stars of early dawn, each rider looked exactly like his companions.

They wore huge high-peaked sombreros, short leather jackets, and tight-fitting bell-bottomed trousers. Crossed bandoliers, bristling with cartridges, hung from every shoulder. Six-guns and carbines were ready to their hands.

Suddenly the burly hombre at the head of the band jerked his mount to a quick stop. His hand lifted in a signal to his followers.

"*Silencio!*" The low, sibilant, half-whispered command was passed

from man to man down the line. Instantly a tense silence settled over the group.

"Juan! Benito!"

Answering the low growled call, two vaqueros reined their horses out of the line and rode forward beside their chief.

From under the great brim of his sombrero, El Lobo's dark face, with its heavy black mustache, looked out evilly.

"Yonder is the herd we seek, hombres," the half-breed rustler chief said, parting the branches of a mesquite tree and pointing to a wide dark blotch on the summit of a low rise. "Still bedded down, and the two gringo guards will be drowsing in their saddles. Go, and do your work with care, that there may be no stampede of the herd."

Moments passed, in that unearthly calm which marks the coming of day to the range. Then the hunting cry of a wolf floated eerily across the dim landscape.

"Sounds like an old he lobo," muttered a young cow-puncher, as he reined up his broncho from an endless circling of the herd. He turned uneasily in his saddle, some warning of danger stirring his sleepy brain. "Or mebbe it's that murderin' rustler, El Lobo. He allus howls when he's raidin' a herd."

A sinister, sombrero-topped figure leaped suddenly from the cover of a close-by clump of chaparral. There was a dull gleam of unsheathed steel in the gray light of breaking day.

Then a riderless cow pony galloped wildly down the long slope.

It was a signal for the watching gang to crowd their horses toward the herd.

"You settled them night herders?" demanded El Lobo gruffly, as he met the two slit-eyed ruffians he had detailed for the grisly task.

"*Si, señor.* My long-bladed *cuchillo* went so deep I could hardly pull it out," answered one.

"*Bueno.* And you, Benito?"

"Mine also," nodded the other vaquero.

"Let's go, then!" ordered El Lobo. "Move quickly, hombres. We must wet these cows in the Rio Grande, before the sun rises."

"Haw-haw!" laughed a lean hombre, wheeling his horse and spurring it along the edge of the slowly stirring herd. "Thees ees a great joke on Jeem Corson, of the Slash C. He weel be fightin' mad, when he ees find out how many of hees fine fat *vacas* we haf stole."

With a skill born of long experience, the rustler crew rapidly got the hundred head of prime beef steers headed down the slope toward the Rio Grande.

El Lobo took the lead, followed by the surging mass of the cattle. On each flank of the steers rode two vaqueros. Five riders were on the drag. With snapping rope ends and loud yells and oaths, they hazed the herd swiftly over the mesquite-studded plain that stretched away to the river.

Once only did El Lobo, the murderous River Wolf, glance back to the low rise where two young night guards lay motionless in the glowing dawn light.

"A fine meal for the buzzards," he sneered, with a shrug of his thick shoulders.

CHAPTER II.

EL MUCHACHO.

THE scorching sun of a hundred long New Mexico summers had beaten down upon the little border town of Rio Vista. A wide-flung loop of the river, which marked the boundary line of old Mexico and the United States, half encircled the

rows of squat adobe buildings in which the mixed American and Mexican population of the town lived and transacted business.

Of *cantinas* and *posadas*—cheap inns and drinking places patronized largely by Mexicans and the drifting scum of the border—there were several. But the pride of Rio Vista was the Cholla Bar and Hotel. Under its hospitable roof gathered daily—and nightly—a goodly number of the Verde Valley's best people.

The long hitch rack in front of the Cholla was already well filled with dozing, tail-switching little cow ponies, although it was not yet noon. Several buckboards were in evidence, also, their teams tied here and there among the saddle animals.

For cowmen often brought their wives and children in from the range for a day of trading and friendly visiting in the old town. And always the Cholla Hotel was the center of social activities.

It would soon be time for the mid-day meal now. Little groups of ranch women stood about in the hotel lobby, eagerly exchanging the gossip of the range. From time to time, some watchful wife would glance through the wide, open archway which connected lobby and bar, seeking to put a damper on the spirits of a too-convivial husband.

The bar was doing a good business that morning. Two trail-herd crews, returning to the upper end of the valley from a hard trip to the distant railroad shipping point, had stopped over in Rio Vista to celebrate their homecoming.

"Have one on me, boys!" boomed a deep voice.

The invitation came from a big, gray-maned-and-mustached hombre who towered above the crowd lined up at the bar.

It was accepted with hearty good will. Jim Corson, owner of the *Slash C*, was one of the leading cowmen of Verde Valley. A dominant figure in a hard land, he stood by his friends and fought his enemies to a finish.

"See yuh later, boys," said Corson a minute afterward, putting down his empty glass and turning toward the hotel lobby. "Me an' Joan is goin' tuh eat now."

More than one pair of eyes followed Corson longingly as he moved through the wide archway and stopped beside a strikingly pretty girl seated in the lobby.

Many a youthful waddy had aspired to win the favor of Joan Corson, but so far, none had received encouragement.

Range gossip had it that young Tom Goodwin had carried away her heart with him, when he rode from the old Bar G Ranch adjoining the Corson range, two years before, to seek adventure on the northern cattle ranges.

"It's time you were leaving that wild bunch, dad," said the girl, with a reproving shake of her golden-auburn head.

But there was a smile on her red lips and a merry twinkle in her deep blue eyes that belied her chiding manner.

"Shucks, Joan! Them boys has tuh play once in a while," defended the big grizzled cowman. "But I'm gittin' mighty hungry. What yuh say we go into the dinin' room an' see what the cook is dishin' up?"

"Just a minute, dad." Joan Corson was looking back into the barroom as she laid a small hand de-tainingly on her father's brawny arm. "Look who's here!"

It seemed that every one in both the lobby and barroom had the same thought. With one accord, they

turned their astonished gaze on the newcomer.

He was a Mexican of the lower class by his dress. His lithe, muscular body was covered by a cheap blue-cotton shirt tucked into tight-fitting pantaloons of gray jeans. On his feet he wore *guarachas*—the native sandals of sole leather fastened by a rawhide thong.

A gaudy *serape* of shoddy material was thrown carelessly over one shoulder. Across the other was a stout cord from which a guitar was suspended.

But the young peon was clean. And his face, showing beneath the wide brim of a huge palm-fiber sombrero, was strong and clear-cut. A tiny black mustache perched jauntily above a firm-lipped mouth.

A murmur ran through the crowd of range-hardened men at the bar. Mexicans of that class were not welcome in the Cholla. Their place was in the *cantinas*, the cheap mescal joints, at the lower end of town.

Seemingly unconscious of this unfavorable attention, however, the brown-skinned youth leaned indolently against the casement of a window and started to strum his guitar.

"Hey, hombre! Vamose! Git out o' here, afore I throw *yuh* out!" bawled the scowling bartender, starting round the end of the long bar.

"Hold on, Hank!" put in a ruddy-faced, heavy-set cowman. "I ain't heard sich music since the old days when we used tuh dance fandangos in Santa Fe. Leave him be!"

There was no doubt about the quickly changing humor of the crowd. That lively air which came twanging and thrumming from under the deftly flying fingers of the young peon was irresistible. Booted feet began to beat time on the puncheon floor. Spurs jingled a

merry accompaniment. A score of fingers snapped in rhythmic unison.

"What's yore name, young feller?" asked the red-faced cowman, as the musician paused for a moment between tunes.

"El Muchacho. As you call it in Engleesh, 'the Keed,'" answered the dark-skinned youth, flashing a smile at his audience.

"Thet name don't tell us much, but it fits *yuh*, Muchacho," said the cowman, with a knowing look. "Step up tuh the bar an' have a drink on me."

"You will me excuse, please," "El Muchacho" politely refused. "Wheesky *no me gusta*, I no like it."

"Waal, I'll be a hump-backed rattlesnake ifn I ever afore seen a Mex thet didn't drink!" declared the astonished cowman.

But El Muchacho's nimble fingers were again drawing sweet melody from the strings of his guitar. The tune was plaintive, sad. No one in hearing but swayed in time to the compelling air of that universal favorite, "La Paloma."

In a rich tenor voice, El Muchacho sang:

"I am the wandering dove that seeks
The sad nest where I was born."

A change came over the singer as the mournful refrain floated through the stilled barroom. He seemed saddened, as if the words came home keenly to him.

"What a strong, manly face that young musician has," Joan Corson remarked thoughtfully to her father, who was indulgently waiting for her to go in to dinner with him. "You know, dad, I believe I've seen him somewhere before."

"Likely *yuh've* seen him loafin' around here in town afore. A lazy, music-making hombre like him won't work."

"Now, dad, that isn't fair. Maybe he would be glad to get honest work. Why don't you——"

"Hey! What's the matter?" Jim Corson, who was standing facing the open front door of the hotel, suddenly interrupted his daughter with a shout of alarm that brought every man and woman in the Cholla rushing outdoors behind him.

"It's Slim Davis! He's been hurt!" cried a woman's voice in the crowd.

CHAPTER III.

VIGILANTES.

HALF fainting, a long-legged, lean-bodied waddy slipped out of his saddle as his sweating cow pony stopped before the hitch rack. The rider's face was ghastly pale under his tan and dust. He would have fallen to the ground, had not big Jim Corson reached him in time and helped him over to the high board platform which served as a porch for the Cholla Hotel.

"Somebody run fer Doc Hardy!" Corson thundered above the clamor of the excited throng that hemmed in the injured man.

"Give him a swig of this old bourbon," said the bald-headed, apron-clad bartender of the Cholla, thrusting his way through the crowd, with a bottle in his hand.

The cowman tenderly raised the pallid, sweat-streaked head of the almost unconscious waddy and held the neck of the bottle to his colorless lips. The powerful liquor revived him, after a few moments.

"What happened, Slim?" asked Corson anxiously, as the badly hurt rider looked up and caught his eyes.

This was a *Slash C* waddy, and Corson, without a son of his own, was like a father to every young rider on his outfit.

"Got a knife stuck in my side,"

"Slim" answered in a weak half whisper. "The Mex who did it thought I was dead, I reckon. Wasn't far wrong, at thet."

"Rustlers?" Corson gritted the word through clenched teeth.

"Yeah, the herd was gone when I come to. Must 'a' been *El Lobo*, 'cause I heard a wolf howl, jest a minute afore the knife stuck me. An' Shorty—he——"

"Yuh mean pore Shorty got his, too?" put in the grim-faced cowman, as the other gasped and sank back weakly.

"Uh-huh," murmured Slim.

At that moment, the doctor arrived. He was a little, pompous-looking man, wearing silver-rimmed spectacles and a close-cropped, grayish beard. With a few snapped orders, he got the patient removed to his office in a near-by adobe house.

For a long moment, big Jim Corson stood looking into the faces of his neighbors of the range. Rough, hard-bitten men they were, like Corson himself.

They understood the situation. Hardly a man among them but had, at one time or another, lost cattle at the hands of the ruthless *El Lobo* and his gang of cutthroats from across the border.

Still fresh in their minds was *El Lobo*'s recent raid on the Bar G Ranch, when old Tom Goodwin had been killed, his ranch buildings burned, and his cattle all driven across the border. And young Tom away for the past two years riding the northern ranges, had not been heard from, although the sheriff had written letters to several points, hoping to locate him and inform him of the disaster.

"Men, this thing has got tuh——"

"What's the ruckus? Somebody been fightin'?" cut in a lanky, gray-mustached man whose unbuttoned

vest bore a nickel-plated sheriff's star.

"Worse'n that, Bill Jackson!" roared Corson, who seemed to find in the sheriff's late arrival on the scene an object on which to vent his wrath. "One of my waddies has been murdered. Two of 'em, if Slim Davis cashes in. An' a herd of my prime beef critters that the boys was close-herdin' down in the river pasture was rustled."

"El Lobo ag'in?"

"Shore it was. An' that means yuh can't take no posse across the Rio Grande an' foller him. Why, dog-gone it! We might's well not have no sheriff a-tall in this county fer all the good yuh are!"

"Easy now, Jim," said the unruffled officer. "I ain't blamin' yuh none fer gittin' on yore high hoss. But on the other hand, yuh ought ter not blame me, if the law says I cain't cross the line into Mexico."

"S'pose yuh cain't!" thundered the thoroughly aroused cowman. "Is that any reason why us cowmen should sit down an' let that measly, murderin' half-breed skung of an El Lobo, ruin us an' kill off our waddies?"

"Reckon it's a right good reason," countered the sheriff. "What kin yuh do?"

"Why, dang it all! We'll take the law into our own hands. That's what we'll do!"

Turning to the tensely listening crowd in the dusty street, Corson shouted:

"What yuh say, boys? Shall we hit the trail after that river wolf?"

A loud clamor of approval greeted the irate cowman's proposal. The ranchers of Verde Valley showed plainly that they were ready to ride the vengeance trail.

"Git yore hosses then," said Corson. "Let's ride!"

"Hold on, fellas! I'm in on this deal."

It was the sheriff speaking. Those nearest to him saw a glint in his faded blue eyes that meant fight.

"How come? Didn't yuh say the law wouldn't let yuh chase El Lobo across the border?" Corson asked bitterly.

"I ain't representin' the law no more," retorted the sheriff. "Not officially. I done resigned this minute. My deputy will be sheriff now. Ain't nobody kin say I set in my office, while the men of Verde Valley was cleanin' the range of two-legged wolves!"

"That's fine, Bill!" Corson boomed heartily, as he grasped the sheriff's gnarled hand in a friendly clasp. "We'll call ourselves the vigilantes an' elect yuh fer our leader."

"Then warm yore saddles, boys!" the former officer shouted to the cheering crowd of range riders.

Instantly there was a rush to the hitch rack. A score of hard-bitten waddies and cowmen flung themselves on startled horses.

As the troop of grim-faced vigilantes thundered along the main street of Rio Vista, a buckskin pony flashed across their front, heading down a squalid side street. On its rider's back, a guitar bounced with every leap of the racing buckskin.

"Huh, that good-fer-nothin', music-making Muchacho runs away like a scared coyote when trouble starts," muttered Jim Corson contemptuously.

Back in the doorway of the Cholla Hotel, his pretty daughter, Joan, watched the flight of El Muchacho with a shade of disappointment in her blue eyes.

"I don't know why I should care," soberly reflected Joan, "but somehow I expected that young Mexican to show more spirit."

CHAPTER IV.

BAD MAN'S BRAND.

"I am the wandering dove that seeks
The sad nest where I was born."

A RICH tenor voice sent the sad Spanish song, "La Paloma," rolling down a winding canyon trail. And with it came the clatter and thud of a horse's steel-shod hoofs.

As he rounded the bend of a steep-walled canyon, the singer came into view. And what a striking, mysterious figure he was—a rider whose face was concealed by a scarlet-silk half mask; a youthful-appearing caballero who rode a splendid black stallion, whose saddle was hand-tooled and inlaid with silver and gold in beautiful design.

He was garbed in the picturesque *charro* costume of old Mexico. His broad shoulders were incased in a black-velvet jacket. Trousers of similar material, studded down the seams with silver conchas, fitted snugly over the rider's muscular legs. His high-heeled boots were of softest black kid, spurred with jingling silver rowels of Spanish make.

The curly dark hair of the caballero was almost completely hidden under a massive sombrero of finest black felt, covered on its wide-curving brim and its high-peaked crown with a network of filigreed silver. From the scarlet-silk sash that girdled his waist protruded the pearl butts of twin six-guns.

The swift stride of the black stallion created a breeze that whipped out the end of a red-white-and-green-silk *serape* flung gracefully across the masked rider's shoulders.

"Take it easy, Thunder!" The caballero's voice was gentle as he bent low over the stallion's withers. "We're goin' ter stop at the old home place fer a minute."

Riding out of the canyon, the red-masked horseman reined his mount to the left and followed an old unused trail up the slope of a low knoll.

At the top, he pulled the stallion to a halt beside the ruins of several burned ranch buildings. For a moment, he sat in his silver-mounted saddle, viewing the desolate scene.

Almost at his horse's feet, an object caught the caballero's eye—a rusty branding iron, showing a Bar G, half buried in the sandy soil.

Below the half mask he wore, the youth's lips set in a hard, straight line. Then he spoke to the stallion and sent it slowly toward a little grove of giant cottonwoods.

Pushing through the trees, he came to a tiny open glade. Two low mounds were there, a headboard at each.

The grim mouth of the young caballero softened as he swung down out of his saddle and knelt bare-headed beside the two graves. One of them was old and weathered. The other was freshly made—but a few months old at the most.

"Mother! Dad!" he whispered.

After a few moments, he rose to his feet. A tear trickled from beneath the scarlet mask. He wiped it away with the back of a sun-browned hand.

"We got work to do, Thunder," said the caballero, replacing the great sombrero on his dark head and mounting the black stallion. "Thet thievin' killer, El Lobo del Rio, is goin' to settle with Señor Red Mask fer this job!"

Riding out of the little grove, the caballero reined up his horse and sat looking over the country to the southward.

Unlike the rough, mountainous section that he had just left, this was a level, grassy valley. It was

dotted with scattered clumps of mesquite and greasewood. On its farther edge was a fringe of cottonwoods that marked the course of the Rio Grande.

Touching the stallion lightly with his tinkling silver spurs, Señor "Red Mask" sent the magnificent animal bounding down the easy slope of the knoll.

For the next half hour, the strange rider held his way at a fast lope across the Verde Valley. When he finally came to the cottonwoods, he reined his tireless mount westward, following the winding course of the river.

Eagerly, now, he scanned the ground over which he was traveling. A mile upstream, he found what he had been seeking.

"Here's their tracks!" he cried aloud, suddenly checking his horse beside a wide trail.

There was no mistaking the fresh sign. Cattle and shod horses had passed that way not a great many hours before.

Wheeling the black stallion, Red Mask rode swiftly through the cottonwoods and came out on the brink of the river. It was broad and shallow at this point—an easy fording place for the fat Slash C cattle.

When his horse had splashed out of the river and climbed the shelving Mexican shore, the caballero found himself in a wild, forbidding land.

Tangled thickets of tornillo and cat's-claw fringed the stream. A gaunt, barren ridge upreared its ugly bulk as if to bar the lone trailer from entering the wide stretch of cactus-studded desert that lay beyond the river.

There was a strange, ominous silence over the land.

"Pears like you an' me is the only livin' things in this part of Mexico," Red Mask told the black stallion.

But even as he spoke, the rider's observant dark eyes told him differently. For Thunder's small, sensitive ears had flicked forward.

The young rider suddenly leaned sidewise in his fine silver-mounted saddle, the better to see among the clusters of giant boulders at the foot of the ridge.

That quick movement undoubtedly saved his life. For in the same instant, there was the roar of a heavy six-gun, and a bullet zipped through Red Mask's black-velvet sleeve like the touch of invisible, ghostly fingers.

So sure was the hidden gunman of his aim that he peered from behind a great rock—a bell-crowned sombrero, framing a dark, leering face.

With the darting swiftness of a rattler's strike, the caballero jerked one of the pearl-handled six-guns from his sash. It blazed and roared once.

The hombre behind the rocks tumbled in a broken heap beside the trail.

"One of El Lobo's pack. Left behind as a spy, in case they might be followed," Red Mask told himself. "Waal, this hombre won't tell no tales."

Riding close to the dead rustler, the caballero dismounted. It was a strange thing that he did next.

A clump of sage grew near at hand. He plucked two green twigs of the fragrant desert plant. Going back to the sprawled body of the dry-gulcher, he placed the crossed twigs on the man's chest.

It was an old Mexican custom. It was called the "bad man's brand."

Taking a cartridge from the belt under his crimson sash, he wrote on the wide brim of the outlaw's sombrero:

THE MARK OF SENOR
RED MASK

There was a faint flicker of a smile on the grim lips at the edge of the caballero's mask as he swung back in his saddle.

"Them vigilantes will be plumb wild with curiosity, when they come trailin' along here an' see that mark," he muttered.

CHAPTER V.

THE INN OF THIEVES.

AFTER mercifully stripping saddle and bridle from a horse which he found concealed among the rocks not far from the spot where the rustler had tried to dry-gulch him, Red Mask headed straight across the sandy waste that stretched away to a range of rugged mountains.

The trail was faint. Every gust of hot wind that swept across the desert wiped out a little more of it. And the sun was already swinging low in the western sky.

Loosening the reins on the willing black, the young caballero sent it forward at a fast clip. But before he had covered half the distance to his goal in the volcanic hills, the wind rose to a gale. It carried a sinister moaning note that foretold trouble.

Soon the air was filled with stinging pellets of sand. The sun was almost clouded over. No longer was there a visible trail.

Giving the gallant stallion its head, Señor Red Mask wrapped himself in his gay silken *scrape* and forged onward through the storm of sand that swirled about him with ever-increasing violence.

Only the stamina and the instinct for direction of his faithful mount brought the caballero at last to the edge of the desert. The wind was dying down in hollow gasps. The sun had set, and darkness was fast falling.

Seeing the mouth of a canyon, the lone rider entered it in the hope of finding water and perhaps grass for his horse. For himself, there was no prospect of food, until another day had dawned.

But the rocky canyon proved to be as barren and arid as the desert he had left behind. It pitched upward so steeply that the great black horse was scrambling at times for its footing.

Happily, the grueling climb was soon ended. There was still a faint twilight when the stallion topped out on the rim rock.

It was a barren, wind-swept mesa that met the caballero's gaze. Dark blotches, here and there on its nearly level surface, he took to be clumps of piñon and stunted mesquite.

"Begins to look like we'll have to make a dry camp to-night, Thunder," Señor Red Mask told his mount.

Loath to do this, however, he continued looking for some sign of life on the mesa. In the dusk, he could not see clear across it. Yet his keen eyes made out what was either a great pile of uptilted rock formation or an adobe-walled house. After riding toward it for a few minutes, he caught the gleam of a light.

Pressing forward cautiously, he was soon able to distinguish the outlines of a massive, low white-walled building.

It had a sullen, menacing appearance. Its thick adobe walls seemed to frown at the caballero as if warning him to pass it by.

But hunger and thirst are strong persuaders, both to man and beast. Inside those great walls were food and drink, beyond a doubt.

Señor Red Mask knew that, as a matter of fact. His splendid horse, Thunder, must have sensed it. For the latter, without the need of a

touch on the reins, fox-trotted straight through a great, yawning archway in the outer wall.

Immediately the caballero found himself in a wide patio or inner courtyard. One glance told him that the place was not the hospitable home of some rich rancher. Aside from its squalor and untidy appearance, there was about the interior of the place an air of secret menace that strengthened the impression given by its forbidding outer walls.

On the farthest side of the big patio was a small corral, flanked by squat adobe stables. The other sides were occupied by two-story structures built in the old-time Spanish style of architecture. Balconies jutted from the great barred windows of the upper floor.

The sound of coarse talk and laughter came from one of the largest downstairs rooms. The yellow gleam of lamplight streamed from its deep casement windows.

Seeing a ragged, dirty peon slinking across the gloomy patio, the caballero called to him:

"*Mozo! Ven aquí!* Boy, come here!"

At the words, the servant turned and approached the stranger. Within a few feet of Red Mask, he suddenly halted.

"*Carramba! Un caballero mascarado!* A masked rider!" exclaimed the man fearfully, as he caught sight of the scarlet mask on the young visitor's face.

"*Si, hombre,* I'm a masked rider," the caballero answered in fluent Spanish. "But you don't need to get scared about it. What place is this?"

Instead of replying, the peon backed away, glancing in apparent terror toward the room from which came the sounds of revelry.

"Answer me, *mozo!*" Señor Red

Mask touched the black stallion with his knees as he gave the sharp command.

With one bound, the animal was at the Mexican's side, ears flat and teeth bared viciously.

"*Si, si!* I will answer. Only keep this *caballo* from killing me!" whined the frightened hombre. Lowering his voice, the man went on hurriedly: "*Es la Posada de Los Ladrones, Señor Mascara Roja*—It is the Inn of Thieves, Señor Red Mask! The bandits, smugglers, and stealers of fat cows come here for rest and entertainment."

"Then I got a lucky break, after all," muttered the caballero to himself. "Mebbe thet murderin' El Lobo an' his gang, thet I lost the trail of, will drop in here so's I can get a line on who they are."

"But the señor is a stranger. He will be killed for a spy," protested the peon, seeing the masked rider about to dismount.

"Thet's for me to worry about. If this is a public *posada*, I got a right to enter it, mask an' all. Lead the way to the stable, pronto."

Swinging down out of the saddle, the caballero led his horse after the mumbling peon.

For the next quarter of an hour, he carefully supervised the watering, feeding, and rubbing-down of the splendid black stallion. Nor did he fail to note that various other horses were already quartered there.

They were horses that bore brands of American outfits on the other side of the Rio Grande. Stolen horses, beyond a doubt, for their saddles were of Mexican make. And Americans neither used Mexican saddles nor sold horses below the border.

"Now, hombre, I'm goin' in the *posada* an' get me some grub," Señor Red Mask told the still cowering servant.

His silver spurs jingling musically, the caballero walked rapidly over to that section of the *posada* which housed the *cantina*, where food and drink might be secured.

Stepping lightly through the open door, he paused just inside the great room. From an inner pocket of his velvet jacket he took a Mexican cigarette, lighted it and blew a ring of smoke toward the low, heavily beamed ceiling.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RIVER WOLF.

ALTHOUGH he seemed only casually interested in his surroundings, Señor Red Mask's gleaming dark eyes missed nothing of importance in the *cantina*. Swiftly he glanced over the score or more of men present.

Riffraff of the border they were—half-breeds, pure Mexican Indians, renegade Americans, gunmen all, except those whose preference might be for a long-bladed knife or *cuchillo*.

Most of the men were drinking the fiery tequila or aguardiente that were the common liquors served in such places. Some stood at a long bar that filled one side of the room. Others sat at tables, drinking and playing monte.

There was a counter at one end of the *cantina* where food was being served to several vaqueros. To this counter Señor Red Mask went, glancing about him with apparent unconcern as he crossed the big room.

The very daring of the youthful stranger, in entering such a resort, masked and richly garbed, held the vicious customers spellbound, for a few moments.

But they quickly regained their usual wolfish manner. The red mask

that concealed the newcomer's face was a challenge to them that could not be ignored. Muttered threats passed about the room. The word "espio," which is the Mexican term for a spy, came freely from their snarling lips.

Unruffled by the storm that was brewing around him, the masked rider ordered food and water. He sat with his back to the wall, and the eyes that looked out through the holes of the red mask missed no movement of the scowling hombres who faced him.

It seemed that they lacked only a leader to send them into murderous action against the mysterious stranger.

And scarcely had the young caballero finished his meal, when the man who was undoubtedly El Lobo, chief of the rustlers, appeared in the *cantina*. He came from an inner room, and something of the power that he wielded over the hard-bitten outlaws gathered there was evidenced by their respectful attitude toward him.

A big man, his tight-fitting soft-leather jacket and trousers revealed powerful muscles as he strode swaggeringly to the bar. Twisting his long black mustache at an angle that added to his ferocious appearance, he ordered a glass of aguardiente.

In the act of lifting the liquor to his mouth, his shifty glance fell on the masked caballero.

Instantly he stiffened, glowering in evident amazement at such unheard-of nerve.

"Do my eyes see truly?" snarled El Lobo under his breath. "A masked spy in the Inn of Thieves!"

Raising his voice, the rustler chief called hoarsely:

"Come here, señor of the red mask, an' dreenk the health of the *bandidos* of the Rio!"

Although it was an invitation to join in an act of good-fellowship, the caballero was not deceived. He sensed that the big hombre, El Lobo del Rio, intended to make sport of him for the entertainment of himself and his vicious band.

He would be forced to unmask, if El Lobo got the upper hand of him. And a refusal to join the rustler chief in the proposed toast would bring the wrath of the whole gang down on him.

But cold nerve and daring might yet save him, the young caballero believed.

Stepping jauntily over to the bar, he motioned with a sinewy brown hand toward an earthen *olla*. It was suspended by a maguey fiber cord from one of the heavy ceiling beams, directly over the bar—a container of water, used by some to cool their throats after the fiery Mexican liquors.

"That is my drink," Señor Red Mask told the waiting bartender, in Spanish so perfect that no one in hearing of his voice would doubt his Castilian descent.

"*Agua!*" snorted El Lobo contemptuously. "Water ees a dreenk for burros, for peegs!"

The burly half-breed poured a full tumbler of aguardiente and set the fiery liquor in front of the caballero.

"Dreenk thees, or I weel cut off your ears weeth my *cuchillo*!" he snapped.

"I'm not so sure about that knife work you mention," retorted Señor Red Mask coldly. "Maybe those big ears of yours will get trimmed down a little."

"You—you—" sputtered El Lobo, in a fury of rage that was beyond words to express.

With a hand darting to a green sash he wore, the *bandido* lunged at the taunting stranger beside him.

Señor Red Mask was not caught unawares. He well knew what was coming. As El Lobo's right hand came up clutching a glittering knife, the young caballero leaped nimbly aside.

And when the surprised *bandido* faced him, a gleaming blade of finest Spanish steel was in the masked stranger's outthrust hand. With an incredibly swift motion, he had drawn the knife from its leather sheath, hidden underneath his jacket at the back of his shoulders.

El Lobo lunged viciously, hissing like a rattler in his rage. The victor in many a knife brawl, his sole thought now was to bury his long-bladed *cuchillo* in this stranger's heart.

But the caballero quickly proved himself a master of the art of knife fighting. His blade flashed up in a skillful parry. There was a sinister ring and grating of steel against steel. Tiny blue-white sparks flew from the clashing *cuchillos*.

Exclamations of wonder came from the crowd of awed spectators. They had expected their chief to make quick work of this richly garbed caballero who came so boldly to their hang-out, hiding his identity behind a scarlet silk mask. For was not El Lobo the most expert of all the knife wielders of the Rio Grande country?

For a moment, the two fighters were at close quarters, clutching each other with their free left hands. Their knives were locked together, hilt against hilt. Then suddenly they broke away. They leaped backward, fell into a crouch and began to circle.

"Dog of a spy!" cried El Lobo, as he tensed his powerful body for another quick lunge. "The buzzards will feed on your carcass mañana!"

The caballero's only answer to this

insulting remark was a lightninglike flick of his blade that slit the *bandido*'s left cheek. It brought a howl of pain and fury from El Lobo.

Like the beast for which he was named, the rustler chief leaped in to the kill. His greenish eyes were aflame with anger and hate. His razor-edged *cuchillo* swished upward in a mighty thrust for the heart of Señor Red Mask.

But the young caballero had the agility of a panther. His silver spurs jingled, and his high-heeled boots tapped sharply on the hard floor as he lightly bounded aside. For several moments, he seemed to bewilder his heavier opponent by the rapidity with which his lithe body darted in and out of knife range.

And each time he came in, his flashing blade left its mark on some portion of El Lobo's sweating body.

Infuriated to the point of insanity, the bandit chief staked his life on one terrific thrust. Snarling and mouthing oaths, he drove his knife upward with such force and speed that it seemed impossible for the caballero to parry the thrust.

But the latter's dazzling swiftness was equal to his dire need. Sparks flew from his blade as it slithered along El Lobo's heavy *cuchillo*.

Then something happened that brought a gasp from the men who watched the fight.

A split second before Red Mask could lock his blade in a hilt-to-hilt parry, the crafty El Lobo checked his thrust to the body and, instead, circled his knife upward in a swing for the caballero's throat.

It was quick and expert work. For a moment, it looked as if the masked stranger must surely fall a victim to the desperate rustler's onslaught.

But once more Señor Red Mask moved faster than his vicious foe.

With the point of El Lobo's blade almost touching the great vein in his neck, the caballero's knife flashed upward in a stroke so swift that it was but a blur of motion. It caught the *bandido*'s blade, locked it and turned it upward over his head.

For an instant, El Lobo's midriff was exposed. A downward thrust of Red Mask's knife would end the fight.

In that moment, however, there came a sudden swish that was not made by a *cuchillo*. The speeding loop of a rawhide reata dropped over the caballero's splendid sombrero, down past his velvet-clad shoulders, and jerked taut with such force as to throw him off balance.

CHAPTER VII.

DEATH TRAP.

A MAN less agile than Red Mask would have been thrown to the floor with stunning force. That, doubtless, was the intention of the vaquero who roped him. But the caballero twisted his body in falling, and instead of landing on his back and head, he struck catlike on his hands and knees.

His arms had been pinned to his sides, but above his elbows. This gave him free movement of his lower arms and hands. As a result, when he leaped to his feet, his pearl-handled six-guns were blazing from his hips.

There was a scattering of the crowd in the *cantina* as the vaquero who held the rope sagged to the floor with a slug of hot lead through his heart. Dazed by the deadly, surprising way in which the masked stranger had turned the tables on them, the whole murderous crew were, for the moment, too paralyzed to return his fire.

Just as El Lobo, with a roar of

fury, went for his gun, a blasting stream of lead struck the two big swinging lamps that lighted the *cantina*.

Confusion reigned instantly. Terror struck at the hearts of the outlaws as they saw the evidence of Red Mask's deadly aim. At any moment, a hail of bullets would come ripping toward them out of the darkness, they believed. And for that reason, they fought and scrambled to get under cover.

The tall caballero recognized the symptoms of their fright. He knew it for a momentary panic, brought on by the suddenness of his unexpected attack. They would quickly recover their wits and start gunning for him. Then it would be twenty or more against one.

"The odds are too heavy," muttered Red Mask to himself. "I've got to get away from here pronto!"

To leave the *cantina* by the front door would be too risky. That was the way the bandits had gone. They would be crouching like jungle beasts, ready to stab and shoot the moment their daring enemy came out into the light of a great, full moon that had just tipped above the eastern rim of the mesa.

The young caballero remembered the inner door through which he had seen El Lobo enter the *cantina*. What lay beyond that closed door, he had no way of knowing. But this was a desperate situation into which he had been suddenly thrown. It required daring action.

Stepping lightly, in order that the jingle of a spur rowel might not betray his intention, Red Mask passed around the end of the long bar and over to the door. It yielded easily to his touch.

Once inside the other room, he gently closed the door and threw a heavy bolt which securely locked it.

There was a candle burning on a small table at the far side of the room. By its dim, flickering light, the caballero could barely make out objects about him. But his first quick glance told him that the room was probably the combined office and sleeping quarters of the keeper of the inn.

A massive oak desk occupied one corner of the room. There was a table covered with a collection of dishes, wineglasses, and many empty bottles—the remains of a feast, plainly.

"El Lobo must have eaten in here with somebody," Red Mask told himself.

He stole forward cautiously, toward a wide couch which he could see dimly in a darkened corner.

"*Quién es?* Who is it?" demanded a heavy, liquor-hoarsened voice.

A yellow beam of candlelight gleamed on the bright blade that the caballero seemed to pick magically from thin air. He took a quick stride that brought him close to a great hulk of a man who had risen to his feet with some difficulty.

"I'm called Señor Red Mask!" he snapped in Spanish. "And unless you do exactly as I say, I'll carve your fat carcass till your amigos won't recognize you!"

It was evident that the fat hombre had been sleeping off a too-generous indulgence in native liquors. His tongue was a bit thick and his legs none too steady. But the sight of a mysterious masked man served to shock him into a condition approaching sobriety.

"My poor house is yours, Señor Red Mask!" grunted the fat innkeeper, using the customary polite phrase that has been handed down by innumerable generations of Spanish-speaking races, and which means exactly nothing. "Command me!"

"Show me the way out of this den of two-legged lobos!" said the young caballero. "And watch your step. My knife will be at your back, every move you make!"

"Si, señor! Gladly will I guide you."

And now Red Mask realized that the innkeeper was too anxious to serve him. A note of cunning had crept into the big hombre's voice. Somewhere along the way, a trap would be sprung.

"Get goin' then!" snapped Red Mask.

His hand flicked out as he spoke and jerked a knife from his captive's sash. The innkeeper's clothes fitted his fat body so tightly that a glance was sufficient to show that he carried no concealed gun.

There was a door opposite the one through which the caballero had entered the room. The innkeeper waddled to it, with his captor right at his heels.

When the door was opened, Red Mask saw the beginning of a dark passageway. Instantly he grasped his guide's sash. He was taking no chances on the fellow's slipping away from him through some secret exit.

Onward they marched. The passageway was narrow and pitch dark. Doubtless it had been constructed for the purpose of enabling the villainous users of the hang-out to escape in case of a raid by rurales—the native mounted police.

With every sense alert for signs of danger, the caballero followed in the wake of his prisoner. His youthful face was grim and determined behind the scarlet mask he wore. Yet his nerves tingled. He felt a powerful hunch that every step he took was carrying him nearer to some unknown and terrible peril. But death awaited him from that mob of

murderous bandits in the *cantina*. He could not go back.

After a little while, Red Mask became aware that the sash to which he was clinging had grown tighter—very much tighter.

"It's not likely this hombre is gettin' any fatter," he reflected. "More likely he's takin' up the slack of that sash with one hand while he's untyin' it with the other."

The thought had hardly flashed through his mind, when he suddenly was holding nothing but a loose piece of cloth in his hand.

Instantly he dived headlong in a flying tackle. His outspread arms closed in a wrestling grip on the fat legs of the innkeeper. The treacherous hombre had been a split second too slow in making his get-away.

He crashed to the adobe-brick floor of the passageway with a force that knocked the breath out of him with an explosive grunt. And the desperate young caballero scrambled astride the man's hulking body, reaching for his throat.

The next moment, there was a terrific crash immediately back of the struggling pair. The jarring impact shook the heavy-walled building like an earthquake.

For an instant, the fighting caballero thought the ceiling had caved in. Then his hand brushed against a rope stretched across the floor. It came to him in a flash that the innkeeper had tried to lead him into a death trap.

The rope was a trigger cord, set to catch unwary feet. The thing that had fallen was a heavy beam, or some similar weighty object, which would drop when the rope was jerked. A deadfall!

"You sprung that trap, aimin' to jump clear an' leave me to be mashed flat!" gritted the caballero under his breath.

His sinewy fingers closed on the throat of the heaving, struggling mountain of flesh under him. Only when the innkeeper went limp did he relax the pressure of this throttling grip.

Footsteps were coming down the passageway, from the direction in which the fugitive masked rider had been heading. Some one had heard the crash and was coming to investigate.

The caballero got to his feet and slipped noiselessly to a side wall. He crouched in the dark and waited.

Chuckling to himself, the hombre approached the sprung trap.

"Ho, there, Señor Red Mask! You thought to give us the slip, eh? How does it feel to be squashed like a tarantula under foot?" he asked jokingly.

Then there was a sudden gasping breath of surprise. The hombre had stumbled over the innkeeper's huge body. There was no mistaking its identity, even in the dark.

"What has happened?" the man ejaculated.

"Plenty!" snapped Red Mask in Spanish. "And more's to follow!"

He leaped forward with the words and swung one of his long-barreled six-guns in a wide, sweeping arc. It landed with a thud on the hombre's head and dropped him across the still-unconscious body of the innkeeper.

Swiftly, now, the caballero went forward. One hand was touching the wall, feeling his way. The other held a pearl-handled six-gun ready for action.

There was not a moment to lose, if he was to make his escape. The whole *posada* would quickly be swarming with bandits, searching every nook and cranny for the fugitive Señor Red Mask.

Dim light began to show in the

passageway. An exit must be close at hand. The hombre who had come investigating the crash of the deadfall had doubtless been on guard at the end of the passageway. But what was beyond the exit?

The tall young caballero quickly found out. A few more swift strides brought him into an arched doorway. Beyond was the open patio. Muffled shouts and oaths came from the *cantina* at the far end of the building.

His escape from the barroom must have been discovered. The outlaws would be coming down the passageway any moment now.

He darted outside, keeping to the dark shadows of the *posada*. If only the moon had been a little later in rising!

"I've got to get Thunder. It's my only chance!" Red Mask muttered under his breath.

He glided from shadow to shadow. There were bright patches of light here and there that he could not avoid. Taking his chances with death, he pressed on toward the low adobe stable building.

With less than twenty yards to go, he heard a vicious snapping of teeth and a thud of striking hoofs in the stable. Then the whistle of an enraged stallion.

"Some hombre is tryin' to steal Thunder," the caballero told himself.

He rushed to the door, just in time to hear a low moan and see a body flung violently against the stable wall.

"Steady, Thunder! Stop it, old-timer!"

The great black stallion's teeth were bared and its steel-shod hoofs upraised to strike the finishing blow to the unconscious bandit on the floor. But at the sound of his master's voice, Thunder halted.

Quickly the caballero threw his splendid silver-mounted saddle and bridle on the quivering black horse. Leading it outside, he sprang into the saddle and touched spurs to the stallion's flanks.

CHAPTER VIII.

PURSUIT.

ROARING Colt six-guns rocketed orange flame from the door and windows of the *cantina* in the Posada de los Ladrones.

A black stallion plunged wildly through the white Mexican moonlight. It snorted and reared as the masked rider wheeled it, with a muttered command and a jab of silver rowels.

Outnumbered twenty to one, the man on the stallion answered the shots, the pearl-handled Colt in his right hand thundering defiance to his foes.

A vaquero darted out of the arched doorway of the *cantina*. A crashing burst of lead and flame lanced at him from the rider of the plunging stallion. The Mexican's knees buckled; with a screamed Spanish oath, he crumpled on the rough paving stones in front of the *cantina*.

Shouts and commands came from the interior of the *posada*. A bullet from Red Mask's gun whistled between the iron bars of a window. It found its target between the eyes of a bandit whose twin six-guns were still smoking as he stumbled back and dropped dead among the disordered chairs and tables.

A single smoking lantern lighted the *cantina*. Its feeble rays shone on a scene of death and destruction. Two leather-clad, big-hatted hombrés sprawled grotesquely in front of the long bar. The bullet-smashed lamps swung uselessly from a heavy

beam of the low ceiling, dripping oil on the sanded floor.

And still the rolling thunder of gunfire went on. A whizzing slug came through the open front door, struck the barrel of a six-gun in the hand of a half-breed and glanced across the room to smash the big mirror behind the bar.

Two men made a desperate rush through the front door. One pitched headlong, dead before he reached the open patio. The other—a renegade American, by his dress—crossed the threshold, only to slump down on the paving stones. The gun in his hand thudded metallically on a rock. He groaned and kicked convulsively, his heavy Chihuahua spurs bringing a shower of tiny sparks from the pavement.

“*Muerte al espia!* Death to the spy!” bellowed a heavy voice from the far end of the building.

The cry was followed by the terrible howl of a hunting wolf.

It was the *bandido* chief, El Lobo. With a little group of his deadliest gunmen, he had apparently gone through the inner passageway of the *posada*, in search of Señor Red Mask.

They were rushing forward now, guns blazing.

Against such odds, no single gunman could contend—and live. The caballero spurred his mount toward the big outer gateway of the walled patio.

Too late! The heavy barred gate had been closed and bolted.

Red Mask bent forward in his saddle, roweled his horse and whirled it. The black stallion snorted and pitched. The caballero took the racking plunge of his mount with the easy sway of a born horseman.

Then, as the black shot forward in a racing gallop, he leaned low over the flying mane. The dark eyes that

peered through the holes of the red mask were gleaming. His lips were drawn in a thin, grim line.

Straight toward the back wall of the big courtyard raced the black horse. There would surely be an exit there.

With bullets buzzing angrily past him, Red Mask reached the rear gate that he sought. A glance in the moonlight showed him that it, too, was locked securely.

It looked as if this was to be the finish. Here, it seemed, was the time and place for the daring masked rider to make his last stand, with his back to the wall. There was no other way out. Behind him, a shouting, shooting mob of cutthroats led by the murderous El Lobo, was rushing him like a pack of wolves to the kill.

It occurred to Red Mask that he could easily scale the wall by standing on his horse's back and reaching the top. But he would have to abandon the faithful animal to a cruel fate. They had been pals of the long trails. He would not desert Thunder now.

Then, in a flash of thought, an idea came to the harassed caballero. He threw himself out of the saddle, landing on the cobblestones with a musical jingle of silver spurs.

Grasping the stallion's silver-mounted bridle, he whirled the animal round and backed it with a crash against the gate.

A board cracked, but the heavy crossbars held. With a muttered exclamation, Red Mask led the black horse forward a few feet. This was no time to be squeamish. Giving a savage jerk on the big Spanish bit, he rammed the stallion's rump against the gate. It struck fairly, with all the animal's weight and strength behind it—a mighty, living battering-ram.

There was a splintering crash, and the wrecked gate was lying on the ground.

Instantly the caballero leaped into his saddle and roweled the black stallion's flanks.

Wild Spanish yells came from the balked mob of gunmen. A fusillade of shots sent hot lead screaming perilously around the fugitive man and horse. But they were an elusive target in the moonlight.

Onward to safety sped the black horse and its masked rider.

CHAPTER IX.

PURSUIT.

THE coming of dawn found Señor Red Mask riding his black stallion out of a juniper-timbered canyon in the Mexican mountains. There had been a spring of clear, cold water where man and horse had quenched their burning thirst after the fierce battle at the Posada de los Ladrones. Picketed on lush grass, the stallion had fared well.

For the young caballero, the lonely camp had meant only a few brief hours of sleep under a moonlit sky. But it had refreshed him wonderfully.

He was singing, in a low, pleasing tenor voice, a few lines of his favorite song, "La Paloma":

"Oh, for the *rancho*, on the Rio Grande,
Where once I lived so farefree and happy."

The tune of the song varied to fit any mood. In places, it was gay and lilting. Again, it was sad. And oftentimes the caballero made up words to suit his own desires.

Allowing the bridle reins to hang loosely over the horn of his silver-mounted Mexican saddle, the young masked rider rolled and lighted a quirly.

The morning light grew stronger

with every passing moment. As he rode clear of a little grove of mesquite in the mouth of the canyon, Red Mask reined up his mettlesome black and sat looking over the landscape. The sandstorm that had swept over the country during the night had blown itself out. The air was clear.

It was a sinister, forbidding scene that unrolled before his keen dark eyes. There was little verdure. Several kinds of cactus were much in evidence, mostly cholla, prickly pear, and an occasional barrel cactus.

The sage was sparse and straggling of growth. Here and there, small clumps of stunted mesquite struggled for existence.

"I reckon we give El Lobo an' his gang a right good warmin'-up last night, Thunder," the caballero told his mount, leaning forward to stroke the animal's arching neck. "But we ain't done with 'em yet. We got to locate that cattle hideout they got somewhere round here in the hills an' get back the cows they stole. It's likely they'll be workin' over the brands this mornin'."

"An' that ain't all. El Lobo himself has got to pay for what he's done."

He urged the willing black horse forward as he finished speaking. His alert eyes were continually searching the country on every side of him.

Suddenly his eyes focused on a dark, moving spot at some distance across the flat. As that blotch on the horizon drew nearer, and the daylight strengthened, the caballero made out several horsemen.

"Thet big man on the bay horse is Jim Corson, an' Sheriff Bill Jackson is ridin' alongside him on a roan," Señor Red Mask told himself. "I got to keep clear of them. They'd shoot me down fer a Mex rustler quick."

He reined the black stallion closer to the foot of the low ridge he was skirting, hoping to escape the notice of the oncoming vigilantes.

But those grim riders of the vengeance trail were keen-eyed, experienced range men. Their leader had been a man hunter for many years. No movement of man or beast was being overlooked in their determined search for the murderous raiders of the Rio.

"Look yonder! Over at the foot of that ridge!" cried a gaunt, middle-aged cowman.

"I already got my eye on that hombre!" said the former sheriff, Bill Jackson.

He reined up his horse and reached for the field glasses which he carried in his saddle pocket.

Hastily adjusting the powerful lenses to his eyes, he gazed steadily at the lone horseman for several moments.

"What do yuh make of him, Bill?" asked Corson impatiently. "Looks like one of them rich Mex *rancheros* tuh me."

For answer, Jackson handed the field glasses to the big cowman. One quick glance was enough for Corson.

"A red-masked rider!" he half shouted in excitement. "The hombre that put his mark on that dead man we found at the river! I'll bet it's El Lobo, tryin' tuh disguise himself! Must have a hideout close around here, where his gang is holed up!"

"All right, boys! Let's go after him!" ordered the vigilantes leader, Jackson. "We'll cut in behind him an' keep him movin' on around that ridge. Purty quick he'll be mighty surprised tuh run smack inter the rest of our bunch. They ought ter be circlin' back that a way by now."

"Thet was a dang good idea of yores, Bill, splittin' up our crowd an'

spreadin' a dragnet fer them rustlers," put in a hawk-beaked waddy.

Clapping spurs to their horses, the half dozen riders laid a course designed to keep their quarry from doubling back on his trail. They, too, had found water and grass where they had camped the preceding night. Their mounts were fresh and eager to run.

Señor Red Mask, however, had no intention of letting those American cowmen get close to him. With a touch of his silver spurs, he sent the big black stallion bounding ahead.

Nor was he so easily caught in a trap. He counted the pursuing horsemen as soon as they strung out in the chase. He suspected that the vigilantes band had divided its force.

"Tough luck, runnin' into thet bunch," he told himself grimly. "They'll start blazin' away at me, if any one of 'em get in range, an' I can't shoot back to stop 'em."

The caballero was determined not to be chased out of the country. He believed that a careful search would reveal some clew to the location of the rustler's hideout. The sandstorm had wiped out all sign of the stolen herd's trail.

Still, the vaqueros of El Lobo would likely ride through this section some time during the morning, on their way to blot the brands on the Slash C cattle. That would give the masked rider the chance he sought.

Instead of continuing on around the base of the ridge, the caballero suddenly wheeled his horse into a shallow ravine. Concealed by its banks, he climbed the low ridge. Through a dip in the crest of the ridge, he passed unseen, and dropped down on the other side. By this ruse, he hoped to throw his pursuers off his trail.

Coming out on a sage flat, he

headed west toward a range of rough, jagged hills. All the while, his eyes were closely scanning the country on every side. There was double danger threatening him now—from both the vigilantes and the rustlers.

A rider suddenly came in view down near the shoulder of the ridge he had just crossed. Señor Red Mask could see the man's arm lift, heard three shots in quick succession.

"Thet's a signal for the rest of the bunch," he told himself bitterly.

And sure enough, riders came streaking toward him from three different directions. He could see them spurring and quirting their mounts in a determined effort to head him off and force him back into their trap.

The vigilantes were out of six-gun range. But some of them carried rifles. Soon the whiplike reports of the saddle guns sounded from two sides of the masked rider. Bullets buzzed like angry bees above his head.

Red Mask leaned low in his saddle. The black stallion snorted and leaped into full racing stride as the rolling spurs bit its flanks.

There was no horse in the pursuing bunch that was a match for Thunder in either speed or endurance. The big black skimmed across the arid flat like a bird on the wing.

Changing his course suddenly, Red Mask headed south. He had noticed a break less than half a mile distant. Dashing into it, he sent the black down it at a fast lope. Soon he was in a deep arroyo.

A rifle bullet whined spitefully past his ear. Glancing back, he saw several riders strung out in a scattered line, a quarter of a mile behind him.

Rounding a high cutbank, where

the arroyo made a big bend, he passed out of sight of his pursuers. Here a narrow wash angled sharply away from the arroyo. The hard-pressed caballero swung his mount into this haven and sent it scrambling up the steep ascent to the rim.

He seemed to have eluded his pursuers for the time being. He could see no sign of them, but he knew they would come trailing.

Swinging westward again, Red Mask kept his willing black at a furious gallop. He had to lose those vigilantes somehow. The sun was already swinging up above the saw-tooth sky line of a rugged mountain range far to the east.

Somewhere in the depths of the *malpais*, or bad lands, El Lobo and his thieving killers were almost certainly working over the brands of those Slash C prime beef critters. More than anything else, Señor Red Mask wanted to catch the River Wolf at his crooked work.

CHAPTER X. THE WOLF'S DEN.

IT was a creek that finally gave the resourceful caballero his opportunity to baffle those stubborn, expert trailers from across the Rio Grande.

He came onto it in the depths of an arroyo, which he had entered through a fissure in the cliff wall. Riding into the water, not more than knee-deep to the black stallion, he followed the winding course of the creek for a half mile downstream.

"Reckon I'm safe from the vigilantes now," Señor Red Mask told himself. "Even if they trailed me to the creek, they wouldn't know which way I turned."

In spite of his apparent security, the caballero soon began to feel uneasy. The hunch that seldom failed to warn him in moments of impend-

ing peril was on the job. It became so strong after a few minutes, that he reined the black horse out of the water and left it standing in the cover of a clump of piñons, while he stole forward on foot to scout.

It was well that he did. For he had proceeded but a short distance before he spied a vaquero, perched on a big boulder beside the creek. Plainly the hombre was a lookout, a sentinel posted to protect some one engaged in crooked work.

"Looks like I might've stumbled right onto El Lobo's hideout," was Red Mask's quick thought.

Silently he slipped back to his horse. A long rawhide reata was coiled at his saddle horn. Taking this down, he deftly built a loop while returning to the man on the rock.

The fellow was half dozing, with the burned-out stub of a corn-husk cigarette protruding from between his loose lips.

Watching until the vaquero's eyes drooped shut, the caballero stepped clear of the sheltering underbrush. His right arm flashed out. Like the darting strike of a rattler, the reata snaked forward. Its spreading loop settled over the sentinel's head and jerked him sprawling from the boulder.

Nearly unconscious from the shock of his fall, the hombre was bound and gagged before he knew what had happened.

"Thet's good for a starter," muttered Señor Red Mask, as he went swiftly down a rocky trail. "Now for a fast, fightin' finish!"

He hadn't gone far before he came on something that gave him a shock of surprise—the arroyo forked. And the creek, which naturally flowed through a narrow cleft in the rock wall at that point, had been diverted into the other branch.

Close examination showed that a crude dam of boulders and logs had accomplished this. But a cleverly arranged floodgate would let the stream flow back into its regular channel at will of the persons who had built it.

"Thet's a smart trick," the caballero told himself. "When the water is runnin' through the cleft, nothin' else can go through it, because the current is too deep and strong. An' it would cover that floodgate so that a person who didn't already know it was there wouldn't ever suspect it."

Walking around one end of the dam, Señor Red Mask quickly confirmed his suspicions as to the use of that cleft in the rock wall. Cattle and horse sign was plentiful.

The rustlers had driven their stolen herd down the creek, leaving no sign. Arriving at the dam, they had switched off the water. Then they had driven the cattle through the cleft in safety.

From the fact that the water was now turned into the side channel and a guard had been left outside, it was plain that the thieving El Lobo and his vaqueros were in their hideout, working on the brands.

Undaunted by the perils which he knew must be waiting for him at the other end of that narrow defile, Señor Red Mask hurried forward to investigate.

The side walls of the cleft were worn smooth as glass by the rushing torrent of water that had poured through it for uncounted centuries.

After a walk of fifty yards, the cabellero emerged from the gloomy waterway. The narrow cleft had suddenly opened into a big, egg-shaped meadow—a meadow that was inclosed by rocky cliffs so steep that neither man nor cattle could scale them.

There was not even a break in the walls for the creek to pass out through. But this mystery was quickly cleared up when Señor Red Mask's eyes followed the dry bed of the stream across the meadow to a low, cavernlike opening at the foot of the opposite wall.

Crouching in the shelter of a mesquite thicket close to the mouth of the cleft, the caballero gazed upon a scene that made his dark eyes gleam through the holes of his red mask.

Two branding crews of rustlers were busily engaged in blotting the brands on a herd of prime beef steers. Señor Red Mask could easily make out the Slash C iron mark on the critters' sides. They were not more than a hundred yards distant.

And riding a big buckskin mustang through the smoke and dust, bellowing orders to his sweating hombres, was El Lobo del Rio.

"I could easy drill that murderin' River Wolf without moving out o' my tracks," the caballero told himself grimly.

He drew one of the long-barreled, pearl-handled six-guns from its hiding place beneath his crimson-silk sash. But he had no intention of actually shooting the unsuspecting rustler chief from ambush. He meant to give every hombre there a fighting chance for his life.

For a daring idea had sprung into Señor Red Mask's mind as he saw the arrangement of the rustlers' hideout, and the entrance to it.

With a quick movement of his arm, he threw up his heavy Colt and blazed away at El Lobo. The bullet went exactly where he had meant it to go—through the tall peak of the rustler's big sombrero.

Instantly there was confusion and uproar among the brand-blotting crew. The vaqueros dropped ropes and irons and went for their guns.

Those working on foot at the branding fires rushed for their horses.

As for El Lobo, his swarthy, black-mustached face paled as he realized how close he had been to death in that moment.

Then, with a wild yell of mingled rage and surprise, the half-breed rustler chief sank spurs in his mount. Gripping the bridle reins in his teeth, he jerked a pair of .45s from their holsters and dashed toward the entrance to the hideout.

"*Es el espia*—the spy! El Señor Red Mask!" shouted El Lobo, catching a fleeting glimpse of a black-clad, scarlet-masked figure darting back into the narrow cleft.

Several of the vaqueros had been closer than their leader to the daring Señor Red Mask when he fired. Eager to cut off the caballero's escape, they had spurred their horses after him the instant the shot was heard. They were still ahead of El Lobo.

"Thet shot brought 'em, like buzzards to a feast," muttered Señor Red Mask, retreating through the cleft and taking his station among several huge boulders that clustered near the outer end.

The simple yet daring plan that the lone fighter had evolved was easily seen through now. He had forced his enemies to attack him in a straggling, drawn-out formation, instead of rushing him in a compact body. Not more than two rustlers could ride abreast through the close-walled cleft. And owing to the extremely slippery rock floor, they must go slowly.

Wham! Bang! The first two *ladrone*s to enter the cleft were caught by bullets from Señor Red Mask's deadly guns. Reeling and clutching at their saddle horns, they wheeled their frightened mounts and dashed back into the hideout.

Fierce cries for vengeance came from the group of rustlers who had quickly gathered at the inner end of the narrow waterway. The moment the way was clear of the two badly wounded men, several riders spurred into the cleft, firing six-guns as they went.

Once more that deadly hail of hot lead raked them. They could not face it. Wounded, the fight taken out of them, they bolted back to their comrades.

For several seconds, while the listening Red Mask was reloading the hot empty cylinders of his six-guns, there was no sound from inside the hideout.

"Must be holdin' a council of war about me," he told himself.

Then suddenly he heard the furious pounding of horses' shod hoofs. Those of the *ladrone*s who were still able to stay in their saddles were evidently retreating.

It flashed through the grimly waiting caballero's mind that there was something very suspicious about that hurried departure. What were they going to do?

Slipping noiselessly from behind the sheltering rocks, Señor Red Mask once more made his way through the cleft—just in time to see three hombres spurring madly in the wake of their burly leader, El Lobo.

"Now where they goin'?" Señor Red Mask asked himself curiously. "They can't get away from me that a way."

But he quickly saw his mistake. While he watched, El Lobo jerked his horse to a sliding stop beside the cavern at the base of the opposite cliff. It was too low for a horse to enter. But there was nothing to prevent a man from passing into the black maw of the underground-creek channel.

"They're out of range of my six-

guns," Señor Red Mask muttered ruefully.

Then he thought of something that sent him back through the cleft at a fast run.

The floodgate! Working furiously, the caballero pulled it open.

Instantly there was a mighty surge of water down the rocky channel. It roared hungrily through the cleft.

Señor Red Mask pictured to himself what was happening inside the hideout.

El Lobo and the surviving members of his gang would be cut off from all chance of escape. Warned in time by the roar of the onrushing water, they would turn back to safety—and capture.

"I'll switch the water off after a bit an' give them rustlers a chance to surrender. They ought to be right tame by now," Señor Red Mask told himself.

He was about to start working the floodgate again, when he happened to glance back up the long arroyo.

"Waal, I'll be dog-goned!" he exclaimed. "Them vigilantes must have heard the battle down here an' come a-runnin'!"

Dashing back to the guard whom he had left tied up on the creek bank, Señor Red Mask hastily plucked a cartridge from his belt and scrawled a few words on a smooth white rock close beside the hombre.

A little clump of sage was growing in a pocket of earth among the rocks. He broke off a couple of green shoots of the fragrant plant and crossed them on the rustler's chest. It was the mark of Señor Red Mask.

Hidden by huge boulders from view of the approaching riders, the caballero then hurried to his own horse. Swinging up in the saddle, he sent the black stallion at a swift

gallop down the side arroyo from which he had switched the water a few minutes before. Where the north wall began to shelf back less steeply, he reined Thunder out of the still wet channel and began to climb toward the rim rock.

"What's this? An hombre hog tied, or I'm a four-toed Gila monster!" cried Bill Jackson, pulling his sweating horse to a sudden halt.

The vigilantes leader dismounted and leaned over the bound and gagged outlaw sentinel, while his astonished followers crowded round.

The boldly scrawled message on the rock instantly caught his eye. He read it aloud:

Close floodgate in dam. Then go through cleft. Don't let El Lobo get away.
SEÑOR RED MASK.

"Kin yuh beat that?" exclaimed Jim Corson. "He's tricked them rustlers some way an' got 'em holed up!"

"Them that he ain't already *shot* up," put in another cowman.

"Here's his mark," said Jackson, picking up the crossed twigs of sage. "An' tuh think that he was fighting that gang single-handed while we was lookin' fer a chance tuh fill him full of lead!"

Anxious to see what had happened on the other side of the cleft, the cowmen lost no time in switching off the flow of water. Guns in hand, they rushed through the dripping defile.

"There's my cows!" shouted Corson, as he emerged into the hidecut.

"An' here's what's left of the hombres that stole 'em!" Jackson called out exultantly.

It was a sorry-looking gang that came under the guns of the vigilantes. Two of them were quite plainly dead—Juan and Benito, the

pair of cutthroats who had slunk through the gray dawn to sink their knives in the Slash C herd guards.

Three of the others were too badly wounded to sit up. The remaining trio stood in abject terror, hands high above their heads.

"Where's El Lobo?" sternly demanded Bill Jackson, as his searching eyes failed to discover the rustler chief.

"He ees caught by the water when he try to make hees get-away," answered a bandit, pointing to the yawning black mouth of the underground-creek channel.

"It was better'n he deserved, at that," said the ex-sheriff grimly. "A rope was waitin' fer him across the Rio Grande."

"Look yonder, men!"

It was the booming tones of Jim Corson that rose above the babel of excited voices around him. He was pointing to a high rim rock that overlooked the rustler's hideout.

Outlined against the blue sky line was the picturesque, charro-clad figure of Señor Red Mask!

Reining up his great black stallion for a moment, he lifted a gloved hand in token of salute and farewell. His work was done.

"I am the wandering dove that seeks The sad nest where I was born."

Faintly the sad words of "La Paloma" floated down to the watching vigilantes as the gallant horseman on the rim rock rode out of their view.

"Wanderin' dove, huh!" fervently exclaimed big Jim Corson. "Me, I'd call him a fightin' bald eagle!"

An' that Corson hombre jest about called the turn, at that. Señor Red Mask shore ain't no dove, whatever else he may be. As Jim says, Eagle is more like it. We ain't seen the last o' that fightin' young jasper. He'll be back ag'in in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon. Watch fer him.



OLDEST INHABITANT OF TEXAS IS DEAD

A COLORED woman, "Aunt" Mary Humphries, died a short time ago at Durgin, in Rusk County, Texas. It has been established by records that the venerable Negress was born in 1805, near Memphis, Tennessee.

She was born in slavery, her first owner being a man named Ware, by which name she was known.

Ware had secured a mortgage on his earthly possessions, and was unable to lift it. So his goods and chattels, including his slaves, were sold at a sheriff's sale.

Mary was bought by a man named Trammel, who moved with his family to Texas in 1836, making the trip in ox wagons.

Mary became greatly attached to

the Trammel family and married one of their slaves named Humphries.

After slavery was abolished, the couple would not leave their "old massas." When Mr. Trammel saw that they were determined to remain, he told them to go to his saw mill and choose some lumber for a home. This they did, and a comfortable house was built for them, in which they lived happily for many years.

Humphreys died a long time ago, but Aunt Mary continued to live in the house until her death. She is survived by four children, all of whom were born in slavery, the youngest being seventy-eight years old.



Hungry And Rusty Tame A Town

By Samuel H. Nickels

Author of "Hungry And Rusty—Rurales," etc.

LOUDER and louder came the drumming of steel-shod hoofs.

A rifle barked faintly from the canyon bed, and a glancing bullet shrieked straight up into the still air above the towering rim rock.

There was another shot, then a choking groan from somewhere close. The two oncoming horsemen could scarcely have heard it above the pound of flying hoofs upon the flinty ground beneath them.

Suddenly two dusty riders burst from a fringe of cedar brakes. On down the rocky trail toward the canyon rim they spurred their sweat-lathered horses.

The bright sunlight gleamed on a silver badge that was pinned to the front of each of their faded shirts. It glittered also on the rows of brass cartridges in their crisscrossed gun belts, on the conchas of their bat-wing chaps, and the shiny butts of their low-swung Colts.

They were "Hungry" Hawkins and "Rusty" Bolivar, the deadliest scrappers of the Texas Rangers. As gunmen, the long, lanky, sad-eyed Hungry and his peppery little partner were almost a whole company by themselves.

They were bringing the law to Jicarilla, the new mining camp that

lay just around the next bend of the wide canyon. And Jicarilla had need of law. Already it was known as the toughest town along the entire Texas border.

Killings there were of nightly occurrence, and for the last month an organized band of claim jumpers had been busy with their deadly work. Not a miner dared let it be known he had struck pay dirt. His life would instantly have been in danger.

Knee to knee, eyes alertly scanning the trail ahead of them, the young cowboy Rangers started down the steep, rocky path that led into the bed of the canyon. The shelving rim rock was now behind them.

Suddenly little Rusty's horse let out a wild snort and reared up on its hind legs. Hungry's mount jumped back and whirled to run. The two Rangers spun them about and clamped them with their spurs.

Just then Rusty's sharp eyes spotted a pair of boots that were sticking out from behind a large boulder. Those boots were lying with toes downward, and there was an ugly splash of crimson on the boulder beside them.

"There's a dead man," Rusty barked, dropping a hand to a gun butt.

"I see 'im," Hungry said quietly. "From the stain on thet boulder I'd say he's just been killed."

Both Rangers swung from their saddles and tied their horses to a stunted oak. With a quick look about them, they then walked around the boulder to examine the dead hombre.

One swift glance told them instantly what had happened. The man's Colt was still in its holster, and there was a crimson stain between his shoulder blades where the murderer's bullet had struck him.

He had not been given a chance even to draw his gun.

"Dry-gulched!" Rusty spat disgustedly.

"An' robbed," Hungry said, reaching unhurriedly for his chewing tobacco. "Look at them there pockets. They've been turned wrong side out."

Not only had the dead man's pockets been rifled, but a small pack he had been carrying had been hastily torn open. In addition to this, Hungry rolled the body over and found a short piece of broken watch chain dangling from a belt loop in the man's trousers.

"Took his watch, too," Hungry grunted. "Didn't even take time to loosen the chain. Just busted it. I'll save what's left of it; then we might as well bury 'im."

Hungry crammed the bit of chain into his chaps pocket; then they laboriously scraped a shallow grave and lowered the dead man into it. After they had covered him they heaped a mound of stones above the place as a precaution against burrowing animals.

Hungry at last straightened from their task and mopped the sweat from his doleful face with the sleeve of his shirt. He tongued his tobacco into his cheek and spat an amber stream at a mesquite bush, then stood looking at the ground around them.

"Well, what's yuh waitin' fer?" Rusty demanded impatiently. "Cap Roberts said fer us to hurry here an' clean out the town of Jicarilla. From the looks of this dead hombre, I reckon it's needin' a cleanin'. Come on."

"Will yuh quit botherin' me when I'm busy thinkin'?" Hungry said patiently. "Now hush up! I purty nigh had me an idea then."

Rusty let out an angry snort, and

his wizened face twisted in an expression of disgust. He opened his mouth for a hot retort, but knew it was no use. He fidgeted for a moment; then, with a helpless glare at his lanky partner, he sat down upon a rock and began jerkily rolling a cigarette.

There was no use trying to hurry Hungry when the latter was trying to think out a puzzling problem. He always needed plenty of time—and plenty of room.

Still, the big, awkward, homely faced cowboy Ranger had a habit of solving things in a way that showed uncanny shrewdness in spite of his gawky appearance. Rusty puffed savagely at his cigarette and waited.

Suddenly Hungry squinted one eye and stalked across to a big boulder several steps away. It looked as if it would have been a likely spot for the dry-gulcher to have hidden himself to wait for his victim. A single glance at the ground behind it, then Hungry motioned for Rusty to join him.

"Well, what've yuh done found?" Rusty snapped irritably.

"See them tracks?" Hungry said quietly. "See whar he knelt in the dust to shoot? He was a big hombre, wore corduroy pants, an' old boots with a patch on the side of the left sole."

"Yep, an' he was usin' a .40-82 Winchester rifle," Rusty barked as he picked up a brass cartridge case. "Shot twice. I see another cartridge layin' over by that bush."

"Now let's see which way he went from 'hyar," Hungry said. "You bring the horses while I foller his trail."

As little Rusty whirled and went bow-legging it to get their horses, Hungry began carefully tracking their quarry. He trailed him back

and forth among the rocks until he found where the fellow had hidden his mount.

At that point Hungry waited until Rusty caught up, then he swung into the saddle. The murderer's horse tracks led them directly down the canyon toward Jicarilla.

"No use to track 'im any farther," Hungry announced quietly. "He's gone straight back to town. Let's lope up."

On down the boulder-strewn canyon bed, they swung along at an easy gallop. Presently they began passing staked-off claims where miners were busy with pick and shovel. Small tents, makeshift shacks, and dwellings of various kinds were scattered on every side.

Suddenly Hungry motioned to Rusty and nodded meaningly. With a quiet wink, he removed his badge and fastened it inside his shirt, where it would not be seen.

"Without these badges showin', people won't know but what we're just a couple of stray cowhands," Hungry said. "We'll see more if they don't know we're Rangers."

Rusty's wizened face twisted in a sly grin as he hid his own badge. He slouched sidewise in the saddle and carefully examined both his six-guns, then thrust them back into his holsters.

Around the next bend they saw Jicarilla. There it lay, a sweltering huddle of tents, sheet-iron shacks, hovels of logs, rock, warped boards, dry-goods boxes, or whatever the miners and inhabitants could find to build them with.

Except for one single, dusty street that split the camp through the center, the rest of it was merely a jumble of crooked paths. The houses stood in every direction, wherever their builders had seen fit to stick them.

Hurrying men pushed and jostled one another in the crowds that thronged the street. Dust billowed up in a choking cloud from under their milling feet, and pack burros piled high with supplies and camp equipment threaded their way patiently through the uproar.

II.

As Hungry and Rusty crossed the canyon and neared the edge of town they saw a cluster of new-made graves among the litter of tin cans and rubbish of every kind. Near them was a crudely lettered sign that had been painted on a box lid and nailed crazily to the trunk of a gnarled mesquite. The sign read:

boOt hiL cemitarie
git funny here an youl be next.

Little Rusty thumbed his freckled nose at the sign, then let out a shrill cackle of high glee. A wild, reckless light danced in his snapping eyes as he patted his right-hand gun and touched his mount with his spurs.

Not a muscle of Hungry's solemn face betrayed what he might be thinking. His eyes looked even more melancholy and mournful as he turned away from the sign and followed Rusty.

They had scarcely entered the dusty street when the blasting roar of a fanned gun scattered the crowd just ahead of them. As the two Rangers spurred their horses forward they saw a man stagger and pitch over on his face in the dust.

"Who done that?" Rusty barked.

No one answered him. Instead, men began edging nervously away. With lips tightly closed, they evaded his glance and hurried on about their business.

There was a queer greenish glitter in Hungry's usually mild eyes as

he halted his horse just behind Rusty. But only a careful observer would have noticed that gleam in the lanky Ranger's eyes.

"I asked yuh who done this shootin'?" Rusty barked again.

"They're afraid to answer yuh," Hungry said quietly. "We'll have to find out fer ourselves."

To be afraid to answer could mean but one thing to Hungry. It told him that Jicarilla was ruled by a gang of killers, and that to oppose them or to give out information about them meant instant death.

Hungry nodded understandingly at Rusty. He knew also that where there is a gang of killers, those killers always have a leader. He meant to keep their identity a secret until they had located that leader.

He looked around until he spotted the largest saloon and gambling den; then, with a nod for Rusty to follow him, he rode toward it. In a lawless mining camp he knew that the biggest saloon is usually run by the biggest crook, or the leader of the wild bunch.

They swung from their saddles at the hitch rack and dropped their bridles reins. Across the front of the barnlike building was a sign which read:

POKER BLANTON'S PLACE
BOOZE CAMP AND GAMBLIN.

"Keep yer hands close to yer guns," Hungry said quietly as they started toward the door.

"Arrh!" Rusty snarled. "Maybe yuh think I need me a nurse to ride herd on me. My guns'll be ready an' smokin' when I need 'em. Just you keep 'em off my back, if anybody jumps us."

Hungry smiled patiently as he shoved open the crude door. Inside, a noisy crowd milled profanely at the rough bar. A fiddle screeched,

and a tinny guitar twanged loudly from a low platform at the far end of the smoke-filled room, where a rather pretty girl in a gaudy red dress was singing.

The two young Rangers had hardly stepped inside when they saw a villainous-looking ruffian in flannel shirt and greasy chaps whirl from the bar and glare at them through slitted eyes. The hombre hastily set down his whisky glass and tapped his companion on the arm.

At a whispered word this companion turned and stared searchingly at Hungry and Rusty. He looked them over keenly from head to foot in one swift, penetrating glance.

"Just a couple of fresh cowhands," they heard the fellow say sneeringly. "I'll just drop a few words of timely advice into their ears."

The man shoved his glass back on the bar, and as he did so, the partners caught the flash of a huge diamond ring on his white, long-fingered hand. They saw the gleam of another stone in his gaudy necktie as he flicked some cigar ashes from the lapel of his black coat when he started toward them. He looked to be a professional gambler.

"Pretend not to notice 'im," Hungry whispered softly, without turning his head. "Keep still an' let me do the talkin'."

Rusty grunted to show that he understood. With this he reached carelessly for tobacco and papers, and pretended to be greatly interested in the girl who was singing.

With a strangely noiseless step for so big and heavy a man, the black-garbed stranger stopped in front of them. He smiled coldly.

"I don't believe I've seen you two cowboys here before," he said with a questioning glance. "Strangers in Jicarilla?"

Hungry took his time about replying. He munched his tobacco thoughtfully a couple of times; then took a long shot at a spit box.

"Yeah, strangers in Jicarilla, but not strangers in these mushroom mining camps," he drawled quietly.

"We've got a pretty tough camp here," the fellow said meaningly. "I heard you two punchers were inquiring about who did that shootin' out in the street a while ago. I wouldn't be askin' too many unnecessary questions, if I was you. It might not be exactly healthy."

Rusty whirled and glared up at him angrily. The scrappy little Ranger was all set to give the man a first-class bawling out, but Hungry shook his head and motioned for him to be silent.

"Just where does yore interest in this matter come in?" Hungry inquired mildly, not a muscle of his doleful face betraying what he thought.

"Well," the man said, his beady black eyes narrowing, "I just hate to see an innocent stranger horn into trouble. Too much talk might get yuh shot. Savvy? Some of the deadliest gun fighters along the border are hangin' out in Jicarilla."

Hungry sighed heavily and took another shot at the spit box. He had already noticed the bulge of a hideout gun under the man's arm-pit. He knew there were more under the tail of that long black coat, with probably a derringer in his sleeve.

"I'm Poker Blanton, who owns this saloon," the man went on. "I hate to see you two young fellows get shot up, so I'm just warnin' yuh."

Rusty's face was getting redder every second, and the freckles on his little nose stood out like danger signals. He was puffing jerkily at his

cigarette, and both thumbs were hooked in his gun belt. His eyes were snapping angrily.

Hungry knew that the scrappy little Ranger's temper was near the exploding point. He had seen Rusty shoot the heels off a man's boots for less than "Poker" Blanton had said.

"We're thankin' yuh, Blanton," Hungry said with a warning shake of his head at Rusty. "I'm awful glad yuh told us about these hyar bad hombres. We might 'a' got ourselves all shot up."

A few bystanders whom Hungry had noticed listening laughed jeeringly at this. Poker Blanton's thin lips also twisted in a sarcastic smile as he nodded curtly and went back to the bar.

"Now yuh've fixed it," Rusty snarled disgustedly. "Yuh've let thet Blanton hombre an' the tinhorn gun slingers of this camp think we're yaller. Why didn't yuh let me tell 'im where to head in?"

"Bawlin' Blanton out would've meant shootin'," Hungry replied softly. "I ain't ready to start shootin' till I know who's leadin' the gang thet's doin' all this killin' an' claim jumpin'."

With a dejected sigh Hungry bit off a fresh chew and sauntered awkwardly back to where the girl was starting another song. While he pretended to be interested only in the singing, he was warily watching the men in the saloon—particularly Poker Blanton.

After a while Hungry turned, and with a nod to Rusty, went back out into the street. They had hardly reached their horses when four drunken ruffians came floundering through the door behind them. They were swearing savagely and grabbing at the guns in their holsters.

Hungry whirled about and looked

sharply at them. At the blasting roar of a Colt he ducked aside, grabbed Rusty's arm, and jumped back around the corner of the saloon, out of line of fire.

"Hey!" Rusty snarled. "Let go my arm! Them drunks ain't shootin' at us."

Hungry's solemn face wrinkled in a patient smile. He winked quietly and dropped both big hands to his gun butts.

"Wasn't they?" he inquired innocently. "You're wrong two ways, pard. Thet fake drunken row was staged fer our special benefit."

"What do yuh mean?" Rusty snapped.

"Waal, in the first place, none of 'em's drunk," Hungry replied. "In the second, they was sent out thar to accidentally—on purpose—git us both with stray bullets."

Rusty let out an angry snort and grabbed his six-guns from their holsters. He would have darted out and started a shooting bee of his own but for Hungry, who had other plans. Hungry grabbed him and jerked him back.

"Not yet," Hungry said firmly. "Come on an' let's ride away from hyar. They've stopped shootin'. I'll explain later."

Muttering disgustedly, Rusty swung into his saddle and followed Hungry down the crowded street. They rode on to a big livery corral, where they put up their horses and gave them a good feed of gramma hay.

The sun had gone down and it was rapidly getting dark when they finished caring for their mounts and went to look for a place to get supper and spend the night. They had just left the corral when a Mexican boy brushed past Hungry and slipped a piece of crumpled paper into his hand. Without a word he

shook his head at Hungry and slipped away.

Hungry nodded quietly, without looking around. He stood talking to Rusty until the boy was gone; then he cautiously opened the paper and read:

You cowboys get out of Jicarilla as quickly as you can. Your life is in danger every second you stay. You will be murdered if you spend the night here. Go while there is time. Eight gunmen stood ready to kill you while you were talking to Poker Blanton in the saloon. A signal from him and you would have been riddled with bullets. I saw them watching you, but couldn't warn you. Go while there is time.

A FRIEND.

Hungry smiled and handed the note to Rusty. The little Ranger broke into a high-pitched, cackling laugh as he finished reading. There was no mirth in the sound, and his thin lips were curled back from his even teeth like those of a snarling wolf. He was hungrily caressing his gun butts, and his eyes were dancing dangerously.

"Warnin' us to leave, huh?" he gritted. "Thet note was wrote by a woman."

"By the girl who was singin' in the saloon, if I've guessed right," Hungry said. "I saw her lookin' hard at me, then at the door, as if she wanted us to git away from thar. Waal, we'll be on our guard, but we ain't leavin'."

Hungry tore the note into small pieces; then he and Rusty went on down the street. After loafing about for a while they located a makeshift hotel where they could get supper and a room for the night.

III.

The man in charge—a hulking, bull-necked hombre—eyed them insolently and demanded his pay for the room in advance. Hungry paid

him without a word; then, when they had eaten a hearty supper, they went to their room.

Hungry carefully closed the door and pulled down the flimsy window blind before he ventured to light the candle which had been thrust into the neck of an empty whisky bottle on the pine table. As the light flickered up he glanced quickly about the room.

Except for the flimsy table, a water bucket, a tin washbasin, a cheap mirror, and a ramshackle bunk of rough boards in the corner, it was bare of furniture. A smelly straw mattress and a few none-too-clean blankets lay in the wide bunk, and a grimy towel hung from a nail on the wall.

There was also a small closet in a corner behind the door. While Rusty began pulling off his boots, Hungry started toward the closet for a look inside.

Before he reached it, a light step in the hall outside stopped him. He dropped his hand to a gun butt and turned as some one knocked softly at the door.

Hungry flattened himself against the wall and jerked both guns from his holsters. Rusty made a flying jump and did the same on the opposite side of the door.

The knock sounded again. This time it was a little louder, as if whoever it was might be nervous or in a hurry.

"Come in!" Hungry said quietly.

The door was instantly shoved open, and the girl from the saloon darted inside. Her face was pale with fear.

With a bashful gulp, little Rusty crammed his guns back into their holsters, and his mouth flew open in astonishment. He shot a quick glance at his bare feet and made a grab for his boots.

"Waal, miss, I—we—" Hungry began awkwardly.

"Hush! Be still. I may have been watched," the girl whispered tremulously. "Listen to me! You cowboys are in deadly danger. Get away quickly! Blanton thinks you may be officers in disguise. I overheard him talking. You should not have asked about that killing in the street."

Hungry's solemn face straightened. He looked down at her and started to speak, but she silenced him with a hurried wave of her slim hand.

"No. Be still," she said softly. "You wonder why I came to warn you. Because I work in Blanton's saloon as singer, you suspect me. I must hurry, but I'll explain."

In as few words as possible, the girl told him about herself. She told them why she had been forced, against her will, to sing in a saloon and gambling den in order to support herself and an invalid mother.

Her father had staked a good mining claim and had taken out quite a supply of gold. One night he had been murdered and his gold stolen. On top of this, Poker Blanton showed a bill of sale to the claim and said he had bought it from her father only the day before he was killed.

This had left herself and her mother absolutely penniless. Blanton had tried then to make love to her. Finally, when she absolutely refused him, he had offered her a job in his saloon as singer.

She strongly suspected Blanton of having a hand in the murder of her father. So she took the job in order to watch him, as well as to support herself and her mother. Now she felt certain that it was Blanton who was the leader of the ruffians who were doing all this killing and claim

jumping, but there was nothing she could do about it.

More than this, if Blanton had the least idea that she suspected him, she would doubtless be killed at once. She was taking her life in her hands by even warning Hungry and Rusty.

"So Blanton got yore father's min'-in' claim, did he, ma'am?" Hungry inquired. "Yuh reckon he still holds it?"

"No, he sold it for seven thousand dollars this afternoon," she said. "He has the money for it. It is in a wallet he carries in his pocket."

As she talked, Hungry suddenly stiffened, and a greenish light flashed into his usually solemn eyes. His right-hand gun seemed almost to leap from his holster, so swift was his draw.

The girl's eyes dilated in terror, but Hungry whispered for her to keep talking. Hungry kept his eyes riveted upon that closet door. He had heard a movement behind it, had seen it move slightly.

With a muttered grunt, Rusty jumped softly from the bed and landed beside Hungry. The little Ranger's long, blue-barreled Colts were gripped ready in his hands, but he was not even looking toward the closet. He was watching the window, where he had seen the blind shake.

Slowly, a little at a time, the closet door moved outward. As Hungry ripped his other gun from its holster, he motioned for the girl to get back and drop to the floor.

Suddenly Hungry saw the ugly black ring of a gun muzzle being thrust through the crack in the closet door.

Bram! In the little room the shattering blast of Hungry's left-hand Colt was deafening.

The door crashed outward, and with a hoarse, choking yell, a man rolled almost at Hungry's feet. The heavy six-gun he had started to use on the girl clattered noisily to the floor.

Bang-bang! Bang! Three roaring crashes of Rusty's Colts made the candle flicker.

The flimsy window blind jumped crazily as his bullets tore through it. A choking gasp and they heard a heavy body fall outside.

"I got 'im!" Rusty barked, bounding forward.

A sweep of his gun barrel knocked the candle to the floor. He stamped it out with his foot as he ripped the curtain from the window.

The man outside was dead. All three of little Rusty's bullets had struck him. The sawed-off shotgun with which the ruffian had meant to sweep the room lay unfired beside the body.

"Hyar, miss," Hungry snapped to the girl, "git through this window an' slip back whar yuh belong 'fore somebody sees yuh. Hurry! Duck around behind this hotel."

He grabbed her arm and helped her to the ground. In a moment she had disappeared in the darkness.

At that instant the pards heard a heavy step in the hall. Some one pounded loudly on the door and called for them to open it.

Hungry threw it open and ducked quickly aside. It was the proprietor of the hotel, and he had his big hands on both butts of his tied-down guns.

"Say, what the blue blazes is goin' on in hyar?" the fellow demanded savagely. "I thought I heard shootin'."

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised if yuh did," Hungry drawled quietly. "It seems like some hombre committed suicide in that closet. Come

in an' shut the door so's we can examine 'im."

With a surprised oath, the man stalked into the room and kicked the door shut behind him. He raked a match across his pants and picked up the candle.

He glared across at the body on the floor, then whirled, with a snarled oath, toward Hungry.

"Which one of you cowhands killed that hombre?" he bellowed accusingly.

"I did," Hungry snapped. "My pard, thar, gunned the jasper yuh had planted at the window."

"I—I—" the man stammered uncertainly, sudden fear graying his brutal face. "I didn't have nobody planted at that winder."

"Don't try to lie to me, hombre," Hungry said softly. "Yo're another one of Poker Blanton's flunkies. I spotted yuh when yuh wanted pay fer this room in advance. Yuh knew we was to be shot."

As the man shrank back against the wall, Hungry stepped between him and the door. Rusty's thin lips twisted in a mirthless grin as he planted himself beside the window to bar escape from that direction.

The fellow looked from one to the other in terror. He was nervously gripping his big hands and licking his dry lips like a trapped coyote.

Hungry stared solemnly at him for a moment, hands softly caressing his gun butts. Suddenly the lanky Ranger's eyes flashed with a greenish glitter. He was looking down at the man's corduroy trousers.

"Hold out yer left boot, hombre," he ordered softly—too softly. It was more like the whine of a cougar that is getting ready to spring. "Uh-huh," Hungry grunted. "Just as I figgered—a patch on the side of the sole."

At this little Rusty's cackling

laugh broke out like the snarl of a wolf. Both his gun hammers clicked back threateningly.

"What time is it, hombre?" Hungry demanded of the hotel man.

Rusty laughed mirthlessly and darted a glance out of the window. He thought he heard a stealthy step. He lifted his guns.

"Time?" the hotel man stammered. "Oh, time! I—I—"

He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a heavy gold watch. Part of the chain had been broken off.

"It's—it's just a little after ten o'clock," the man said. As he caught Hungry's stern glance directed at him he went on. "I—I broke this blasted chain yesterday. I'll have to git it fixed."

Without a word, Hungry pulled the bit of chain from his chaps pocket and tossed it to the floor in front of him. It was the piece he had taken from the dead man's body that afternoon, and it matched that on the hotel keeper's watch.

With a choking cry the fellow's face went white. He shrank back along the wall, hands above his head. Suddenly a hoarse yell rattled from his dry throat, and he stabbed frantically for his guns.

Bang-bang! Two bullets from Hungry's blasting Colts struck him just above the belt buckle.

The fellow spun around and crashed to the floor, just as little Rusty fired a quick shot through the window.

"I got another un," Rusty announced, slipping a fresh cartridge into his gun.

Hungry did not look around. He was bending over the hotel man.

"Who's yer boss, hombre?" Hungry demanded sharply. "Who leads the wild bunch hyar in Jicarilla? Come clean 'fore yuh pass out."

The man rolled his glazing eyes

in agony. At last his wavering glance came to rest on Hungry. He gasped weakly and tried to speak. With a mighty effort he croaked a name: "Blanton!" Then his head fell back.

Hungry stood up and reloaded his guns. When he had done this he thrust them into his holsters. With a nod to Rusty to do the same, he next pinned his Ranger badge where it could be plainly seen on the front of his shirt.

"Well, what's next on the program?" Rusty grinned expectantly. "Where do we go from here?"

"Straight to Poker Blanton's saloon," Hungry said quietly. "The clean-up of Jicarilla starts from there."

Rusty blew out the candle and followed Hungry through the window. They paused for a minute at the corner of the hotel to make certain that no other gunmen were hiding to take a shot at them; then they went slipping through the shadows toward Blanton's place.

As the two Rangers stepped from the darkness and walked warily across to the door, they saw that there were still quite a number of men in the saloon. The girl who had warned them against Blanton was again singing on the low platform in the back.

Hungry's face straightened worriedly at sight of her. With a muttered word to Rusty, he turned and went around to the back door. Rusty followed.

The girl had just finished her song and had turned for a word to the fiddler when Hungry caught her eye from the half-open doorway. With a word to the musicians that she wanted a breath of fresh air, she went outside.

"You," she whispered nervously, "what are you doing back here? Get

away while you have time. You will be——”

What she meant to add ended in a startled gasp as she caught the flash of the silver badges on their shirts. Mouth open, she looked first at Rusty, then up at the homely, solemn-faced Hungry.

“Why—why, you’re Texas Rangers!” she said tremulously. “Why, I thought you were just a couple of cowboys.”

“We’re both, ma’am,” Hungry said. “Now, if yuh’ll just keep out hyar, whar yuh won’t git hit by stray bullets, me an’ my pard will proceed to do a leetle house cleanin’ in that dive.”

With a nod to Rusty, Hungry whirled and ran around to the front door. Rusty motioned for the girl to stand away; then, when he saw Hungry come in at the front, he stepped in at the back.

Poker Blanton and several tough-looking hombres were talking in low tones at the bar as they came in. At a sharp word from the bartender, Blanton and his henchmen whirled. The ruffians dropped their hands toward their guns, but a startled oath from Blanton halted them.

He muttered something Hungry did not catch as he glanced first at Hungry, then at little Rusty. Suddenly, with an oily smile on his beefy face, he stepped out from the bar.

“Well, you two young fellers fooled me this afternoon,” he said smoothly. “My mistake. I didn’t know it was Rangers I was warnin’ against these tough gunmen around Jicarilla.”

“Didn’t yuh?” Hungry drawled coldly. “Waal, that’s too bad. I reckon it’ll be more news to yuh to know that yo’re under arrest, Blanton. Put up yer hands.”

With a hissing intake of breath,

Poker Blanton went rigid. Every gun-slinging ruffian along the bar snapped into a fighting crouch, slit-eyed eyes riveted unblinkingly at the two Rangers, and clawed hands poised for a downward stab at their holstered Colts.

Little Rusty stood on the low platform, with legs spread wide apart and slightly bent at the knees. His body was hunched forward at the hips, arms crooked for the snap and go of the experienced gun fighter. He laughed softly, but there was no mirth in the sound.

But for the labored breathing of the ruffians at the bar, not a sound could now be heard except the loud ticking of the clock behind the stove. The deadly silence shrieked a warning of the gun play that would come at any second.

Not a muscle of Hungry’s solemn face changed. Awkward, gawky, in an attitude of slouching ease, he stood with hands dangling loosely at his sides. Only that deadly greenish light which flickered in his eyes could have told that he was ready to go for his guns with uncanny speed, and that they would come up smoking as they cleared the leather. Men who knew Hungry would have been hunting cover.

A buzzing fly zipped against Poker Blanton’s cheek. With a nervous oath, he ducked aside as if struck by a bullet.

Bang! A hidden derringer flamed treacherously from his left hand.

A chorus of yells and the saloon shook with the roar of blasting guns.

As Blanton’s hand shot out, Hungry’s guns seemed to leap from his holsters. Blanton hurled himself aside, and the man behind him went down with a bullet beneath his left eye.

Ducking, bounding back and forth, never in one spot more than a

fleeting second, Hungry and Rusty hurled a stream of bullets at everything that moved. Chairs crashed against the walls, tables went down and were splintered.

Bang! Bang-bang! Wham! Bang-bang! Like darting fireflies, streaks of orange-red flame stabbed through the pall of gun smoke, and hurtling bullets reaped a toll of death. The big mirror behind the bar burst into a thousand fragments.

A hoarse bellow and the bartender came up with a sawed-off shotgun gripped in his hairy hands. A bullet between the eyes hurled him backward, and broken glasses and bottles crashed to the floor. He jerked both shotgun triggers as he fell, and a hurricane of buckshot and slugs ripped a gaping hole in the low roof.

Bullets clanged through the stove and tore down the pipe. Soot and ashes mingled with powder smoke. A thrown spit box crashed through a window above Rusty's bobbing head.

Guns empty, Hungry snatched more from a ruffian who had fallen beside him. Rusty hurled his own useless Colts at Blanton in time to spoil his aim, then grabbed a rifle from a rack on the wall.

Oil dripped from a broken lamp, and the bar went over with a crash. Rusty hurled his rifle into the milling ruffians and snatched a pair of six-guns from the hands of a dead man on the floor.

One side of Hungry's face was a smear of crimson where a bullet had split his cheek and torn through his ear. His shirt was wet and sticky at the shoulder, and he reeled drunkenly as another slug grazed his ribs and splintered through the wall.

Rusty staggered and leaned heavily against a pool table as a bullet numbed his thigh. His hat was

gone, and a trickle of crimson dyed his forehead.

Guns empty again, Rusty began hurling pool balls from the table in front of him. Hungry had got hold of two more loaded Colts. His back was to the wall, and he was shooting with both hands.

Suddenly Blanton lurched toward him out of the pall of smoke. The saloon man's face was twisted with fiendish hate, and he was mouthing oaths in a savage whine. He was shooting at every step as he closed in.

Bang! A bullet fanned Hungry's face and tore through the wall.

Bang-bang! Two more gun shots roared so close together as to blend as one.

Poker Blanton staggered back and gasped chokingly.

Bam! Another roar of Hungry's left-hand Colt, and Blanton pitched to the floor.

With their leader dead, the three remaining ruffians dived through the front windows and escaped in the darkness. Little Rusty shattered the sash above their heads with pool balls as they disappeared.

"Whee-ee! Ee-ya-hoo!" he yelled triumphantly. "We licked 'em! I ain't had me as sociable a ruckus since we joined the Rangers. Yuh hurt much, Hungry?"

"Not past fixin'," Hungry replied painfully. "How about you?"

"Same here." Rusty grinned happily. "Say, how about that girl we left at the back door?"

Hungry did not reply. He was busy pulling open Poker Blanton's shirt and removing a heavy money belt from around his waist and a wallet from his pocket. With these in his hand he went limping toward the back door.

"Where yuh goin' pard?" Rusty called.

"To give this money to thet gal," Hungry said quietly. "Blanton had her father murdered, an' he stole their minin' claim. By rights, this belongs to her."

"Hand it to her; then let's go git patched up," Rusty chuckled. "I reckon Cap Roberts won't have no kick on the way we cleaned up Jic-

illa. What I mean, we've cleaned it!"

Rusty said a mouthful, thet time. Jicarilla ought ter stay cleaned fer quite some time, now that the two cow-punch Rangers have finished the job. They shore are a pizen pair fer outlaws ter monkey with. Watch fer the next story about 'em. It'll be in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.



TRAPPERS BRAVED DEATH TO SAVE FURS

TOWARD the end of last November, the steamship *Baychimo* was on her way out of the North with a valuable cargo of furs. But she was caught in the ice when the arctic winter caught her before she could reach the open water to the south.

One of the passengers was O. D. Morris, who had trapped for some years in the Far North, and was taking his furs to the market. As the boat was apparently settled in the ice for several months, the passengers and crew left her to seek more comfortable quarters.

Then a three-day arctic storm raged furiously. When it stopped, the *Baychimo* had disappeared. A few days later, she appeared like a ghost ship about eighteen miles south of Point Barrow, Alaska.

Morris made up his mind that he was going to save his furs. With an Eskimo guide and a dog team he began his hunt for the ship. When he learned that she had been seen, he went to the place where she was reported to be; but he saw that she was fully fifteen miles from the shore. And between was a great field of rough, grinding ice, with bergs and large spaces of open water.

"No man travel that kind ice," warned the Eskimo. "He get kill quick."

But there is nothing a white trap-

per will not do to save his catch, and Morris was no exception to the rule. He set out at daybreak, and for fifteen hours fought his way through tumbling masses of ice.

There was only one more mile to go, but the trapper knew that, if he reached the ship at night, he would not have the strength to return with a load. So he turned back.

The next morning he secured the services of three Eskimo trappers by promising them a large reward. They started out with two dog teams, using the sleds to bridge gaps in the ice, and pulling themselves over bergs with ropes.

When they were about half a mile from the ship, they had to abandon the dogs because of the increased roughness of the ice.

It took the men four hours to cover the last half mile. They packed fourteen bales of furs on their backs, and set out for the dogs. Four of the bales were lost, but twelve hours later men and dogs, with ten bales, reached the shore safely.

"I could not have done it without my Eskimo helpers," declared Morris when they reached Point Barrow the next day. "And all the credit for the success of the venture is due to them."



Gun-brandin' On Box H

By Nelse Anderson

Author of "Smokin' Out Blue Lobo," etc.

CIRCLE CITY'S only bank stood out among its surroundings like a freshly blooming flower in a field that has gone to seed. Trim and smug in a new coat of green paint, polished plate-glass windows, and richly furnished lobby, it radiated paunchy sleekness that mocked the starved, weather-beaten poverty of the other one-story structures that squatted together as if for companionship.

A rider, so long of leg that the points of his taps flapped within a foot of the dusty road, came riding into town from the west. He compared the bank with its sorry-looking neighbors, and puckered his lips.

"Might as well start this job o'

work right now," he told himself in the soft drawl of the Southwest, dismounting at the bank.

He squinted at the gilded letters down in the right-hand corner of the plate window. "Rufus Burr, President," was the inscription.

The rider's dusty boots offended the green plush carpet in the lobby. He was forced to duck his head to ease his high-crowned hat through the doorframe as he was ushered into the office of the president at the rear, and Rufus Burr winced as his visitor deposited his travel-stained form in a gleaming mahogany chair.

"What can I do for you?" the banker asked.

"My name's Hobson," the rider

said, staring curiously at the high silk hat that adorned Rufus Burr's head. "Some folks call me 'Long Tom' for short."

Rufus Burr's frosty eyes narrowed a trifle as he studied "Long Tom." He saw a bronzed, long-jawed face that was deceptively solemn and featured by level, hazel eyes. Burr decided that Long Tom was probably thirty years of age, but as a matter of fact he was several summers short of that mark.

"I've heard of you," Burr admitted, leaning back in his swivel chair.

Burr's head, which was always silk-clad indoors or out, was small and gave the impression that it was posed on the frame of a small man. But on the contrary, he was a big hombre, not quite as tall as Long Tom nor as sinewy, but heavy of shoulder.

"What can I do for you?" he repeated.

"I was sent down here by the gov'n'er," Long Tom drawled. "Seems as though there's a job here for an officer. I'm packin' a commission as captain o' Rangers—temporary, yuh savvy. Didn't want the job. I never hanker for trouble. Was just amblin' around lookin' over the sights o' the town, when the gov'n'er roped me in. So here I am."

Rufus Burr's indifference had completely melted. He leaned closer, boring Long Tom with needle-point pupils, curiously studying the tall rider, whose name was becoming a by-word in the Southwest.

Long Tom Hobson had a habit of drifting into regions where a keen brain and a fast gun were needed on the side of law and order. Sometimes he came as a special deputy marshal, or a special something or other. Always, it was a temporary

job. With Long Tom, the word temporary meant until the job was finished.

"Glad to meet you," Burr said heartily.

Long Tom met his extended hand and found it powerful. Yet its clasp was cold, and the Ranger didn't especially cotton to Rufus Burr, but then Long Tom never had had much truck with financial sharks who sat behind mahogany desks and wore silk hats while they worked.

"So you've been sent down here to break up this villainous gang of night riders and terrorists," Burr said, nodding his head vigorously. "I'll be glad to give you any assistance, but I feel that I must warn you of the risks. Two deputy sheriffs have given their lives trying to get Zack—er—I mean, trying to end the activities of these marauders. Lately, the law has not been represented in Circle City, because men are unwilling to assume the risk of trying to enforce it."

"What was that name yuh started tuh mention," Long Tom asked quickly.

"That was a—a—slip," Burr said hastily. "Perhaps I should not have been so careless. I don't—"

"There's only one gent who wears Zack as a front name that could catalogue as the ramrod of a gang of killers," the Ranger snapped. "Yuh wasn't meanin' Zack Grail, maybe? Is this his stampin' grounds?"

"Yes," Burr admitted. "But I wouldn't want him to know—"

Long Tom's impatient gesture stopped him. "What makes yuh pick Zack Grail as the hole card in this layout?"

The banker shrugged his shoulders. "He's a gunman, he's been hanging around Circle City for a year, and he has no visible means of

support except a pretense of being a gambler."

"Zack Grail don't have tuh *pretend* tuh be a gambler," Long Tom answered. "He is one, and a good one, too, if yuh can call a gambler good. I knew him down on the border, a few years ago."

Then he changed the subject. "What's the object back of this night-ridin' racket?" he asked. "Seems that half a dozen ranches have been shot up an' burned out by gents wearin' sheets an' flour sacks. Where's the profit in it?"

"Rustling, I presume," Burr said.

"That's possible," Long Tom nodded. "I reckon it's easy tuh run beef, when the owners are dead or homeless. Well, I'll move along tuh the jail an' set up housekeepin'. Might be here quite a spell, unless I'm lucky."

"You may be here a very long spell," Burr laughed meaningly. "You have quite a reputation yourself, Hobson, but Zack Grail is lightning in a hurry when it comes to drawing a gun. And he hasn't any affection for law officers."

"Thanks for the encouragement," Long Tom said dryly. "Where does Grail hang out?"

"At the Imperial, right across the street. Remember, that I warned you."

Burr arose, as Long Tom moved to the door. The Ranger noted that the banker wore no gun, and that his tightly buttoned, close-fitting frock coat could hardly conceal a pocketed weapon without a revealing bulge.

It was late afternoon then, and Long Tom's appearance had not caused any interest. But when he turned his horse into the barn back of the little jail, which presented a cobwebbed vacancy, Circle City sat up and opened its eyes.

Before nightfall, Long Tom could feel the magnetic change. He had busied himself dusting out the little office and preparing the tiny sleeping quarters, but he was aware of the excitement that was welling up in the community. The sidewalks had grown busy, and a stream of gawking citizens strolled idly past, staring in the windows. But none came to call on him.

Long Tom did justice to a square meal at a beanery that evening, eating in solitary state. Then he strolled up and down the planked walks, until the evening festivities were well under way at the Imperial Café, the biggest saloon in town.

Presently, he headed for the Imperial. And now he sensed that Circle City was drawing a deep breath and preparing to duck.

"Which same indicates that Zack Grail is here, waitin' for me," Long Tom decided, as he paused at the batwing doors, then pushed them apart and glided inside.

II.

The Imperial, in reality, fell far short of its boastful name. Its interior was as shabby as its peeling, weather-beaten front. It plainly was in a business slump along with the rest of the town.

Its bar sported many bottles, but the majority of them carried nothing more powerful than colored water. Its mirror was cracked and grimy, its bar battered and dull, and its player piano sadly out of tune.

Long Tom quickly inspected the half dozen patrons. Five he discounted. The sixth was Zack Grail, the gunman.

Grail sat at a card table, riffling a pack between strong fingers, his face impassive as he met Long Tom's level stare.

"Lo, Hobson," Grail said calmly. "Sit and tilt one."

Long Tom fitted his long frame into a chair and rested his arms on the table. Grail did likewise. The other patrons took heart. All of them had edged near some point that would furnish a hasty exit or safe cover.

"I heard you were looking for me," Grail said easily.

"News shore travels on fast hoofs, don't it," Long Tom complained. "I hadn't just made up my mind who I *was* lookin' for. If yuh say I'm lookin' for you, then I reckon yo're right."

"What's the charge?" Grail smiled thinly.

He had expressionless black eyes and a thin, masklike face. Like his black and white garb, that was his stock in trade.

Peeping between the folds of his unbuttoned sack coat was a cartridge-studded belt, and the black butt of a .45. Those, too, were part of Grail's stock in trade. He could take care of himself in more than one kind of gambling—cards or bullets.

"Arson, destruction o' property, kidnapin', manslaughter, murder, an'—I forget the rest o' them," Long Tom said.

Grail lighted a cigar with hands that were steady. He snuffed the match with a cylinder of smoke, flipped it away, and—

With a speed that smacked of magic, he drew! Long Tom's muscles did not twitch as he stared into the bore of the gun. Boots scuffed, and men began diving to cover.

"Yo're shore fast on the draw," Long Tom observed languidly. "A gent advised me not four hours ago that, if I went up against you, I'd likely stay in Circle City as a permanent resident."

Grail's eyes narrowed a trifle, but the gun did not waver.

"Where's your warrant?" he asked. "What's yore evidence?"

"No warrant an' no evidence," Long Tom admitted, tilting his chair back on two legs, his eyes wandering over the room.

"Keep your mitts away from your cutter," Grail warned him. "I'm not going to be railroaded. I know who stamped you—a jigger who wears a silk hat and is afraid to pack a gun."

"Well, well, that's right interestin'," Long Tom mused. "I take it that yo're denyin' all them counts I suggested."

"I've done some killin' in my time," Grail said slowly. "And I'll probably do some more, before somebody gets behind me one of these unlucky days. But I don't make a living by—"

He did not finish. Long Tom had swung into action then, with flashing rapidity. One moment he was sitting there, insolently staring about. The next instant, the card table reared up into Grail's face. Long Tom had kicked it with a powerful surge of a booted foot.

Boom! Grail's .45 roared, but the table had deflected its muzzle, and the slug went into the ceiling.

Long Tom threw his body against the table, and Grail went over backward to the floor, pinned down beneath the object.

"Drop that gun," the Ranger said, straining to reach the .45 which jutted out. "Drop it, I say."

Grail struggled, but he was flattened out. He endeavored to twist the gun around the edge of the table, but before he could succeed, Long Tom grasped it and wrested it from him.

"Now stand up," Long Tom said, climbing off the capsized table.

Grail crawled out, his face still impulsive, but desperation glowing in his eyes.

"You lived up to your rep that time," he admitted. "I suppose I'm due for a long look between some nice iron bars."

"I'd be pleased tuh chat with yuh in private," Long Tom said in a low voice that no other could hear.

Grail's eyes flickered with surprise, but without a word, he led the way to a little poker room leading off the main room at the rear.

"Here's yore gun," Long Tom said hurriedly, glancing at the only window in the place. "I didn't pull that play because I wanted tuh be smart. I had spotted a gent at a window just behind you, who was bearin' down on one of us with a six-gun. I knowed it wasn't any use takin' a pop at him, because yuh would have mistaken my meanin' if I went for my cutter. So I started that scramble, an' he didn't go through with his plan, because o' the ruckus."

"At the window?" Grail exclaimed in surprise. "What was the idea, do you reckon?"

"One of us ain't wanted in these parts," Long Tom opined.

"Sh-sh," Grail breathed, his voice barely audible. "There, at the window behind you. Quick—"

Long Tom whirled. Both his and Grail's hands stabbed down and flipped upward in blurred motions.

B-r-r-o-o-m! The combined roar of the two .45s came in one deafening thunderclap. Glass from the sash tinkled down.

The head and shoulders of a masked man that had been there in the frame an instant before, vanished—swept away by the smashing lead.

A moan, and the sound of a body falling, came to them.

"Got him!" Long Tom snapped,

racing from the room with Grail at his heels. They sped out the side door and to the rear where a dim figure lay groaning softly against the wall of the building.

Pounding feet were bringing others to the scene as Long Tom knelt beside the victim.

"Stand back," the Ranger barked, as he struck a match and lifted the head of the masked man. Rattling breath told that life was but a matter of minutes—perhaps seconds.

"Who sent you?" Long Tom questioned sharply, lifting the mask.

"I'm—I'm—"

"Never mind who you are," the Ranger insisted. "Who sent you? Try to pull yourself together."

"I'll—I'll—tell," the fellow gasped with an agonized effort. "He—he—was—"

Crack! The sharp report of a gun, and a red stab of flame came from somewhere near by.

The form in Long Tom's hands jerked, and then went limp with the flabbiness that could mean only one thing—death. The last bullet had pierced his brain.

Long Tom leaped erect, his gun sweeping the group that stood in an appalled, frozen half circle about him.

"Stick 'em skyward!" he gritted. Then, lifting his voice, he bellowed: "Hey, there in the barroom! Bring a lamp! Hustle! Keep 'em rigid an' high," he warned the group, crouching low so as to watch the uplifted arms against the starlight. "Who fired that shot?"

No one spoke. Feet shifted a trifle. The laboring breath of tense men was his only response.

"I'll soon know," Long Tom advised them significantly. "May as well step up now an' admit it."

Still there was silence. A lamp

was brought and set up in the circle. Long Tom's eyes began probing every face of the dozen suspects. All returned his stare owlishly and blankly.

Then the lamp caught the gleam of a high silk hat, and the Ranger discovered Rufus Burr in the group.

"You there, Burr, help me look over these *hombres*," Long Tom commanded. "The gent who fired that finishin' slug is right in this bunch here—an' he hasn't had a chance tuh reload. I'll ask everybody tuh spill out their hardware."

The banker moved to his side and, at his command, the citizens began stepping forward. Long Tom searched them himself, stripping their guns from their holsters, and running his hands over their coats, pockets, and boots for possible concealed weapons.

He returned all the .45s immediately, without a second glance at them. But three .38s were found in the crowd, and these he handed to Burr, who broke them and spread out the shells. Two of the weapons gave up an empty shell each, but a glance through their barrels showed them clean of powder marks.

Long Tom handed them back to their owners without comment. An empty shell was no evidence, because most men carry a "dead" under the firing pin, as a precaution in case the gun should be accidentally dropped.

Zack Grail was the last to be searched. He stepped forward, hands in air, face expressionless as usual. Long Tom paid no heed to Grail's sagging .45, but he did go over his clothing and boots with extraordinary thoroughness. He found nothing.

"I reckon that'll be all," Long Tom said reluctantly, after spending fifteen minutes more in combing the

ground within an area of fifty feet. He was puzzled—sorely puzzled.

The shot that had silenced the masked man, had been from a gun no larger than a thirty-eight, for the report had been clear, and not as commanding as the voice of the normal .45. And it had been fired at a distance of not more than thirty feet. Nobody had actually seen the flash, being intent on watching Long Tom and the dying man. But every one had seen the reflection.

Long Tom did not believe that any one had escaped from the scene—not, at least, any one who had been thirty feet away. And he did not believe that the gun could have been tossed to any great distance, for such an arm motion would have been noticed.

"Wait a minute," Zack Grail said suddenly.

The group that had started to shift around, halted and became tense again.

"You haven't searched our friend here," Grail said softly. "Mr. Burr I mean. Or is it an affront to propose such a thing? He represents the almighty dollar in this community, you know. In fact, he owns most of this range now."

"What foolishness!" the banker bristled. "I never carried a gun in my life."

"Yo're willin' tuh be searched, though, I take it?" Long Tom asked crisply.

"To be sure," Burr snapped. "But it has always been my policy never to go armed. It has been my experience that those who arm themselves usually find use for their guns—and not always in self-defense."

There could be no mistaking that barb. It was aimed at Grail. But the gambler only smiled and rocked on his high heels.

"There are some humans who

don't pack guns, because they're afraid to," he murmured significantly.

The banker did not answer, but he was rigid with fury as Long Tom ran practiced hands over his pockets and coat.

"Perhaps you would like to search through my hair also," Burr said scornfully, removing his silk hat, and presenting a bald pate.

III.

Long Tom, with the aid of Grail, carried the body to the jail.

"He's a bar fly who has been loafin' aroun' Circle City for a long time," somebody identified the victim. "Just a bum!"

Long Tom searched the ragged clothes. The pockets held nothing of consequence, but he discovered a money belt which contained nearly two thousand dollars in gold and bills of no mean denomination.

"Just a bum, hey?" Long Tom muttered, as he counted the sum and had witnesses vouch his accuracy. "I reckon, Mr. Burr, that a roll of that caliber would be safer in yore bank vault. If this hombre was a bum, then it's sure a payin' profession."

The "bum's" body carried only two bullet wounds. The first was that of a .45 in his chest; the other the .38 in the head.

"One of us missed," Long Tom said to Zack Grail.

"Yeah," the gambler answered.

"Maybe one of us didn't want tuh hit him," the Ranger hinted.

Grail shrugged. The curious drifted away, and soon Long Tom was alone. The body lay in the little morgue, awaiting the arrival of the coroner from the distant county seat the following day, and Long Tom sat at the pine desk until long

after Circle City became dark and silent.

He knew that the key to his "job o' work" lay there in the morgue. But the key apparently had been thrown away by that mysterious bullet. This job o' work had become a problem with as many angles and sides as a cut diamond.

The slain man had been a member of the band of night riders. Long Tom assumed that as a fact, merely on the face of things. And that he had been shot by some other member of the terrorist outfit to prevent his telling anything, was another hunch that seemed logical.

But who of that group had fired the shot? Long Tom was forced to admit that only one of them evidenced the character, nerve, gunmanship, and brains needed for such a deed.

Zack Grail! Long Tom's thoughts, no matter how wide they ranged, always swung back to the gambler. And always looming up unbidden behind the mental vision of Grail, was a shining silk hat, and the frosty eyes of Rufus Burr.

What was the basis for Grail's contempt of the banker? And what about the gambler's sneering remarks concerning Burr's failure to arm himself. Some personal grudge perhaps.

That path of thought revived Grail's words, while the banker was being searched. Burr owned this community, Grail had said. Was there any hidden meaning in that remark?

Long Tom put the problem aside, finally, and slept. But when he awakened, he picked up the thread where he had left off.

After breakfast, he sought out the proprietor of the general store, one Art Swain, a gnarled old-timer, who had been in Circle City before any

"bob wire" had marred the clean sweep of the range. He corralled Swain in the cubby-hole that served as the store's office.

"What's yore theory of this night-ridin' crew?" he asked directly, watching Swain peer about furtively.

"It ain't none o' my affair," the storeman grumbled.

"Meanin' that even if yuh had any suspicions, it wouldn't be healthy tuh publish 'em," Long Tom prodded.

Swain nodded.

"That bad, hey?" Long Tom reflected. "How many ranches have been hit by these robed caballeros?"

"Bout half a dozen, I reckon."

"Was they wiped out clean?"

"It 'mounted to that, but why don't yuh ask Rufus Burr? He owns them ranches now. Had tuh take 'em over on mortgages, after the raiders got through with 'em."

"Yuh mean that the night riders ruined the ranchers, an' the bank had tuh foreclose?" Long Tom asked sharply.

"Yeah, but that don't mean nothin', fer Rufus Burr is carryin' paper on this whole danged range—or he was. It's about all closed up now."

"All of it?"

"The whole danged valley."

"Ain't there any outfit that's got its head above water in this here range?" Long Tom asked incredulously.

"Well, I forgot about old Smoky Bill Hornaday of the Box H. He don't owe anybody a cent," Swain explained. "But the rest of 'em was hit so bad, a few years ago, by a drought an' a fever epidemic, that they had tuh stick nice, thick plasters on their spreads. Rufus Burr put out all the paper."

"How's the situation been the last few seasons?"

"Looked mighty fine until the night riders started. The outfits began tuh make money again, what with good rain an' feed, an' high beef prices. But—"

"Have these robed gents ever cut down on Smoky Bill Hornaday?"

"No, but—"

"I'll be slopin'," Long Tom said, rising. Then he bent closer. "If anybody tries tuh pump yuh about our palaver, yo're at liberty tuh tell 'em everything we said. But don't mention that I told yuh tuh spill the news."

Long Tom apparently idled away the day. The coroner arrived at noon, and his inquest developed nothing except that the victim had come to his death by gunshot wounds.

Therefore, at sundown, the body was buried in Circle City's boot hill. Zack Grail was among the curious who attended the brief service.

The Ranger disappeared shortly after dark, spiriting his horse quietly from the stable, and heading away across the flats behind the buildings. He struck the eastward trail a mile beyond town, arriving at the Box H before midnight.

"Smoky Bill" Hornaday was a shaggy-browed, gray-thatched six-footer, who had seen fifty Western winters, but who could still sit a horse and spill a loop alongside any top hand. His spread was not huge, as such things are rated in the open spaces, but it was a compact, money-making proposition, carrying six riders the year around, with three times that number for the spring and fall work.

His headquarters were sturdy and well-kept—in their way in as sharp a contrast to the poverty-stricken neighboring spreads as was Rufus Burr's bank to the other struggling business enterprises in Circle City.

Smoky Bill was aroused from sleep, but it required only a few terse sentences before he was not only fully awake, but swinging into his boots and gun belt.

"I may be shinglin' the wrong roof," Long Tom said, some time later, as he sat beside Smoky Bill in the shadow of the pole corral. "An' again maybe we won't have action until some other night. But we'll set tight."

Spotted in strategic points about the dark, apparently sleeping ranch, were the six Box H riders, all loyal, capable men.

But Long Tom was not wrong. Action came dramatically, and so suddenly that it nearly succeeded, in spite of the Ranger's preparations.

One moment, the only sound was the soft ripple of the long grass swaying in the night breeze. The next instant, the roll of galloping hoofs, shrill yells, and the iron chorus of flaming guns smashed the stillness.

From the shadows of the cottonwoods and willows beside the creek beyond the corral, and from the fringe of buckbrush and mesquite on a rolling hump just beyond the branding pens, the raiders came in a sudden, wild rush.

Long Tom glimpsed peaked hoods against the sky line and the ghostly blobs of white figures on sheeted horses, as the charge came sweeping on. The night riders were following their usual procedure of noisy and sudden attack, which was the reason for their usual success. Sleeping men, aroused by whistling bullets and squawling enemies, rarely offer resistance.

Lead smashed and banged into the walls of the bunk house and glass tinkled from windows of the headquarters building, as the sheeted riders swooped into the ranch circle.

Then, with equal ferocity and paralyzing shock, the charge was smashed. The combined barking of six-guns and .30-30 rifles welled up into a roar of sound, as the defenders opened up.

The raiders reeled back as if they had struck an actual wall. Long Tom saw at least two sheeted figures topple from their saddles. Horses went down, too, amid a blaze of gunfire and the scream of hot bullets.

The blare of smoking muzzles reached a climax, and then stopped abruptly. Both attackers and defenders had emptied their guns. Metallic sounds grated through the night as fresh shells were poured in.

Men could be heard moaning somewhere in the darkness. Guns started to chatter again. Long Tom caught a sheeted figure in his sights, and blew him from the saddle as he turned to flee. Beside him, Smoky Bill was firing and yelling.

Then a commanding voice bawled something above the roar of battle. The raiders wheeled and turned. Their guns blared again, and Long Tom felt a chill. For the sheeted riders were wiping out their own wounded comrades who were lying helpless on the ground.

Long Tom emptied his gun at the disappearing figures, but darkness and their horses saved them further losses. He judged that there had been about a dozen men in the original attack.

"Afier 'em," Long Tom bellowed, as he raced on foot in pursuit, jamming fresh shells into his gun.

Bullets began spattering about him from ahead, as the fleeing raiders lined their guns upon him.

Somewhere beyond the corral, a red flare suddenly licked up into the night sky.

"The alfalfa," Smoky Bill bel-

lowed, swearing bitterly. "We got tuh stop it or it'll sweep the whole blasted spread."

"Grab yore crew an' fight the fire," Long Tom shouted back as he raced onward. "I want tuh slap down on the boss of that gang."

Horses were plunging through the sage and mesquite somewhere to Long Tom's left, and again he heard that harsh, commanding voice. Begrating his failure to have saddled horses ready, the Ranger plunged on...

He heard the voice again, not far ahead. He was in thick brush now. Evidently, the leader of the raiders was trying to rally his scattered forces.

Long Tom burst into the open, and sighted a white-robed figure against the chaparral, not a hundred feet away.

"Stick 'em up!" he bawled.

His answer was a flaming bullet that fanned his cheek with a hot finger. He thumbed the hammer of his gun—and it clicked on a faulty cartridge.

The robed leader fired again as his horse whirled to flee. Long Tom sent a bullet screaming in pursuit as the animal leaped to the bite of the spurs toward the sheltering gloom of the brush.

He saw the terrorist's left arm swing wildly, as the reins dropped from his grasp, and he knew that his bullet had registered at least a wound. Before he could fire again, the sheeted figure was gone, spurring madly through the brush.

"Well, I've got him branded anyway," Long Tom muttered, as he legged it back to the ranch.

He could hear the crew working down in the burning alfalfa, and saw that they had the blaze beaten. He turned his attention to the battlefield.

Five white-clad figures lay sprawled on the ground. All had cashed in. There were no wounded. Long Tom found each body torn by bullets. Their own comrades had silenced them effectively, unable to take time to carry them away.

The smoke-blackened punchers, led by their boss, returned shortly, having conquered the fire, and some of the riders identified the dead riders as Circle City ruffians.

"That leaves me almost where I started," Long Tom said disgustedly, as he bade them good luck, and headed for town.

But he was still counting on that fresh bullet mark. And running through his mind was Zack Grail's tall figure. That robed leader, discounting the effect of his peaked hood, had been a tall man, and also a fast, accurate gunman. Zack Grail filled that description nicely.

IV.

It was eight o'clock, and Circle City was opening up for business as Long Tom rode into town. The morning air was cool and clean, washed by golden sunlight and offering no threat of the torrid heat that would send the town into its siesta hour by afternoon.

Rufus Burr's bank had unlocked its doors, a teller was awaiting the first customer, and a swamper was flailing a broom on the cedar planks of the sidewalk, as Long Tom rode past. Down the street was a silk-hatted figure, strolling pompously along, a cane dangling in the crook of an arm—Rufus Burr, on the way to his office.

Long Tom nodded to the banker as he rode by. Curious faces turned to the Ranger, noting the lines of fatigue on his face, and the stains of travel on his garb and horse.

He did not pause at the jail, but continued onward to the opposite fringe of the straggling town. There he halted, threw the reins to the ground, swung down, slapping his gun into a more favorable position, and started up a little path to a cabin on a little knoll some hundred yards off the road.

That was where Zack Grail lived alone!

Long Tom stepped quietly upon the little, rickety stoop, pressed the latch, and stepped inside, all in one quick motion, his hand spread above his gun.

Zack Grail was there. He sat on a chair beside a table. His .45 lay in his lap. His eyes, narrowed and steady, met Long Tom's gaze without swerving. His left arm lay limply on the table beside him, his coat shielding it.

"Looking for me?" Grail asked finally.

"Maybe."

"Here I am. I've been here since midnight last night."

Long Tom stroked his chin—but not with his gun hand.

"What's the matter with yore left arm?" he asked casually, though inwardly he steeled for the draw that he believed the question would demand.

But Grail did not lift the .45. "It has a bullet in it," he said. "I dressed it myself."

"I reckon yo're the gent I'm lookin' for, then," Long Tom said. "Drop yore cutter on the floor, Grail."

"I said that I've been here since midnight," the gambler replied, making no move to release the gun. "You can check up on my alibi at the Imperial."

Long Tom thought it over. A man could have reached the Box H between midnight and the hour of

the raid, but it would have meant a good horse and plenty of hard riding.

"Who beefed yuh?" he finally asked.

"I was asleep in my bed, when some hombre took a sandy at me through the window," Grail said, indicating a broken pane of glass at the rear. "He only got me in the arm. Bum shooting."

Long Tom relaxed. As he pondered, he ran his fingers up the back of his head, tilting his hat forward a trifle—a habit he had when trying to reach a decision.

"Don't try to drag a cutter out of your hat," Grail warned, with a grim smile.

"By all the mosshorns of Halifax!" Long Tom suddenly bellowed. "By all the leaping lizards of Laredo! Come on, Grail! Yuh've taken a load off my mind. Get up on yore hind laigs, an' take a stroll with me. We're callin' on the town banker, pronto!"

Ten minutes later, side by side, they entered Rufus Burr's office. They had not announced themselves, and the banker, wearing his silk hat as usual, partly rose from his chair in surprise, as he stared into the impassive faces of his two visitors.

"What's the meaning—"

"Set down!" Long Tom ordered. "I invited Grail."

Burr leaned back in his big swivel chair. His left hand lay flatly on the desk at his side, and he was nervously rubbing the back of his neck with his right.

"I heard yuh had an accident last night," Long Tom said smoothly. "How's yore arm, Mr. Burr—yore left arm?"

Burr's right hand shot upward, lifting his silk hat from his head. His face had contorted into a terrible mask.

The movement of his hand, the lift of his hat, and the gleam of a gun in his grasp, required but a fraction of a second.

But his two visitors were artists of the gun. Their right hands had flipped down and up in motions that could have been timed by the single tick of a watch.

Bro-oom! For the second time, the two .45s in the hands of Long Tom Hobson and Zack Grail bil-lowed smoke and flame in a double blast of death.

The feebler flash and report of a .38 mingled and was lost in the explosions of the bigger guns.

And Rufus Burr, his hand still clutching the short-barreled weapon that he had carried in his high silk hat, was lifted clean out of his chair and hurled to the floor in a lifeless heap.

"He's still carryin' my .45 slug in his arm," Long Tom said later, after inspecting the fallen banker.

"And I'm still carrying that pill that he put in my arm when he came dusting back from the raid on the Box H," Grail chuckled. "I wonder why he didn't kill me instead. He knew that I suspected him and was just trying to get the goods on him."

"He thought it safer tuh frame yuh as the night rider, an' then there wouldn't ever be an aftermath," Long Tom said. "He'd got a hold of the whole valley, dirt cheap, by his methods, an' wanted tuh reform an' live on his loot. He hired thugs tuh help him in his raids, and most likely even they never saw him without his mask."

"Why did you suspect me?" Grail complained.

"I thought you might be workin' with him," Long Tom admitted. "I suspected him, when I learned about the mortgages. He tried tuh cover up by attackin' the Box H, even though there was no profit in it for him. But that was the trap I'd set for him.

"But I couldn't picture a gent in a silk hat, who never packs a gun, as bein' in charge of the real operation. That remark yuh made a while ago, about me havin' a gun in my hat, made me see the light.

"Why this jigger drilled that hombre right before our eyes back of the Imperial the other night," Long Tom continued, "an' carried the gun away in his hat. See! It's short-barreled, an' light of weight. It was held in the hat by a spring clip."





The Long Loop of the Thunderer

A "Circle J" Novelette

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "Murder on the Mescalero," etc.

CHAPTER I.

SOME BULLDOGGIN'!

THE four riders headed up the long, dusty ridge. To the south, a few miles at most, lay the Mexican border. The gray, desolate land between looked dry and barren to the eyes of these northern punchers.

"Waal, help me, Hannah, if this ain't jist about the no'-countest country I ever seen!" one of the waddies grunted. "No grass, no water, no nothin'! How in the heck does thet old feller at the Diamond P figger ter raise good cow stuff?" "By usin' cow sense, yuh derned

ol' walrus!" a red-headed ranny beside him jeered. "Which same is somethin' yuh'll never have," he chuckled, "if yuh rides the range from now till yuh sprouts new teeth, I reckon."

"Say-y, am thet so?" the other roared. He was a lanky, battle-scarred buckaroo with a long and grizzled mustache sweeping down from beneath a nose badly humped and broken. "I still got teeth enough ter chaw yuh up," he fumed, "yuh danged two-bit imitation of a cowpeke!"

"Buck! Joe! Cut thet out!" The snappy order came from a bronzed young hombre mounted on a powerful chestnut stallion. Billy West, the leader of the party, had flashed his keen gray eyes upon the wrangling waddies.

Saddle pards though these two were, Joe Scott and "Buck" Foster were always jawing, quarreling. Billy had grown tired of it, in the last few miles. He said so shortly.

"And you needn't worry about ol' Ranse Proctor not raisin' good cattle," he added to Buck, the grizzled veteran. "I looked some o' that herd over three days ago, before I bought 'em. Good, stout three-year-olds, and plumb prime for this country."

"Heck! Thet don't mean nothin'," Buck grumbled. "This country ain't prime fer nothin' but prickly pear, mesquite, and lizards. If I was New Mexico, I'd jist up and give it ter the spicks below the border."

"If yuh was New Mexico! Haw-haw-haw!" the redhead roared. "Listen ter Buck, boss. He shore kin git puffed up. Back home, I knowed he figgered he was all Montana, but now danged if he ain't tryin'—"

"Thet'll do." Billy silenced Joe before Buck could jump in with a hot retort.

While Buck glared, the sorrel-top snickered. Joe Scott snickered well, for he had a huge beak of a nose that blew disdainful little noises like a bellows. His blue eyes danced in a freckled face. His bat ears twitched with suppressed amusement.

Behind him, the fourth member of the party—a slant-eyed little chink—grinned blandly.

Sing Lo, cook for Billy West's Circle J outfit, liked to see Buck get the worst of things. He and that fierce-eyed veteran enjoyed a feud of long standing.

The little party rode on. Although he hadn't said so, Billy West could have told Buck why the cattle they were going after were in excellent condition. Beyond the ridge lay a region of wild, rough, gorge-cut hills. Springs were plentiful there. Grass grew well along the slanting draws and canyon bottoms.

Furthermore, desert-bred cow stuff can thrive on most anything. Billy, who had bought sixty head from Proctor, of the Diamond P, knew that those hardy three-year-olds would put beef on in a hurry, once he got them on his home range in the Bitterroots of Montana.

As he rode along, he was laying plans for their skillful gather. Proctor—stooped, white-haired and crippled up with rheumatism—had been unable to join in the round-up. So Billy had paid the honest old jasper in advance. It would be no trick for Circle J to get the cattle.

Joe was still chuckling, Buck glaring, as they jogged along, when suddenly from beyond the ridge there came the loud crashing of six-gun shots. Faint yells mingled with the uproar of gunfire.

The crest of the rise was still about three hundred yards away. The pards reined in, listening. That tumult sounded like a battle.

But it wasn't. Within less than half a minute, a swirling dust cloud appeared on the sky line.

Straight downhill it traveled, with a dark and queerly bobbing object half hidden in its middle.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad! What in heck am thet thing?" Buck ejaculated. "Derned if it don't look like—like—I cain't make it out. What am it, Billy?"

"Why, it's a man!" Joe Scott's surprised cry cut in. The redhead had eyes like a desert hawk. "A jasper what's ridin' a longhorn steer! Look it him bounce and jerk! Some fool puncher has climbed the critter on a bet, I reckon."

"A bet, nothin'!" young Billy West snapped. "Do you hear thet?" Those faint cries were louder now—cries for help, beyond a doubt. "Thet hombre is in a bad way. And he shore rides mighty funny."

Snapping open the flap of his saddlebags, Billy swiftly brought forth a pair of field glasses. He clapped the glasses to his eyes. An angry growl came from him.

"Why," he exclaimed excitedly, "thet jigger is tied to thet crazy steer! Somebody's put him there to take an awful poundin'. I seen his face good. He's in agony now—and desperate."

Billy's spurs touched up his horse. He tore hard up the boulder-strewn slope, with his pards behind him.

Steer and man were halfway to them now. If the hombre fell off, tied to that terrified animal, he would be dragged to death, pounded to pieces, inside of a few moments.

His hands seemed bound behind his back. Only a desperate leg grip kept the fellow upright.

"By gosh! He's a rider!" Joe Scott cried.

The redhead knew a locoed steer was mighty hard to fork, even when an hombre's arms were free to help maintain his balance.

"Sufferin' wild cats!" Buck yelled. "He's slippin'!"

The veteran jerked a coiled lariat from his saddle horn. But already Billy West had his rope down and was building a fast loop, as he sent his fleet chestnut flying straight for that big red steer and rider.

For a moment more, the jerking, bouncing hombre held on by his loosening leg grip. Then off he jolted to the rock-strewn earth. Dust spouted higher as, still bound to the animal, he hammered the ground beneath the longhorn's belly.

No man could live long through that. The steer was tearing through greasewood, prickly pear, and ocotillo cactus. Rope spinning in swift, knifelike circles, Billy West shot up to slap his twine upon the bellowing creature.

The red-eyed brute veered off as Billy closed.

"Come on, Danger!" the Circle J owner cried to his mount. "In on him, hoss! We got to stop him, pronto!"

Danger, the big chestnut, was on the longhorn's tail like a flash. Billy's lass' rope zipped through the air, in a bulletlike throw for the wide, spreading horns. Again the steer veered slightly.

Nevertheless, the hard, fast cast would have snapped down about its head if the brute's swerve hadn't carried it past the tall, flanging stems of a big ocotillo.

One of those spiny arms struck the rope and blocked it from its target.

A groan came from Billy West. His blunt spurs drove in. The man tied to the steer was snapping along behind now—a wild, weird, moaning thing that crashed into rocks and cactus.

With no time to build another loop, Billy swept up beside the infuriated longhorn. Straight downhill it was now, a hard, sharp slant, with horse and cow brute going like twin whirlwinds.

A fall meant a terrific smash here, but a fall was just what Billy West intended. Leaning out over Danger's neck, he slid his right arm across the steer's back, gripped a horn, and dived from the saddle in the hard, skillful lunge of an expert bulldogger.

The force of his drive jarred the speeding brute, but the steer clung to its footing. Billy's high-heeled boots plowed into the ground. He had both horns now, but on that downhill slant, it took tremendous power to check the big red longhorn.

With every muscle braced, the grim young rancher was jerked along in stabbing crow hops.

But the drag weight of his body began to work upon the steer, in just another moment. Broad of shoulder, lean of waist and flanks, Billy West's muscles were built of whipcord.

Bulging sinews stopped the enraged brute in a thick swirl of dust haze. The steer bellowed its fury.

Billy's breath came in gasps, as he fought to twist the big head down—a head that lunged wickedly from side to side in vicious swipes to gore him.

Billy's muscles ached in every joint from the power of his pressure. His wrists and shoulders seemed about to crack. But he had his grip. Like a bulldog, he held it.

Slowly the critter's nose was screwed up toward the sky. With a grunt, the big brute swayed upon its feet—then, just as slowly, it toppled.

CHAPTER II.

THE STRANGER.

BILLY fell upon the longhorn's neck and held it down with all his weight, as horses slid to a quick halt beside him.

Buck and Joe were just getting there, for the whole wild chase and struggle had consumed but a few minutes.

"Hot dog, boss! Thet shore was some bulldoggin'!" Buck Foster roared. "Hold that critter still, while I ups and shoots him!"

"Forget yore gun!" Billy snapped. "I've got this brute for keeps. Cut loose that pore jasper!"

Already, though, Joe Scott was on the ground and springing to the limp figure Billy had tried desperately to save. A slash of the redhead's knife severed the rope still holding the hombre to the longhorn.

"Is he dead?" Billy called.

"Heck yes, he's dead!" Buck Fos-

ter growled. "If he ain't, he's got more lives than a herd o' wild cats."

Joe Scott merely grunted, "Cain't tell yet."

Then he straightened up, seized a piggin' string from his saddle horn, and side-lined the longhorn in a jiffy.

With the steer tied, Billy scrambled up and strode to the crumpled figure.

The stranger's dust-grimed face was cut and bruised. A great red welt showed across the forehead. His lips were swollen so that Billy couldn't tell if that sagging mouth was breathing. The nose wasn't, that was certain.

Dropping down beside the fellow, Billy West felt his wrist. The faintest pulse seemed to beat there. Billy snapped at Buck:

"He's alive! Get water!"

"Light here be watlah, blos," a voice squeaked in pidgin English.

Sing Lo, thumping the sides of a sleepy-looking piebald cayuse with his heels, had come jolting to the scene. The little chink handed down a canteen to Billy.

The Circle J boss quickly sloshed some of the warm fluid over the unconscious hombre's face and head. The man stirred slightly. But he showed no other signs of coming back to consciousness.

That he hadn't been killed seemed a miracle. But as Billy studied him closely, while bathing his face now, the young Montanan saw that this, too, was a waddy who appeared built to take hard knocks in plenty.

The jasper was short, well-muscled, wiry. His face, once the dirt-grimed crimson had been washed away, showed tanned and young, determined. Even the puffed cuts and numerous welts couldn't blot out the lines of strength exhibited in his clean-cut features.

"Cowpoke, ain't he, boss?" said Joe.

Billy nodded. "Looks like it. We'll find out when he comes to, if he does. I think he will. This bird is tough. Sing Lo, get my first-aid packet."

"So be, bloss!" The yellow-faced little cook sprang forward with the kit that he had already fished out from Billy's saddle pockets.

The Circle J owner got busy with drugs at once. But long minutes passed before the eyes of the stranger fluttered open. He looked at the group, tried to struggle up, sighed—and once more fainted.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck growled. "I thought he was comin' to. Open his shirt, Billy. Let's throw more water on him."

Billy unfastened the faded woolen shirt; then a gasp of surprise came from him.

This was no common cow waddy. In the bright New Mexico sun, a badge gleamed from the fellow's undershirt.

Billy leaned closer and read the words stamped upon the metallic emblem. He shot a quick glance at his pards.

"Boys," he said, "we've bumped into somethin'. This isn't just a range hand. He's a State live stock inspector."

"Yuh means he am a cow dick?" Buck Foster exclaimed. "Why—why, then he must 'a' been chasin' rustlers! They tied him on the steer, the dirty varmints!"

"Somethin' like that," Billy answered grimly. "Figgered he'd be killed, of course. Those shots we heard were to terrify the longhorn."

"Dang the skunks! They cain't be fur away!" Buck howled. "Come on! Let's git 'em!"

With the words, the impetuous range veteran was rushing for his

horse. Into the saddle he swung and went spurring up the ridge before Billy's terse order could stop him:

"Wait a minute, yuh galoot! We can't leave this jasper here. We've got to——"

But the thunder of the cayuse's hoofs drowned out the sharp command. Gun in hand, Buck was tearing away, sure that his pards would follow.

"Darn him! Go ketch him, Joe!" Billy cried. "Bring that hothead back here!"

Pursuit of the hombres responsible for this outrage would be undertaken, Billy had resolved, but not in Buck's wild-eyed manner.

The range detective was showing evidence of coming to again. A few words from him would give the straight of the thing, enable the Circle J men to act in the way best suited to the circumstances.

Joe was off at once, but the thudding drumbeats of his horse only made Buck Foster think that the Circle J men had whole-heartedly fallen in behind him. Without looking back, the grizzled veteran sped for the barren ridge top.

Meanwhile, Billy was again busy with the live stock inspector. More water and drugs brought the fellow to. This time, he held onto his reeling senses.

"Thanks, pard," he mumbled thickly. "Yuh—yuh must be the jasper—what come flyin' in—before I passed out—to save me."

Billy nodded. "Yep, me and my buddies. Yo're all right now, I guess. No bones broken?"

The waddy worked his wrists and fingers; then, with a grunt of pain, he raised each foot and worked each ankle.

"Nope. Everything seems ter move. Nothin' busted," he gasped.

"It's a wonder, though, I wasn't smashed plumb to pieces."

"I'll say so!" Billy cried. "What low-lived fiends did this to *yuh*?"

"'Fiends' is right," the hombre growled. His eyes, keen and blue, flashed hotly. "The Thunderer did it—to kill me off. And I'd 'a' died, too, if it hadn't been for *yuh*. But I'm all right now, blast thet cold-hearted rattler!"

"Who him be—that Thundlah homblay?" Sing Lo cried. "Him cattle lustler?"

"And worse," the range detective snapped.

Strength was returning fast now. Tough and wiry, he sat up fiercely.

"Thet black-hearted hound is as dirty a killer as we ever had to get. *Yuh* see, I'm a range—a—a—that is —er—" He stumbled, hesitated.

"Yes, I know," Billy West said. "We found *yore* badge. *Yo're* a cow dick."

The other's eyes studied Billy's face a moment. What they saw there—clean-cut, square chin, firm mouth, straight, level gaze—seemed to reassure him.

"Yep," he said, "I might as well tell the truth. I'm a cow dick. Anyhow, *yuh* look plumb square to me. Well, friend, here's what happened."

In the same short sentences he might have used in making out an association report, Steve Holden, as his name was, hit the high spots of his story.

"El Tornador"—Spanish for the "Thunderer"—was a vicious, loud-mouthed border raider, he said—an American who denned up below the line and made frequent forays into United States territory.

The man's outlaw gang struck first here, then there, savagely mowing down all who tried to oppose them.

"There's a dozen murders in with 'em now," the cow dick growled. "I been down here watchin' the herds and workin' with the sheriff's office. El Tornador shore surprised me to-day, though. Thet gang run off a bunch o' Diamond P stock, right under my nose, and nabbed me into the bargain."

"What? Diamond P?" Billy cried. "From off in them hills yonder?"

"Yep, about sixty head of three-year-olds. Some of ol' Ranse Proctor's prime stuff," Steve Holden answered. "He ain't any too well off, ol' Ranse. Thet raid'll hit him hard, I reckon."

"Hit him, nothin'!" Billy snapped. "I just bought them cattle myself. Say, how many in *thet* gang? And how far is it to the border?"

"Well, I'll be darned!" Holden exclaimed. "Yore stuff, huh? Friend, they're shore gone now. There's a dozen tough customers with the Thunderer. We couldn't whip 'em if we caught 'em. And it's only three miles to the border."

"Makes no difference," Billy said. "I don't give up my stuff without a battle."

His thoughts snapped back to Buck and Joe. His gray eyes swept the ridge.

Neither waddy was in sight. Over the hill they had sped, Buck in the lead and the redhead vainly trying to overtake him.

CHAPTER III.

A RACE FOR THE BORDER.

NOT even a dust plume marked the spot where the spurring waddies had disappeared. Restoring Holden to consciousness and listening to his story had taken much longer than Billy West had realized.

Turning, the bronzed young Montanan ordered Sing Lo:

"Stay here with Holden, chink. I'm off to get my cattle!"

The next instant, Billy West had hit the saddle.

"Wait! Wait!" Steve Holden cried. "There's a shorter cut than that over the hill. And if yo're bound to go," he gritted, forcing himself to his feet, "I'm goin' with yuh!"

"Yo're in no shape," Billy told him crisply. "Just point me out thet short cut."

"I'm tougher'n yuh think," the other declared. "And yuh can't see thet short route from here. Nope, I'm goin'! Thet's my job. Here, chink, give me thet piebald!"

Stumbling to Sing Lo's cayuse, the live stock inspector pulled himself aboard. The little chink could wait here.

"This way, West!" Steve cried. He headed south along the ridge side.

Billy was up beside him in a moment. Steve's battered face was grim. He grunted shortly:

"We'll jist do our best. But two of us ain't goin' to have much chance, I kin tell yuh."

"There'll be four," Billy answered. "Yuh forget Buck and Joe, my waddies."

But it was Billy West himself who was forgetting. The redhead an' the veteran had fogged away before Steve fully regained his senses. During his wild ride on that steer, the cow dick had been too busy to note what was going on about him.

"Four, in all?" he cried. "Where are they?"

"Over the hill," Billy informed him. "Tryin' to overhaul them outlaws, I guess—if they've seen 'em. If yore short cut gets us there in time, we may be able to get them skunks between us."

"Hope so," Steve growled. "It's

shore our only chance. Git along here, cayuse!"

The piebald, however, wasn't much on speed. Steve, short and wiry, was not heavy, yet his weight was much greater than Sing Lo's.

The paint horse's lack of real speed held Billy back on Danger. As they pounded along, the Circle J owner suggested:

"The minute we get close enough, yuh point out thet shorter way, Steve. I'll tear on through, then, without waitin'."

The other shook his head. "It's jist a gash, where the ridge turns east. Yuh might overrun it. The shadows are long now, and mesquite plumb hides the openin'."

Curbing his impatience as best he could, Billy hung with the hombre. At every moment, he expected to hear the fierce rattle of gunfire across the ridge. By this time, Buck and Joe should be close upon the raiders.

No crash of firearms broke out, however, until that sheltered gash was reached. The way—dark, narrow and rocky—knifed straight across the ridge. An uproad of savage shots came from just beyond now. The tumult was tremendous.

"We're in time!" Steve yelled. "Go to it, West! I'll be as close behind as this cayuse can make it."

Billy tore away. Danger's great rippling sinews covered the ground in rhythmic strides. The horse—a mixture of mustang and racing strain—flashed on through deepening shadows.

Billy's quick ears told him that the raiders had hardly more than passed the other outlet of that gloom-filled short cut. Hampered by the cattle and not expecting pursuit, they had made little speed. The question was how much farther lay the border?

Out of the gash in a few moments, Billy found himself behind the herd. Gray twilight held the land.

Vague blots in the thickening dusk, cattle streamed on to the south, urged on by yelling horsemen.

The battle, however, was almost in front of Billy West. El Tornador was covering his raid with half a dozen gunmen.

Pale-red flashes stabbed out in the gloom. The hoarse bellow of Buck Foster came to the young Montanan:

"Dang yuh! Shoot me hoss, will yuh? I'll blow yuh mangy polecats plumb ter pieces!"

The veteran was down behind his mount. Slugs screamed past his ears. Buck, flinging bullets right and left, seemed all but surrounded.

From rocks near by, another gun was roaring, crashing. Joe Scott, speeding in behind Buck, had seen his pard's plight and dived off beside him.

Buck needed help, all right, although that fierce-eyed old rannihan would have been the last to admit it.

Part of this Billy saw, the rest he guessed, as he came thundering down upon the scene of battle. Furthermore, his keen, sweeping glance showed him a pair of shadowy figures circling swiftly in behind the waddies.

"Give 'em fits, pard!" he cried. "Look out—behind yuh!"

But a sudden furious rise in the gunfire smothered out his yell. Buck and Joe had their hands full.

They had no time to turn. The shadowy jaspers to their rear came sneaking in upon them.

With a flick of his spurs, Billy West sent Danger charging straight for those two toughs. The thunder of flying hoofbeats awoke the hombres to his rush.

With startled oaths, they whirled, dropped low behind rocks and went to working six-guns.

Bullets tore at Billy's clothes, nipped his batwing chaps, screamed past his silk shirt and big ten-gallon Stetson. The pair could shoot, all right.

Only the thick gray dusk and Danger's flashing speed saved the Circle J owner from that first savage gun burst.

The hombres got no chance to shoot again.

Crash-crash-h! Whamming away at those vicious streaks of red, Billy heard one of the jaspers scream. The other spun backward from his boulder.

Billy swerved. His pards had heard him now. Both were yelling their delight. Then they were up and dashing at the startled enemies in front.

Steve Holden's ringing war cry pealed out from the gulch. He, too, was flying in. Taken by surprise, the bandits' rear guard bolted.

Billy could hear them springing to horses. Mesquite crashed violently. He was about to set out in pursuit, when one of the ruffians he had downed sprang furiously to his feet, about ten yards from him.

The fellow still held his gun. His arm jerked up. Billy ducked, or he would have made a perfect target.

The bullet whipped overhead. Billy's Colt flamed lead upon the instant. It was his life or that of the vicious tough. The fellow fell, this time to stay there.

The delay, though, short as it was, proved disastrous. Steve Holden had reached the scene. The piebald he rode bobbed up in Danger's way when Billy's mount whirled again.

The horses crashed. Billy West nearly lost the saddle.

"Dang it!" Steve cried. "Where's

a gun? Them skunks took mine when they captured me. And I come tearin' in without no shootin' iron, almost before I knowed it."

"Get thet hombre's!" Billy jerked a thumb at the fallen tough. "The dirty snake will never use it."

In a moment more, the cow dick was armed. Joe had caught up his own horse. With a roar and a leap, Buck Foster sprang on behind the redhead.

"Help me, Hannah, if yuh leaves me behind!" the veteran roared. "Git goin' fer them cow thieves!"

The party took out through the dusk, but the bandits had a lead now. The bellowing of cattle being whipped on at a run sounded through the gloom. With night closing swiftly down, the herd was out of sight now.

Bullets burned fiercely back. Riding their hardest, the pards returned the lashing gunfire.

Suddenly a tall white thing loomed up ahead. Steve Holden cried out in disappointment:

"Hold up, West! They've beat us to it. Thet's the border marker!" He pointed at the white post.

"Yuh mean they're across the line already?" Billy's heart sank with his shouted words. He understood the legal restrictions governing international boundaries.

"Yeah, it's agin' the law for us to follow." Steve grabbed Danger's bridle bit. "Across thet line, them crooks are safe. It's a danged tough break," he grunted.

Billy slid to a halt beside the concrete marker. He knew that Steve was right.

Being a law official, the State live stock inspector naturally wished to avoid the muddle which would result if they dashed into Mexico in defiance of all treaty rules. It meant his job, if he did. Sometimes

governmental red tape can work a big injustice.

"Hyar, what're we waitin' fer?" The bellow came from Buck, who had thundered up with Joe on their doubly burdened cayuse.

The grizzled veteran was all for tearing on, even after Billy's crisp explanation.

"Does yuh mean ter tell me," he howled, "thet we're goin' ter let thet thar piece o' concrete stop us?"

"We've got to," said Billy. "Steve would get in a jam if we didn't. He's gone through enough for us, as it is. He almost lost his life in tryin' to save our cattle."

"What? Our cattle?" cried Joe. "Great guns, boss! Was them the stuff we bought from Proctor?"

"It was," said Billy tersely.

The bandit fire had ceased now. The Thunderer and his men seemed to savvy exactly what had happened. The border line was their big ace in the hole. From out of the darkness, a voice called, booming, exultant, savage:

"Ta-ta, gents! Much obliged fer the beef. El Tornador can use it well. I'll be seein' yuh later."

"Yuh'll be seein' us sooner'n thet!" Buck Foster howled.

He jerked up his gun to blaze away at that mocking voice from the Mexican side, but again Billy West restrained him.

"The Thunderer—himself—thet was," Steve Holden growled. "He knows he's safe, the varmint!"

As if to confirm the words, a match flared along the ridge across the border. El Tornador was lighting a cigarette. His coolness showed the man's swaggering disdain.

His features stood out in the night—wedge-shaped, thin-lipped, cruel. The infamous killer looked like a gigantic, flat-browed weasel.

The match flicked out. "Holden,"

he called, "yuh die fer this day's work! And so does them other interferin' jaspers!"

"Yeah? Yuh try ter come back ter this side and see what happens, yuh danged two-bit crook!" Buck roared.

But the Thunderer was riding away to join his men shoving on the Circle J owner's cattle.

CHAPTER IV.

NIGHT MESSAGE.

WAAL, I'll be a horned toad," Buck growled, "if yuh all ain't a mess o' numskulls!"

"Aw, dry up," Joe Scott snapped in disgust. "Yuh give me a pain in the neck. Billy knows what's right. Anyhow, if yuh hadn't let yore hoss be shot, we'd stopped them coyotes before they reached the border."

"Who, me?" Buck roared. "Yo're crazy as a locoed skunk. I'd 'a' run on and caught 'em, anyhow, if yuh hadn't dived off thar beside me. I had ter stay ter help yuh."

Jawing furiously at each other, the doubly mounted pair rode back with the rest. Billy let them quarrel, for already his quick mind was planning. Regardless of circumstances, he didn't mean to lose that herd of cattle.

"We wounded an hombre back here," he said, a trifle fiercely. "Thet bird's goin' to talk, or I'll know the reason why. I want to know where thet gang holes up—what they do with rustled live stock."

Steve Holden nodded a bit grimly. "We'll make him talk, all right. But I can't see thet it'll do yuh much good, West. Thet border line's still got us beat, fer sartain."

"I'm not so sure of thet," the bronzed young Montanan returned.

As yet, however, he had no idea

how he might recover the stolen stuff. But Billy West was the kind who never gave up. There must be a way, somehow.

No wounded gang member was to be found, though, when they reached the main scene of the battle. There lay the evil-looking ruffian Billy had been forced to kill. But the other jasper he had hit had managed to make off through the darkness.

"Waal, help me, Hannah, if this ain't a heck of a note!" Buck growled. "Somebody's done been hyar and carried 'em all away. I knocked a dozen galoots stem-windin' meself. Whar in thunder am they?"

"In yore head," Joe Scott jeered. "Yuh shore kin shoot wild when yuh git excited."

Buck glowered and yanked at his walrus mustache. "Yo're loco, Joe Scott!" he snapped. "I never gits excited."

"Well," said Billy, "let's pick up Sing Lo and get to Proctor's ranch. I mean to stick here some while. We'll need a base of operations. He'll let us stay, I reckon."

"If he don't," Buck growled. "I'll jist plumb—— Say-y, boss," he broke off, "them ain't our cattle, after all! They're his! He hadn't delivered 'em. We'll jist make him give us back our money!"

Billy shook his head. "Nope. Yo're wrong. The contract called for us to gather them ourselves. We're the ones who're out, Buck."

"By heifers! It's a frame-up, then!" the veteran snorted fiercely. "Thet ol' Ranse Proctor am in cahoots with them border raiders."

"Not hardly," Steve Holden declared. "I know him well. He's honest."

Billy West thought so, too. The boss of Circle J rarely made a mistake in sizing up an hombre. Old

Proctor had acted in good faith; of that, he felt certain.

Sing Lo was picked up beside the hog-tied steer. That longhorn, glad to be free, went hurrying off through the night. Then the little chink gave his pards no rest until they told him all about the battle.

"That be too bad," he said, "we lose um cattle. And we no can follow because of piece of concrete? That plenty funny, boss. Sing Lo no can savvy."

"And nobody else with sense," Buck grumbled. "Chink, yuh am the only jigger except me what's got good gumption around this hyar outfit."

Old Ranse Proctor had gone to bed before they reached the Diamond P, but their hail brought him hobbling to the door, lamp above his head, in his night shirt.

He was stooped with rheumatism, his gray hair almost white, his seamed face work-worn, kindly. His jaw dropped in dismay as Billy West, going inside with the others, told him of the raid upon the cattle.

The old man's distress was genuine. "I—I'm mighty sorry, West," he muttered in a worried voice. "It couldn't be helped, I guess, but—but under the—the circumstances"—he sighed and drew a deep breath—"I reckon I ought ter give yuh back yore money."

"Yo're danged right," Buck Foster flared. "If yuh don't shell outter onct, yuh am a dirty double-crosser!"

"The trouble is," old Ranse went stumbling on, "I used that money ter pay off a note what was on the ranch. I ain't got it now, West. I ain't got it!"

There was truth in every word, and Billy West knew it promptly.

"Don't worry," he said crisply. "I take my losses when they come.

Yo're not to blame in any way. All I want from yuh is what help yuh can give me in gettin' a real line on El Tornador."

"Cain't tell yuh much," the thin-haired old rancher said. "I steers clear of him all I kin. He steals from me three-four times a year, but I don't dast follow. I ain't got but one puncher, nohow. What is it yuh was plannin'?"

Billy had to admit that so far, he had hit on nothing. For an hour, the little group discussed the situation. The international boundary seemed always their stumbling-block.

Without that thin border line to bar the way, Joe Scott—always a wizard at reading sign—could have trailed the stock and the pards gone tearing in for a show-down fight.

Billy West rose at last. "I'll sleep on it," he muttered. "In the morning, we may see light."

They all turned in, each hombre troubled. Buck Foster was soon snoring, but it was long past midnight before Billy's futile thinking allowed the Circle J boss to sleep.

Then suddenly the young rancher came wide awake, with a jerk. He sat up in his bunk. In the pitch-dark room, some one was stirring on tiptoeing feet.

"Who's there?" Billy called cautiously.

"Sh-h-h!" a warning whisper came back. "It's me, boss. I heard somethin' at the door." The speaker was Joe Scott.

A faint thud sounded outside, against the wooden panels. Joe reached the door in a bound and had it open with a jerk.

"Hyar, what're yuh tryin'?" the redhead cried.

A vague form whirled in the darkness. A heavy fist lashed out.

Joe crashed back against the door

jamb, his head spinning from the blow. With a grunt of pain and anger, he struck out with all his might.

His hard young knuckles found a target—a snarling human face. The prowler fell. Joe dived for him, but the hombre had scrambled up.

Wham-m-m! The fellow's six-gun thundered, almost in the waddy's face.

Joe staggered back, blinded, for a moment, by the spurting flash. Powder burns streaked his temple. The Colt the redhead carried came jerking up at once.

"Blast yuh! Take that!" he gritted. He showered lead at his assailant, but already the jasper had dived around the house.

Billy West, out now, joined the furious sorrel-top in a dash around the corner. The thud of running feet reached them, from out near the corral; then the hoofbeats of a horse.

Zing-gl A bullet whipped past the waddies.

They sliced lead at the flash. But the unknown rider was making time. He had vanished in the night.

"What's goin' on hyar?" Buck Foster was out in his underwear, packing a six-gun and rushing up in great barefoot leaps.

"Awk!" he squawked, as he tread on cactus. "I done stepped on a snake!"

"Yeah, and one darned near shot me," Joe growled. "Somebody was tryin' ter break into the house."

By this time, the others had come tumbling out. Old Ranse, the last, bore a lamp.

Joe was telling what had happened, as they turned back to the house. "I don't savvy it no way," he grunted. "But— Say, look thar! What's that on the door? A note?"

A ragged square of dirty brown

wrapping paper showed in the lamp's dim light. A knife blade held it pinned to the panels. Billy strode forward, the others behind him. The thing was a message, all right. It read:

To The Hombres What It Concerns: The undersigned, bein a honest jasper, has rounded up sixty head of Diamond P cattle what strayed below the Line. All I wants is a little pay fer my trouble. Leave money at the nearest border marker, and the stock is yores.

El Tornador.

P. S. Two thousand dollars is my charge.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck Foster roared, when Billy had read the note aloud. "Tryin' ter sell us back our cattle! I never heard of sich gall."

"He don't want much," Joe Scott growled. "Derned near all the stock is worth, that's all."

Steve Holden, the cow dick, nodded. "Yeah. Thet's one of his favorite stunts. Run off a bunch, then offer 'em back for about two thirds the market price. Rather than lose all, owners usually take him up."

"Well, I won't," Billy West snapped.

He was angrier now than ever. This attempted shake-down was too much.

CHAPTER V.

A DESPERATE RISK.

WHAT you aim to do, Mistlee Billy?" It was Sing Lo's eager query, as they went back in the house. The little chink had full faith in his boss.

But Billy couldn't answer. He was still high up a stump.

Buck Foster put in fiercely:

"Do? I'll tell yer what ter do. We'll jist pretend ter take them varmints up. Then when that Thun-

derer jigger brings them cattle up ter the line, we'll tear in on them crooks and wipe the hull bunch out."

The Circle J owner shook his head. "No. They probably mean to get the money first, then slip the cattle across at night. Yuh jaspers go back to bed, while I think this out."

As yet, Billy had no slightest plan, but he felt that one would come if he strove for it hard enough. Sure enough, he got his idea, just before daylight.

Silently he rummaged through the house and collected some rough range clothes. Then he woke up Joe Scott.

"But great guns, boss, they'll kill yuh shore!" the redhead gasped, when Billy had outlined his intentions. The plan was dangerous, daring. "Let me go along ter help."

"Nope. This'll work best lone-handed. If they're spyan' on the ranch, I want 'em to think we're all still here. Don't make a move till I come back."

"But suppose yuh don't come back," the sorrel-top insisted. "If they get onto yore game——"

"Wait forty-eight hours, anyhow," Billy instructed him crisply. "Thet'll give me time enough. If I ain't back by then, yuh all can come huntin' all yuh please. There ain't no law against that."

"All right," the big-beaked waddy answered reluctantly. "Shall I tell the others, boss?"

Billy thought for a moment. "Better not, I reckon. At least, not Buck. Thet ol' fire eater might spoil it all by tryin' somethin' rash. Just tell 'em I'm gone on a little jaunt. Thet'll be true enough."

"Call it 'jaunt,' if yuh wants to," Joe growled. "I calls it danged near shore death!"

Billy smiled. His decision fully

made now, he was eager to be off. A few minutes later, with food in his saddlebags, he was forking Danger away from the ranch at a space-eating lope.

Straight south he rode for the border. His own rather expensive range clothing he had left behind, in favor of the rough garb he now wore. Billy meant to shove boldly into El Tornador's camp, once he got the hideout located. And he meant to look hard-boiled, tough.

The gang had lost at least one gunman in the previous night's fierce border fight. The Thunderer could use recruits, if he thought them hard enough.

Billy, counting on not having been recognized in the previous battle, intended to stack up like a swaggering, cold-eyed killer, just itching to do his stuff.

The first streak of dawn found him south of the line, but hardly half a mile from the scene of the cattle fight. Dismounting upon the mesquite-clad ridge, he concealed himself and Danger and settled down to wait.

Below him, the concrete marker soon showed in the rising sun. Since that was the spot at which El Tornador had demanded that the two thousand dollars be placed, gang members would surely watch it. Billy planned to locate those jaspers and trail them when they left.

The day was still young when horsemen came jogging across the ridge crest from the south. Billy slipped to Danger and clapped a hand over the chestnut's muzzle. The riders—three in number—went shagging by fairly close.

Two of them were plainly border hoppers—tough, evil-faced Americans, who found it better for their health to den up outside of the United States. The other wore the

steeple hat and bell-bottomed trousers of a rather dandified Mex.

None looked like the Thunderer, whose cruel, weasel features Billy remembered well from the flare of that big-boned jasper's match.

The men reined up a short distance beyond, rolled off and hid their horses. Then, with spread blanket, liquor, and cards, they, too, threw themselves down to wait.

For an hour, Billy watched them, until they got well absorbed in their game. The ground between was rough, brush-dotted, rocky. The Circle J owner debated slipping nearer. He might learn something from their talk.

"It's worth chancin', anyhow," he decided at last.

Taking off his spurs to avoid their tinkle, he went stealing from bush to rock.

If the hombres mentioned his cattle, Billy might find out where they were hid. Such information could better his plans, although he had small hope of being able to shove the herd away undetected. They would be guarded, of course.

Still, locating them would help a lot. In that way, he'd have to ask no suspicious questions when he'd wormed himself into the band.

Billy smiled grimly. El Tornador might be far slicker than he thought.

Mesquite clumps, greasewood, and yucca covered his wary advance. He was within sixty feet of the hombres, when suddenly a dust-hidden dry twig snapped sharply beneath his boot. The outlaws jerked around at once.

"What ees?" the Mexican hissed.

Billy had flattened tight to the ground behind a little hump. The others saw nothing. A coarse voice laughed:

"Don't git so jumpy, Pedro. Thet was jist a jack rabbit, I guess."

"Jack rabbeet, notheeng! Aha, I sec heem!" Pedro's gun flashed up.

A bullet screamed past Billy. For an instant, he thought he had been located by the startled tough.

The next second, though, he knew he was wrong. Behind him, a good forty feet, a feathered object went rolling in the dust.

Pedro laughed. "That ees good shooting! I keel that chaparral cock at more than thirty yards. My good eyes see heem dart through bush."

Billy breathed a sigh of relief. The Mexican had thrown down on a road-runner. The shot indeed had been excellent. Those birds skim the ground like the wind.

"Thet Mex would've drilled me dead center," Billy thought, "if he'd cut loose at me instead."

He drew his own gun, to be prepared. Those jaspers might come striding up to take a look at the chaparral cock.

They didn't, however. Instead, they went back to their cards and drinking. Raw, fiery sotol was the liquor, and they downed it without a shudder. It didn't seem to make them talkative, however. Drowsiness turned out to be the result, instead.

The two border-hoppers yawned and grunted, then stretched out for a nap. Pedro, the shot-slinging Mex, remained on watch. His beady black eyes swept the American side. The man was quick in every tiny movement, almost tigerish.

"Nothin' to gain by stickin' this close," Billy thought.

He stole back to his horse. There was less chance of Pedro's sighting him there. Eavesdropping would have done no good now. The Mex wouldn't be talking to himself.

Disappointed, Billy waited until the others should rouse up once

again. They slept most of the day through, however. Sunset was near at hand when Pedro gave them a shake.

Again they passed close to Billy, as they headed back for camp. Brief snatches of words told him they were sore at the failure of that two-thousand-dollar cattle ransom to show up. The Thunderer, they growled, would be as mean and ugly as a bear in bee time.

"Hm-m-m, that's pleasant information," Billy muttered.

He meant to see this thing through to the end, regardless. He followed the outlaws cautiously, keeping out of sight as they rode away to the south.

The sun was down; twilight was thick before Billy dared run the risk of riding close. The country was wild and hilly. The way got increasingly rough.

Suddenly the dark blots that were the border ruffians dipped sharply out of sight. Billy proceeded more carefully, until he found that they had turned off down a narrow, twisting pass. Their horses' footfalls came to him clearly. The floor was solid rock.

A voice cracked out in Spanish, "Quién es?"

Billy heard the faint rattle of a rifle bolt. One of the ruffians growled an answer. The three rode on past the unseen guard who had challenged at that point.

"Sentry, eh?" Billy muttered. "Danger hoss, we're close to headquarters now."

Dusty though he was, the Circle J boss got off and slapped more of the powdery gray alkali upon himself and horse. He meant to look as if he had traveled many a long, weary mile when he showed up before El Tornador—if he got by that lookout in the pass.

WW—5C

CHAPTER VI.

"YUH DIE IF YUH FAIL THET TEST!"

BILLY waited five minutes, ten. All was silent again. The hooffalls of the others had faded from floor rock.

Billy judged the guard to be about fifty yards away, down in the canyon's murk.

"Here goes for our little gamble, Danger."

He rode straight down the pass.

Again the sharp challenge rang in Spanish. Staking all upon hard-boiled daring, Billy West failed to halt. Instead, he made himself get tough.

"Who wants ter know, yuh yellow-livered Mex?" he rasped at the hidden sentry. "And sling English when yuh talk ter me. I don't like thatet Mex stuff."

The lookout gasped at the bold defiance and the hard, vicious rasp of the words. Billy had ducked low in the saddle as Danger plodded on. If tough swagger didn't work, he could expect an instant shot.

Instead, he got a surprise. A match flamed up the canyon side, to his back. The next moment, a great blazing object came sailing through the air and landed not far from his horse. The fierce light fanned high.

Billy was outlined clearly in the glow from a huge, crackling sotol torch. The hombre who had thrown it slid down, somewhere to his rear. Billy ground his teeth. Had he walked into a trap?

"And now, señor," purred the guard in front, "yo' weel not be so hard, what? Speak up! Answair my questions, or thees gun weel shoot."

"I'll answer when I please," Billy growled. "Lead me ter yore boss."

"Ah, yo' know where yo' are, then?"

"Of course. What'd yuh think I come hyar fer? Trot out thet two-bit boss!"

The guard hesitated, plainly at a loss. The very brazeness of Billy's actions seemed about to win out for him—here, at least.

Danger, having shied away from the sotol flare, once more went walking forward at Billy West's light touch.

"Yo' stop!" the lower guard shrilled. He blazed away past Billy's head. "Nex tam, I shoot to keel, yo' don't obey," he warned.

"Next time, yo're liable to die before yuh kin ketch yore breath," Billy snapped at him fiercely. "All right, though, buddy, if yo're scared. I suppose yuh've got yore orders." His hands went up contemptuously.

The sentry behind him growled: "Thet's better, jasper. One more step, and yuh'd died on a bullet. We don't take no gaff."

Billy turned his head. "Yeah? Well, step out hyar in the light, brother, and learn yore little mistake!"

He had his bluff in on these hombres, and bore down on it plenty. The word they carried to El Tornador might go far in deciding his reception. Narrow-eyed, hard-boiled, grim, Billy West looked the killer, all right.

But neither guard left to call the boss. The jasper behind growled, but made no move to take up the young Montanan's challenge. The one in front fired three times into the air—a signal, Billy reckoned. He soon learned that he was right.

One leg hooked coolly over the saddle horn, he was waiting with seeming indifference, as a swift rush of hoofs swept up. El Tornador was in the lead. Sparks flew from the rocky floor as he yanked to a halt.

"Waal, what's this?" he bellowed.

Six-guns bristled behind him, but his own weapon hadn't come out. "Who's this grimy hairpin? Why ain't yuh shucked his gun off?"

"Afraid to try," Billy said boastfully. "And they both showed darned good sense."

"Yeah?" the Thunderer rasped. "Waal, yuh ain't!" His wedge-shaped face was scowling. "What're yuh doin' in this pass?"

"Come ter pay yuh a visit," Billy told him. "Thought I'd stick around with yore gang fer a while. From the looks of this tripe hyar, yuh could use a few *real* gunmen. Whar I come from, birds like these wouldn't last a month."

"Uh-huh," the big bandit chief grunted. But Billy could see that his nervy attitude had got the fellow's interest. "And just whar was that?"

"Montana," Billy informed him. "And I ain't sayin' why I left."

"Border-hopper, huh?"

"Draw yore own conclusions. I ain't down hyar for my health."

El Tornador's weasel eyes narrowed. Billy certainly gave the appearance of having put the miles behind him. And the law must want him bad, if he had fogged it all the way from Montana. The bandit leader carefully studied Billy's horse.

The Circle J brand Danger bore was foreign to this country. No iron like it was down here. Yet the eyes of the border raider took in other points.

"Thet chestnut's in mighty good shape," he grunted. "Yuh ride him from the start?"

"I keep a hoss in good shape," Billy retorted. "And I been ridin' him long enough. Yuh got any more questions? If yuh haven't, it's time to eat."

"We'll eat, all right," the other growled. "Jasper, I like yore nerve,

but not yore gall one bit. A gunman, eh? Waal, after supper, we'll find out if yuh kin shoot as well as bluff."

There was a hard, biting chill in the words. Billy wondered if this big, sharp-brained crook had seen through him already. El Tornador wheeled his horse.

"Bring him along," he rasped.

With Billy in their midst, the bandits rode down out of the pass. The Circle J owner's gun was still on him. Either El Tornador wasn't so suspicious as Billy feared, or else the gang boss considered him helpless in the hands of the hard-faced pack.

Camp fires blazed in the little basin into which the canyon dropped. Half a dozen low dobe huts stood revealed in the flickering red light. Billy saw no signs of cattle in the mile it took them to reach the spot.

"Mebbe I can spot the critters come daylight," he hoped.

Still, he wasn't at all positive that things wouldn't take a swift turn against him sometime soon this night. The Thunderer hadn't accepted him at full face value yet. Billy's acting had been superb, but he sensed that the situation was still as dangerous as dynamite.

One wrong move, one slip, and he'd have this whole gang to fight.

During supper—frijoles and fresh beef—he and the gang boss sat apart. El Tornador's voice boomed and roared as he plied Billy with more questions. The young Montanan answered in short, snappy words and grunts.

Difficult though the talking was, Billy told no falsehoods. He wouldn't stoop to that. Instead, he let his manner carry its own impression. When the meal was over, the Thunderer seemed satisfied—almost.

"I kin use yuh, gunny," he

growled, "if yuh kin meet my tests. The first is, jist how well do yuh shoot?"

"Try me and see," Billy snapped. "Want ter use targets, snapshootin', or on-the-fly stuff?"

"Yuh pick it. If it ain't hard enough, I'll set yuh a stunt thet is. But believe me, fellah, it's got ter be plenty fast!"

Billy nodded. "How's this?"

Still squatted beside the fire, he drew a blunt-nosed .45 cartridge from the many in his belt. He saw that the gang was *watching* him keenly.

The Thunderer's voice, always a deep bellow, had carried to every ear. The new recruit was about to strut his stuff.

Hands slid to holstered gun butts. These hard-faced cutthroats knew El Tornador. If this fresh hombre didn't stack up O. K., he was due to be bumped off at once. No man ever came horning into that basin without proving himself a mighty tough crook, or else—

Cartridge in hand, Billy spun the small target high into the air. The firelight's leaping fingers lost it almost at once. Darkness grabbed it, hid it. Billy made no move to draw.

For the span of two breaths, he squatted, motionless. Then the spinning slug shot into view again, several yards away, streaking down.

A blur—*bang!*

The cartridge disappeared, as if snatched into nothingness. Billy's Colt had flashed, aimed, hurled lead. It was back in its holster now.

The outlaws gasped. The shot would have been good, had he cracked down on the cartridge as it sailed up.

But to wait until darkness hid it, and then smash it dead center the split instant it reappeared, was a

sample of gun-slinging magic that left the ruffians pop-eyed.

There was a gunny that *was* a gunny! The eyes of the Thunderer gleamed. Pedro, crack shot though that Mex dandy was, couldn't hold a candle to this new recruit.

But Billy wasn't through yet.

"*Thet's one shot*," he said, "but a six-gun carries six. Who shoes yore hosses here? I want a little help."

A bit puzzled, they pointed out the jasper who did that bit of work. From him, Billy got six horseshoe nails. With the butt of his .45, he drove them part way into a timbered door of one of the dobe huts.

They formed a rude half circle. Then, replacing the spent shell in his gun with a full one, he stepped back twenty paces, in the red glow's wavering light.

Again no man saw Billy's draw, so swift was the rippling streak. Five times his weapon thundered in one continuous blaze. Five nails plunged into wood, their slender heads buried deep.

"Great blazes! What gun-throwin'!" a scar-faced ruffian cried. "Hombre, if I could shoot like *thet*, all the law in Montana couldn't make me leave the State!"

Billy shrugged. "In my business," he said coldly, "I've sometimes got ter be fast. *Waal, Thunderer*," he snapped, "is yuh satisfied or not?"

The rawboned gang leader's voice boomed out: "I'm sayin' so, hombre! Yo're a wiz! But say, why did yuh stop at five shots? Yuh had six nails stuck up."

Billy's smile was thin and grim. "I kind o' believe in keepin' at least one bullet in reserve," he said. "Yuh know—just in case."

There was no missing the meaning of that last drawled remark. Billy wasn't leaving himself defenseless, laying himself wide open, until this

gang had taken him in. He meant to make no mistakes.

El Tornador growled: "Thet's good sense. But yuh kin forgit it now, fellah. We're glad ter have yuh with us. What'll we call yuh? What name yuh been usin' last?"

"The same as always. I never change my handle. I just ain't tellin' it. Savvy? Yuh kin call me anything yuh like."

"All right, then." The other grinned. "I'll jist call yuh—*now!*"

The last word came, a roaring order. El Tornador jumped aside. Billy whirled—a fraction too late to meet a swift rush from behind.

Two hard-driving hombres bowed him from his feet. Others were on him with a bound.

Billy fought to get his gun up, but some one had his wrist. Overwhelmed by superior numbers, he was pinned down by the swarm.

The surprise had been complete, coming, as it did, just at the moment when the Thunderer had seemed to fall for Billy's play.

Ropes, jerked out from shirt fronts, quickly were yanked tight about the waddy's hands and feet.

The toughs stood back, panting from the struggle. Billy glared hotly at their boss.

"What d'yuh mean by this, yuh double-crosser?" the Circle J owner raged. He was still desperately carrying out his rôle. It seemed his only hope—and mighty slim at that.

The very fact that those ropes had been ready showed that the Thunderer had meant this from the start.

That weasel-eyed jasper grunted: "We always do this, hombre. Yuh've met the gun test, but *thet* ain't half. I aims ter know jist how tough yuh are. So I'm holdin' yuh hog tied till I get the chance."

"Yeah?" Billy sneered. "What more do yuh want? Want me ter

kill somebody fer yuh, hold up a bank, er what?"

To his horror, the gang chief rasped:

"Yuh've named it, gunny. I think yuh'll do, but I've got ter see yuh put bullets into a man—the one kind o' target that counts. All my jaspers has done what yo're goin' ter do—blow to bits the next prisoner that we gits, tied up."

Billy felt a shudder run through him at thought of the fiendish test. Nevertheless, he growled:

"Huh! Is that all yuh want?"

El Tornador eyed him narrowly. "Yeah. Easy enough fer a real cold killer. Don't worry, stranger. Yuh won't be kept waitin' long. We gets prisoners frequent in this business. All yuh got ter do is remember, yuh die if yuh fail that test!"

CHAPTER VII.

A VICTIM FOR BILLY WEST.

JOE SCOTT was having his troubles. A full day and night had passed since his boss had fogged it away from the Diamond P. Since everybody wanted to know where Billy had gone, the redhead was hard put to it to evade the questions which showered in on him from all sides.

"Waal, help me, Hannah!" Buck Foster rasped at him. "Yuh needn't be so derned snooty about it. Yuh knows whar Billy has went; I knows yuh does. Yuh am a heck of a pard not ter spit it out. Mebbe we could help him. Ain't that so, Sing Lo?"

"So be," the little yellow man responded earnestly. For once, he and Buck fully agreed, although ordinarily the chink took the side of Joe. "Mistlee Billy, him might be 'n' trouble. He go to see about lured cattle, didn't he, Mistlee Joe?"

"Aw, quit pesterin' me," the sorrel-top growled. "I done told yuh Billy went off on a little jaunt. He'll be back in a day or so."

"One day him gone already," the little Oriental said slowly. "And all we do is wait. Sing Lo, he no like that."

"Me, nuther," Buck grumbled fiercely, yanking at his long mustache. "Them bandits ought ter be run down. Thar ain't no sense in jist a-doin' nothin'. I got a good notion ter go clean up on 'em myself."

"No can chase 'em into Mexlico," Sing Lo declared solemnly. "That conclete post say flo' us to stay in U. S."

Buck snorted. "Ter heck with that post! By gosh! It never said nothin' ter me. I'm goin' ter go look fer the boss."

And go he did, despite all Joe Scott's protests. Furthermore, he refused to have the redhead for company, declaring correctly that Joe would only try to swerve him from his course.

"Naw, sir, I'm goin' alone," the grizzled veteran growled. "Ol' Proctor am too old, and that Holden cow dick am still stove up. Sing Lo kin come along, though," he decided, "ter cook fer me and sech."

Sing Lo nodded. "Me go little ways, to look-see can we find Mistlee Billy coming back."

Because he knew nowhere else to head, Buck made first for the scene of that border fight. He was mounted on a Diamond P horse to replace the one he'd lost in battle. Sing Lo bounced along behind him on the chink's own piebald cayuse.

"All this hyar mystery business gives me a pain in the neck," the range-battered cowpoke grunted, two hours later, as they neared the spot. "The only way ter handle

crooks is ter up and whup 'em, plumb right off."

Sing Lo said nothing. They were almost at the border now, and he knew that he didn't intend to cross.

He hoped Billy hadn't gone into Mexico. That must be a terrible land, if the United States put up warning posts to tell you to stay out.

"Look! There it be," he exclaimed, pointing at the slender concrete marker. "This side is all light flo' fight bandits and bad homblays. No can do on other side. That be funny, Buck."

"Thet be all the bunk," the veteran snorted. "I fights 'em whar I sees 'em. Say, by heifers! Billy was ter put the money by thet marker. Look sharp, Sing Lo, ter see if yuh kin spot any o' them thar skunks on the watch."

The little chink's almond eyes rolled fearfully around the landscape to the south. Buck squinted fiercely also. All that they saw was hillside, rocks, mesquite.

"Huh! They done give up hopes already," the lanky top hand grunted. "Waal, they holes up down hyar somewhars. Hyar's whar we go across!"

His spurs flicked in, and his cayuse leaped into Mexico at a snorting bound. Sing Lo didn't follow. Buck threw a quick look back.

"Hey, ain't yuh comin', yuh yaller pot wrastler?" he cried angrily. "I done means fer yuh ter be my cook."

Sing Lo's headshake was emphatic. "Chink stay light here," he murmured fearfully. "Him like this side of post."

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck growled. "Stay thar and eat it, then. I'm goin' ter chaw up crooks."

Sing Lo didn't know what to say. He feared to be left alone, but he feared much more to follow. Reined

in, he watched Buck strike straight into Mexico; then, with a dismal look on his yellow face, the Circle J cook turned back.

"Me come out to look-see Mistlee Billy," he muttered, "but me going to look-see in United States."

He rode back up the ridge, wondering if he should go tell Joe that Buck had gone across. The little Oriental was almost at the crest, when suddenly a shot rang out. It sounded like a six-gun, off there to the south.

Sing Lo hopped about in the saddle. A groan welled from his yellow throat.

"Me knew it," he wailed in dismay. "Them bad homblays catchee Mistlee Buck!"

Dust spurted high on the slope across the border—the trail of a riderless horse. A smaller dust cloud abruptly resolved itself into three or four fighting figures, as men struggled to their feet.

One was Buck, all right—a roaring, raging, bull-headed old waddy who had stumbled almost squarely into the hands of watching bandits and been jerked from his horse. The veteran had gone down shooting, but he was overpowered almost at once.

Eyes big with terror for his pard, Sing Lo saw Buck jerked to his feet, knocked down again for good measure, and then thrown roughly across a horse. His hands and feet hung limp, Sing Lo knew that he was out.

"Me tell him to stay home!" he cried. "Sing Lo got to do something now. Me guess me go to lanch."

Heels thumping his mount at every jump, the little chink went pounding across the ridge as fast as the sleepy-eyed piebald would lope.

The last time Sing Lo threw a scared glance backward, he saw

Buck, in charge of two captors, being taken hurriedly south.

The chink sped his way, the bandits theirs. The outlaws covered the same territory as Billy West had the evening before. Buck, his hands bound now, was unconscious for a short distance only; then his eyes popped open, and he began to rant.

"Say, yuh low-livered polecats," he raved, "git me off this hoss! This ain't no way fer a waddy ter ride. Untie my hands, blast yore picters, and I'll tear yuh plumb apart!"

"Kind of a high wind sprung up sudden," one of the toughs sneered across at the other. "Or did that noise come from this hyar buzzard bait?"

"I'll buzzard-bait yuh!" Buck yelled. "Jist let me git loose and I'll——"

"Hombre," the fellow rapped, "yuh ain't never goin' ter git loose. Yuh'll die with them ropes on—if that other prisoner meets the test."

"Meet it or not, this jasper dies, anyhow," the second ruffian growled. "Him and that chink was scoutin' around fer a trail. They was tryin' ter git on the scent o' that Diamond P stock, I guess."

"Yo're danged right, and I'll git 'em back, too!" Buck howled. "No blamed set o' border-hoppers can come no ranikaboo on me! I ain't finished yet, not by no long shot!"

"Yuh jist think yuh ain't," the jasper snarled. "Dry up!"

Buck, however, wasn't that kind. He kept spouting off furious threats and insults until his captors, angered, rammed a rough gag into his mouth. Buck was still choking and sputtering his wordless rage when the pass into the bandit basin was put behind and the riders drew up at the huts.

El Tornador and the others strode out to meet them. Buck's fierce

brown eyes ranged about him as he tumbled off.

He was looking for Diamond P cattle. And because of those words about another prisoner, it had also begun to dawn on him that he might see Billy West.

He saw neither, however. The basin held no live stock except saddle horses, and the Circle J owner, if there, certainly wasn't in sight.

"Who we got hyar, Slick?" the Thunderer growled in his hoarse, booming voice to one of the jaspers who'd brought the waddy in.

The fellow answered with a grunt: "Snooper, boss. He was tryin' ter trail them cattle, I think."

El Tornador's weasel eyes glinted with suddenly savage little lights.

"Glad ter hyar it," he rasped. "He'll do ter try that gunny on, then. Pedro, yuh and four-five others bring out that hard-boiled jasper what thinks he's plenty tough."

Guns drawn, the men spoken to unbarred the door of a stout, low shack. A form was dragged out into the open—Billy West, tied hand and foot.

Buck Foster's angry roar would have given the Circle J owner away at once, if it hadn't been for that heavy gag. As it was, the attempted bellow died into a gurgle before it left his throat.

El Tornador disappeared into a shack and came out with Billy's Colt. He spun the cylinder once and tried the hammer, to see that the weapon worked. Then he jerked a thumb at a dobe wall.

"Stand that pop-eyed ol' coot up agin' that."

Rough hands shoved Buck into position. Others hustled Billy near. The rope bonds were slashed from him. He was heaved to his feet.

"Waal, feller, hyar's yore meat." El Tornador grunted coldly. "Yuh

needn't try ter break away. We'll have guns at yore back."

"Who looks like he's tryin' ter break away?" Billy West snarled. "Hand me that gun, if that's what yuh've got it here for—to see me crack down on that ol' maverick thar. I'll say he looks like buzzard bait."

Buck heard the words with astonishment. Why, Billy talked exactly as if he meant to shoot him! And looked it, too! Billy's eyes were narrowed until they seemed to gleam with a killer light.

What in the name of heck had come over the boss?

"By gosh! He's loco!" Buck thought, stupefied, as Billy's gun jerked up. "They been feedin' him some o' that *marijuana*—that dope weed what gits the Mexes all hopped up! By heifers! His eyes is blazin'!"

Poor Buck Foster had never thought he'd come to an end like this.

CHAPTER VIII.

BILLY MEETS THE TEST.

BILLY'S hammer went backward, but suddenly a jasper snapped:

"Wait a minute, hombre! We like ter hear 'em yelp."

The man strode toward Buck to remove the gag. Billy stopped him with a snarl:

"Wait a minute yoreself, jasper! This here killin' is shore my show, I reckon."

With the words, he lowered his gun and went swaggering up to Buck.

"Git yore head over hyar," he rasped, in a voice that all could hear, at the same time tilting the veteran's chin higher and to the right. The movement seemed rough and vicious. "Thar, yuh make a target—eyes up like a dyin' calf."

"Gag off!" the Thunderer boomed out in a growl.

Billy hesitated. For fear that Buck would cry out and give him away, the young boss of Circle J didn't want to remove the cloth.

There seemed no other way, though. El Tornador was the hombre giving orders for this test.

With a quick movement, Billy whipped the gag from the veteran's mouth.

"Great guns!" Buck Foster roared. "Yuh ain't goin' ter shoot me, Bi____"

"Shut up!" The words leaped out, savage, fierce.

Billy's left hand grabbed the pop-eyed waddy by the chin, shoved his head up higher, and also cut off the last of Buck's amazed remark.

Billy's next words came in a low, tense hiss:

"Don't give me away, ol' pard. I know what I'm doin'. When my mouth splits in a snarl, yuh duck! This gun will shore fire."

With that, Billy strode back to position. He looked neither to right nor left.

Yet out of the corner of an eye, he saw that Pedro and several others had their guns already out. That was to be ready if Billy, the recruit gunman, tried any desperate stunt. They were all primed and waiting, in case he flunked the test.

Again Billy's .45 came up until its sights pointed straight at the grizzled waddy's forehead. The veteran's face was working, but he sawed his young boss had some plan now.

Big brown eyes bulging, he watched the grim slit of Billy's mouth. The lips split down, snarling. Buck flung himself headlong toward the ground.

The weapon roared in almost that same instant. Flame ripped from its

barrel, but no answering dove fragments leaped out from the wall. Billy's eyes flashed with a hidden pleasure. He had figured this thing to a turn.

The gun held only blanks, just as he had suspected. El Tornador would never have shoved a loaded weapon into his hand until sure of the new recruit. The test seemed designed simply to gauge the extent of a man's nerve.

Nevertheless, Billy was roaring furiously, carrying his play out to the end. Straight at Buck he charged, ripping out a snarl:

"Try ter duck on me, will yer?" Again and again, his weapon spoke, seemingly into the body of the waddy he'd now reached in his rush.

The outlaws howled with laughter. This was better than they'd thought.

Billy's own form blocked their view. They had no means of knowing that each six-gun blaze just grazed Buck's clothing. Billy was taking no chances that a real shell might be in among those blanks.

"Thet'll do! Yuh've shore proved yoreself, hombre." It was the roaring voice of El Tornador, as the gang chief slapped Billy on the back. "Yo're one of us now, stranger—the best gun hand in the pack!"

Billy stood up, growling. Things had broken right. Now all he had to do was to locate his cattle and contrive a way to slip them back into the United States.

That shouldn't be so hard, since he had the ruffian's confidence. Yeah, he'd slip 'em back—but he wanted to take El Tornador, too, for that hombre's just dues.

The gang boss grinned again and handed the young Montanan his own shell-studded cartridge belt.

"Load thet gun right," he said. "This time, we won't use blanks."

Billy stared. What did he mean? He wasn't left long in doubt.

"The prisoner dies," the Thunderer said. "I like yore style, feller, clean down ter the ground. After this, yo're my executioner fer all sech jobs as this."

He turned and ordered Buck jerked up against the wall again. Cold sweat broke out on Billy. He'd done too good a bit of acting.

A fierce inner fury gripped him. El Tornador was a fiend, all right.

The eyes of the Circle J owner darted over the gang. Every face was evil with desire for a savage kill.

Billy West coolly loaded his gun. All his plans had gone awry.

The only thing left was to rescue Buck and get away as quickly as they could. Billy's swift glance swept the basin. His chestnut stallion, Danger, stood tied to a crude corral, out beyond the huts. Buck's cayuse was nearer, where the veteran had been tumbled off.

Suddenly, without the slightest hint of a warning, Billy's .45 leaped forth in a lightning movement and buried its blued-steel barrel in the middle of the gang boss. El Tornador gave a startled grunt.

Billy jerked the big jasper to him and spun the fellow around for a shield, before the gang could understand. The young Montana waddy's voice came like the crack of ice:

"If anybody dies here, yo're it, yuh black-hearted hound! Order yore men to undo Buck Foster, and make thet order quick!"

The Thunderer's eyes were rolling. His men had guns out already, but they saw no chance to shoot.

Their brains were still in a muddle as Billy backed swiftly away, with their boss as fine protection. Buck Foster gave a whoop:

"Thet's the stuff, Billy! Blow

that skunk's gizzard plumb out through his backbone! By gosh! I aims ter help!"

The veteran started forward, but the Thunderer's voice roared out:

"Cover him, men, quick! So yuh know each other, huh?" he snarled in Billy's face. "Let me go this minute, or yore pard dies in his tracks!"

"Yeah, and so will yuh!" Billy snapped.

Nevertheless, his eyes whipped to Buck and the others for a fleeting instant. El Tornador saw his chance.

With the speed and strength of desperation, a huge paw struck Billy's gun arm violently aside. The next moment, the two were grappling fiercely. Billy found his right wrist locked.

The gang flew to their chief's assistance.

Wham! Billy's left fist boomed an uppercut into the big man's middle with a snap and drive that made the jasper gasp.

The clutch on his gun wrist lessened. He tore the weapon loose. A smash of the barrel dropped El Tornador like a crashing timber.

But Billy was a target now. Guns screamed and roared and flashed.

A pantherish spring took him aside as the first savage slugs snarled past. His own gun blazed its thunder. Pedro, the gang's crack shot, went down.

The outlaw camp was in an uproar. Buck Foster was dashing for Billy. The Circle J boss yelled.

"Grab yore hoss and ramble! Yuh ain't got a gun! I'll take care o' this mess!"

"The heck I ain't!" Buck howled.

With the gang intent on Billy, the grizzled old fire eater was yanking El Tornador's six-gun from its holster. The next second, hands still bound, the veteran was in the fight.

Buck couldn't fire accurately, but his unexpected fusillade had its effect, none the less. Taken from two angles, the bandits dived for cover. One whirled in a doorway, to crack down on Billy West.

Spang-g! A sizzling shot from Billy broke the fellow's arm and spun him back from sight.

Horses whirled in the confusion. The Circle J owner grabbed a cayuse as it thundered past.

"Here, Buck, swing up!" he yelled, as he yanked the animal to a halt. "They've got the cover on us, but our surprise can't last!"

The haze hid them for a moment. Buck cried:

"Yuh ride, Billy! I can git out on foot!"

"Yuh heard my orders!" Billy flashed. "Danger is my hoss!"

Hustling Buck into the saddle, he darted between two huts. Guns were spraying lead from every window. Buck reeled from a shoulder burn as he thundered from the place.

The veteran's bound hand awkwardly sent bullets screeching back. Billy, meanwhile, had reached Danger. Yanking off the hackamore, he sprang into the saddle. Men were rushing from the houses now, but hot lead drove them back.

"Out the pass!" Billy shouted.

He swept up on Buck. Their cayuses got away swiftly. Some of the gang had rifles. Bullets ripped up dust.

The pards made poor targets, though, as they quickly widened the gap. Bandits were running for horses now. The Thunderer was up.

"Darn! I'd like to've brought him with us," Billy growled. "Yuh bad hurt, Buck?"

"Naw! Jist a shoulder scratch. Dang, Billy! But yuh shore had me guessin'. I thunk, fer a minute, yuh was plumb loco, when they had me

agin' thet wall. I never seen an hombre look so mean and tough."

Billy laughed. "Had to play it thet way. Say, yuh got a knife, so I can cut yuh loose?"

"Nope. Them roughnecks took it, same as yores, I guess."

The Circle J owner nodded. "Yep, we'll have to wait until later. Look, Buck! There come them two guards they left in the pass!"

A pair of horsemen had ridden hurriedly from the canyon, now hardly a hundred and fifty yards ahead of the speeding waddies. Gunfire had drawn the jaspers. They took one quick look and went spurring back.

"In on 'em fast!" Billy growled. "We can't let 'em get set, to block our way—not with thet pack at our back."

He shook up Danger slightly. The mighty chestnut flashed ahead.

Billy was in the gorge within a moment. He saw the bandit guards tumbling off and jumping for swift cover.

His six-gun flamed. Those hombres had no chance to get hunkered down. Instead, they scurried wildly up a side gulch.

Billy and Buck streaked past the opening and on up the narrow pass. It was a straight race for the border now. The hard-riding gang was coming fast.

The canyon echoed to thundering hoofbeats. Then the pards were out in the open again. Behind them, bullets still spoke with an angry, buzzing whine.

A mile, two miles went by. The border lay in sight. The Circle J pair had a safe lead now, as they skimmed the last ridge top.

Suddenly Billy grunted. He had caught sight of horsemen on the American side, speeding swiftly down a gulch. Three riders there

were in all—Joe Scott, Steve Holden, and the Circle J's chink cook.

Sing Lo had brought help. Billy West glanced back. An exultant thought had hit him. Here was a chance to carry El Tornador and his men straight into a trap.

"Hold in, Buck!" he cried sharply. "Let them jiggers gain. If they think they're about to catch us, they won't stop for the line. With yuh and me for bait, we'll lure 'em right across!"

CHAPTER IX.

MYSTERY FROM THE CHINK.

BUCK FOSTER didn't savvy, for he hadn't seen his other pards. The gulch rim had hid them, after Billy's one quick glimpse.

Nevertheless, the veteran pulled down. Billy West's word was law with him, especially if it meant sticking closer to a fight.

Fierce yells broke from the gang. The horses of their quarry seemed to be playing out. Again lead whipped tiny dust fountains up about the fleeing pair. El Tornador spurred into the bandit lead, his hoarse roar booming out:

"Go straight across, men! Don't stop! Them jaspers know too much!"

Billy smiled, as he and Buck swept down the ridge. The concrete marker loomed up ahead. He turned to look behind—and so he neither saw nor heard a mesquite bush rattle slightly, somewhat to their right.

A man had jumped up there—the border watcher left behind when Buck had been taken to the outlaw camp. A rifle snapped to the hombre's shoulder. His mean eye gleamed along its sights.

Crack-k. The sharp report came from United States soil.

The jasper went down as if a

sledge had hit him. He fell like a flopping chicken.

Joe Scott, just in time, had blazed away with that shoulder-breaking shot.

Cries of fear rose from the bandits. They had sighted the reinforcements now. Buck and Billy flashed across the line, but the outlaws didn't follow. They had seen too much.

Instead, they reined up, glaring, shouting furious oaths and threats. Billy shelved his disappointment. He realized on the instant that Joe had had to shoot.

"Good work, pard!" he called, as the others came spurring up to him and Buck.

"Good work, nothin'!" the veteran growled. "Thet danged redhead spoiled it all. Thet jasper he cut down on wasn't goin' ter bother us none. I had him covered in a flash."

"Yeah, after he fell," the sorrel-top jeered. "If it hadn't been fer Billy, I'd 'a' let him shoot."

The Circle J owner smiled. No matter what the excitement or what they did for each other, these two waddies were always ready to jump into a jawing match.

"Save yore love words for later," Billy interrupted. "I kind o' thought yuh jiggers would want to know what had happened to me and Buck."

Briefly he told of their adventures, ending with the remark:

"Things broke both good and bad. We know where they hole up now, but I haven't seen the stock. We're worse off than ever, I reckon, though. It's too bad we couldn't trick 'em across the line. We'll never get a better chance."

"Them homblays astaid of con-clete," Sing Lo chuckled. "And so be Sing Lo, maybe."

"I'll say yuh was," Buck snorted. "Chink, till yer git as good as me and Billy, yuh stay in the good ol' U. S."

The bandits had disappeared now. Worn with their experiences, Billy and Buck were glad to head back with the others toward old Ranse Proctor's ranch.

The job had ended in failure, after all. Billy's scheme to throw in with the outlaws had to be replaced by another. But what? That was the question. No answer came at once.

Back and forth they discussed the problem, every one joining in except Sing Lo, as they rode on for the Diamond P. The little chink said nothing, but slowly a light of satisfaction began to dawn upon his slant-eyed yellow face.

"Sing Lo get um idea," he murmured entirely to himself. "He fool um bandits, so be, maybe. Me wonlah should him speakee up."

Buck Foster, however, was roaring out a long, bull-headed opinion about that time, and the little Oriental got no opportunity to unload his thoughts. So he merely hugged himself with glee.

He was sure now that he could get the bandits into the United States.

"Me tellee Mistlee Billy after sup-plah," he decided. "He like um plan, I bet."

But when Sing Lo had his dishes all washed and his pans all scoured that night, he found that the dog-tired Circle J owner had tumbled into bed and was already fast asleep. So were the rest of the waddies, except the old rancher, Ranse.

"Him do," Sing Lo decided. "Them bandits still think cattle belong to Mistlee Lanse."

Accordingly, the wily little Chinaman whispered the details of his plan

to the stooped old man. Proctor listened with mounting interest. At the end, he clapped Sing Lo heartily on the back.

"Chink," he cried, "yo're a dinger! Durned if I don't think yuh kin make it work! All right, git yore things ready. I'll see about the note."

Half an hour later, the Circle J cook was riding alone through the night. His piebald plodded along with a rattle and clank of metal, for Sing Lo had it loaded down until it looked something like a prospector's mount.

The hours of the night passed swiftly, as he went about his work. Dawn was showing signs of breaking when, sleepy-eyed but happy, the little yellow man returned to the ranch.

Humming a squeaky tune in his native lingo, Sing Lo threw breakfast hastily together. He was too tired to do his usual good cooking job. Buck Foster raised a row about the biscuits, the spuds, the coffee, after the waddies had been called to eat.

"Sing Lo, him little excited," the chink cook offered excuse. "Him been velly busy homblay. Him set a bandit trap."

"A bandit trap?" Buck snorted. "Yuh? Why, yuh derned yaller heathen, yuh couldn't set out cheese ter ketch a rat."

"Me ketchum just the same," the little man insisted. "Me show you all, come night."

Eagerly they plied him with questions; for more than once in the past, this little yellow pard had pulled his share of clever stunts.

He shook his head, however. Buck's jeers had offended him just a little. Furthermore, Sing Lo was enjoying the sense of mystery he was imparting to the whole affair.

He'd let the waddies wonder, while he got some sleep.

"Sing Lo tired of being kidded." He yawned in Buck's homely face. "Him going to get some shut-eye. To-night you see um tick."

No argument could move him. Billy West might have forced a disclosure by direct orders, but the Circle J owner had faith in the chink. Nevertheless, Billy was almost as curious as the rest.

That curiosity grew when, late that afternoon, Sing Lo and ol' Ranse saddled up. The rancher had strapped a .45 about him. His seamed face looked rather grim, as he called out to the rest:

"Git yore hosses, hombres. Things are goin' to pop!"

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck Foster growled. "The chink has done told him instead of us."

Wondering, the others mounted. Sing Lo struck out for the border, a happy but half-scared look now on his face.

This business was plenty dangerous. He was glad that the Circle J men and Steve Holden were right there at his back.

Twilight had just clothed the land when they crested the last ridge and looked over into Mexico. The concrete border marker loomed up, a murky white. Beyond it, a dozen horsemen were jogging down toward the line—the Thunderer and his pack!

CHAPTER X.

BORDER SLEIGHT-OF-HAND.

SAY, ain't it about time yuh told us what was what?" Buck growled at the chink. "Them jaspers won't cross the line, and this hyar cow dick won't let us grab 'em until they does. What am this hyar stunt?"

"It just be some sleight-of-hand

what Sing Lo know how to work. You keep hands on guns, evelybody, until chink sing out."

"Waal, help me, Hannah!" Buck snorted. "Does yuh mean ter say yo're goin' ter try tear bombs and thet fool truck? Thet won't git us nowhar. I knowed it was some sick brainless stunt."

The veteran was disgusted. Sing Lo had once worked as assistant to a fourth-rate traveling magician, and was fond of pulling the tricks he'd learned. They sometimes fooled rather stupid people.

But El Tornador was a tough, hard-bitten crook. He most certainly wouldn't fall for any childish stuff.

"By heifers! Yuh better have somethin real up yore sleeve," Buck Foster grumbled. "I'm goin' ter tan yore yaller hide, if we don't git them birds across."

"This thing heap too big to put up sleeve," Sing Lo answered promptly. "Looke here, Mistlee Buck, Mistlee Proctor go to hold powwow with bandits. Come on! We ketchee talk."

The outlaws, fanned out from their leader, had halted just south of the marker. Hands were close to gun butts, but the toughs looked confident enough.

They had recognized Steve Holden. The border was a dead line which that conscientious young law officer would never violate to make an arrest. El Tornador sat his horse swaggeringly, as old Ranse and the rest pulled up.

"Waal, yuh sent me a note sayin' yuh wanted ter dicker fer yore cattle," the Thunderer boomed at the stooped old man. "Hyar we are, ter talk it over and tell yer what is what."

"Not my cattle," Proctor answered. "They belong to these wad-

dies hyar. I sold them to 'em and they—"

"They stands ter lose 'em, then," the gang chief rasped, "unless they pays me fer roundin' 'em up. Two thousand dollars, I said the first time, and that two thousand is the price that sticks."

"Furthermore," he thundered, with hot glares at Billy and Buck, "them two jaspers shot some o' my men. They'll have ter pay an extra five hundred apiece fer that."

"Why, yuh weasel-faced skunk!" Buck shouted furiously. "Yuh and yore hull outfit ain't worth two bits o' that! Come on! Git across that line! I'll show yuh what yo're worth!"

Billy quickly silenced the veteran promptly. The Circle J owner knew that, whatever Sing Lo had in mind, Buck's hot-headed tactics could hardly be a help. The lanky waddy grumbled, as he heard the Thunderer snap:

"I plays this line ter a fare-yuh-well. I crosses when I pleases, and not a blamed second sooner. Three thousand dollars is my price. Yuh kin take it or leave it, pronto. I ain't goin' ter talk all night."

"Mistlee Homblay," Sing Lo cut in, although the little man's voice trembled, "you makee one big mistake. You see that conclete marker? Last night," he blurred shrilly, "Sing Lo, him dig it up! You in United States light this minute, 'cause Sing Lo move it north!"

A gasp of amazement left the ruffian. A furious snarl took its place. Sing Lo's words had rung with conviction. The little chink squealed out:

"Grab him quick, Mistlee Billy! Him be two hundred yards from line! Looke out! Him mean to shoot!"

Already El Tornador had dug for his shooting iron. The trapped hom-

bre was swearing insanely as the gun leaped out.

"Yuh die first!" he howled at Sing Lo.

The weapon blazed a savage streak.

But the bullet missed its target, for Billy West had been too swift. He also had whipped out hardware, in a draw that matched the lightning flash and quickness he'd shown in the outlaw camp.

His slug crashed straight to the mark. El Tornador's six-gun spun from his fingers. Billy spurred hard at him. He meant to take the man alive, as a trophy to Sing Lo. The crafty little chink deserved to crow, after his clever work.

But horses were whirling, rearing, as the bandits realized their plight and sought to tear away south. Guns flamed in all directions. It was a close-range, terrific fight.

Billy reeled in the saddle. A bullet had sung off his saddle horn with a vicious whine and seared a path across his shoulder. His gun was gone, without his knowing it, in the hot pain of the shock.

It took him a moment to get his bearings and realize that he was unarmed. Buck, Joe, and Holden were hammering out lead, while snarling foes fought back.

By this time, El Tornador was fleeing wildly for Mexico. The man's spurs rammed and ripped and raked. Two hundred yards, the chink had said. He'd make it, or kill his horse!

"Go to it, Danger! Run him down!" Smashing past tangled riders, Billy set out for the bandit chief.

The race would be over in a span of seconds, for fast horses can cover two hundred yards almost like a streak.

Danger's swift legs flashed like pistons. The great horse had the

speed of a racer. Yet the slim distance to the real border had almost vanished when he swept up on the other cayuse.

"Lay off of me! I'm in Mexico!" El Tornador almost shrieked.

"Not yet, yuh ain't!" Billy cried.

He dodged a furious blow and hurled himself bodily against the big-boned outlaw with a force that knocked them both from saddle leather. Knee to knee, they struggled up.

In the dim dusk just beyond them, Billy caught a swift glimpse of fresh-turned dirt. There was where Sing Lo had dug up the marker. They were still in the United States!

El Tornador seemed to realize it also. With a savage howl, he tried to spring up and leap past.

"No, yuh don't!" Billy's hand had shot out and jerked him from his feet.

Close-locked, they rolled and battled, with the border bare yards away. El Tornador got a fist loose. Billy's head snapped and rocked.

Three times, the huge hombre smashed him before Billy could free an arm. His wounded shoulder seemed half useless. His left hand must carry the brunt of the fight.

Crack! Splat! That left fist flashed into action, again and again and again. The Thunderer reeled back.

Suddenly the man lunged forward and got Billy by the throat. He let out a roar of triumph. From somewhere, he had whipped out a glittering knife.

The blade struck like a viper. Only a desperate writhe saved Billy's life. The knife slashed his shirt from throat to waistline. Again the blade streaked back.

Billy's wind was leaving him; his whole body seemed pain-racked.

He'd die in another instant, if he didn't stop that second slash!

Thought and move were one together. His fist whistled like a rocket, as all the power of range-hardened sinews was flung into the punch.

El Tornador got it on the chin—a mighty knock-out smash. The man's rawboned figure stiffened. He pitched forward on his face.

His knife arm had gone wooden, like every other muscle. He lay there, eyes open but unseeing, while feet and ankles twitched.

Billy drew in great gulps of air, then kicked away the knife. His eyes swept the dusk around him. What about the rest of that borderline fight?

But the fight, he saw, was over. His pards and Holden had downed the outlaw pack. Tough hombres were prisoners, wounded. Buck, Joe, and the cow dick had managed to cut them off.

"Not a one got away, boss!" the veteran roared, as they now came thundering up. "Hot dog! I see yuh done killed El Tornador! By gosh! Thet's the stuff!"

"Nope, not dead," the Circle J owner said. "Jist knocked out. He'll hang for his crimes, anyhow, here in the United States. But before he does," Billy rapped, "he's goin' to tell me where my cattle are—him or some o' thet pack."

"Don't you fret about that, Misstee Billy!" Sing Lo cried, with a happy grin. "Me know where cattle be hid. I lun into 'em last night."

"Why, yuh danged close-mouthed son of a gun!" Buck yelled. "What else has yuh done? Dern it! Spill yore stuff!"

Sing Lo smiled. "Me getee Misstee Lanse to fix up that note to bad homblays' chief. We don't tell no fib. We just say him come to line, we make cattle talk."

"Yeah, but whar am them cattle? He didn't bring 'em with him, that's a gosh-darned cinch," Buck Foster snorted.

The little chink grinned again and explained. Guided by Billy's account of the day before, he'd taken the note to the rim of the pass above the outlaw camp.

Tying it to a rock, he'd dropped it on the guards and fled. Then, in his wild-eyed rush to get away, he'd run smack into the herd, not far south of the pass.

"They be in little valley, eating good grass. We go getee 'em. That is what be a cinch."

"Chink, yo're a wiz!" Joe cried. "I savvied how yuh handled the marker—with pick and shovel and a rope tied to yore cayuse, I guess. But she shore was some slight-of-hand stunt—makin' a border move, and show up whar it ain't!"

The little man nodded blandly. "Me velly happy," he said, "to helpee out my boss. I just setee trap with bandit bait—and lookee what we caught!"

Sing Lo has shore pulled some plumb clever stunts at Circle J, but the one he pulled on the Thunderer is goin' ter be talked about on the home spread fer a long, long time. Yuh'd think it would make Buck Foster sorry fer the way he's set on the chink in times past. But it won't. Buck'll likely ride him worse than ever. An' Buck an' Billy an' Joe will shore be burnin' leather an' blazin' away with fast guns in the next Circle J story. It'll be in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly right soon.



Cotulla's Missing Witness

A "Shootin' Fool" Story

By Houston Irvine

Author of "Prickly-pear Boot-fittin'," etc.

THE tall young deputy sheriff stepped out of the little office in the front part of the jail building. He glanced interestedly in both directions along Cotulla's Main Street.

The little cow town was crowded. Horses lined the hitch rails. Buckboards and heavy wagons thrust their dusty beds out into the roadway. Scores of men chattered in groups on the wooden sidewalks, overflowed into the street and kept the hinged doors of the Maverick

Saloon swinging like a bull's tail in fly time.

Only three things could attract such a throng to the small town in the heart of the prickly-pear country—a circus, a rodeo, or an interesting criminal trial. Of the three, Lucius knew it was a trial that accounted for the air of suppressed excitement that gripped the crowd.

Ordinarily the young deputy, who liked action and plenty of it, found sessions of court very tiresome. But on this particular day, even his

smooth and untanned cheeks were flushed with excitement, his wide blue eyes brighter than usual.

In another hour—at nine o'clock—big Al Dixon was to go on trial for the murder of "Shorty" Paine. Dixon, a powerful and unscrupulous rancher, from up by the Rio Frio, claimed to have shot Paine, a neighbor, in self-defense.

But the "Shootin' Fool," as Lucius was called, had unearthed an eyewitness—a cowboy named Sid Hastings, who was ready to testify that Paine had not even been reaching for his six-gun when Dixon's bullet had pierced him through the heart, that he had been killed because he had discovered the Dash D owner in the act of branding some calves that did not belong to him.

Lucius and nearly every one else in the county were of the same opinion that Dixon should have been hanged for similar crimes, a long time before. But he had always managed to escape prosecution by means of alibis and the lack of witnesses.

A ripple of excitement, running through the crowd, drew the deputy's attention to a rider on a roan horse, cantering easily along the middle of the street. The hombre was Hastings—a tall, raw-boned, leathery-looking chap, a few years older than the Shootin' Fool.

Apparently the cowboy knew he was the center of attraction at that moment and was intent on making the most of it. Tugging his heavy, holstered six-gun an inch forward on his right thigh, he doffed his battered brown Stetson, smiled broadly to the spectators, and spurred his spirited cayuse up to a hitch rail in front of the Maverick Saloon in a cloud of dust.

Lucius immediately started across the street to greet the puncher. Al-

though he had not been told so, the deputy thought perhaps Sheriff Alcorn and the prosecuting attorney, Fred Hudson, might want to talk to the star witness before the trial opened. They, with Hank Rogers, the veteran older deputy, were in the office.

The Shootin' Fool's appearance in the middle of Main Street drew some of the attention from Hastings. The deputy's make-up always was such as to attract glances—not so much envious as derisive.

Although tall and broad-shouldered, Lucius had not yet got beyond the age where he carried himself with a certain schoolboy awkwardness. Even the two six-guns, swinging in low-slung holsters on his hips, failed to give him the air of experience.

That was partly due to the palleness of his complexion, his popping blue eyes, and long yellow hair, but mostly to the manner in which he dressed. No real, honest-to-goodness cowboy could have been bribed to put on his clothes.

His shirt was of a gaudy orange hue, in contrast to the bright green of his neckerchief. His cowhide chaps and high-heeled boots were as yellow as his unruly locks, and polished until they reflected sunlight like the star pinned upon his chest. Covering his head was a giant white Mexican sombrero, with a snakeskin band.

The Shootin' Fool knew that his colorful garb focused eyes upon him. But he did not let that worry him. In fact, there was more than a little swagger in his gait as he hurried toward Hastings.

What happened next came with such amazing swiftness that the deputy, like every other man along the street, was paralyzed into inactivity for a few seconds.

Heralded only by a clatter of hoofs upon the packed earth, two masked men suddenly appeared, racing out of a narrow alley between the saloon and the hardware store next to it. With drawn guns gleaming brightly in their hands, they spurred their cayuses across the few feet to where the murder witness still sat in his saddle.

Lucius saw one of the strange hombres grab the reins from Hastings's fingers. The other jabbed the muzzle of his six-gun into the cowboy's back, with a snarling order:

"Come on! Hoist yore hands, an' don't try nothin'!"

There was nothing the witness could do but obey. And he did it, thrusting his arms toward the sunny sky.

The man holding the gun at his back snatched the .45 from Hastings's holster quickly and gave the roan horse a resounding slap. Led by the other masked ranny, the cayuse jerked away from the hitch rail, back into the street.

In an instant, it flashed across the Shootin' Fool's mind what was happening. Of course, he could not identify the masked gunmen as employees of Al Dixon. He could not even see any brands on their horses. But——

"They're kidnaping Hastings, so he won't be able to give evidence at the trial!" cried the deputy. Then, in the next breath: "Stop, you crooks! I'll——"

Crash! The gun flashed in the hand of the hombre leading Hastings's roan.

Fortunately for Lucius Carey, the shooter already was moving too fast for accurate aim. Nevertheless, the young officer heard the bullet sing uncomfortably close to his head.

His cheeks paled a little, then flushed. His blue eyes grew nar-

rower, and his stubborn jaw clamped tightly.

Six-guns spoke a language that he understood—and liked. His hands dropped toward the open mouths of his holsters, so rapidly that the motions were blurred.

As fast as he was, he did not have time to get his .45s out of their leathers, however. Seeing the danger, the kidnapers did not try to shoot the deputy again. But they chose an even better, surer way of clearing him out of their path.

Spurring savagely, they jerked their cayuses and the led one of Hastings straight toward the young man. They were going to ride him down.

Lucius saw the big heads of the horses looming almost on top of him. Sharp hoofs flashed with cruel death. The kidnapers' mouths, visible below the edges of their masks, grinned cruelly.

The cayuses snorted and would have separated around the standing waddy. But their masters yanked them back toward him, with oaths.

With the hot breaths of the critters on his pale cheeks, the Shootin' Fool must think only of saving himself. Could he even do that, in the split second that remained before the horses would be upon him?

His action in throwing both arms up in front of him, as if to parry an ordinary attack, was automatic. Hurling himself backward, he tried to get out of the way of the animals.

But they were guided by brains more beastly than their own. Spurring and jerking on his reins, one of the kidnapers jumped his cayuse a long way ahead, rearing.

Lucius Carey saw a forehoof almost brush across his eyes. He tried to dodge farther back, but the high heel of his right boot caught in a

deep rut. With a twinge of pain, as his ankle turned beneath his weight, the deputy fell, clutching frantically at the air for support.

There was no time to think of such minor pain as that of a strained tendon, however. The horse's hoofs were still beating at the Shootin' Fool. Desperately he rolled, trying to get out of the way. But the cause was plunging too rapidly.

Smash! At least to Lucius, the blow of one sharp hoof upon his head sounded like the crack of doom.

He could be thankful, though, that the hit was a glancing one, and that his heavy white sombrero robbed it of some of its force. He was saved a fractured skull.

Everything went black before his eyes for an instant. The noisy hoofbeats faded away. The Shootin' Fool was as still as death itself there in the dust.

II.

Lucius Carey was only unconscious for a few short moments. But that was plenty of time for the kidnapers and their important captive to gallop out of town. Opening his eyes in the glaring sunshine, the deputy saw Sheriff Alcorn and Hank Rogers bending over him. The crowd formed a ring around them.

"Are yuh all right?" asked the sheriff, in a gruffly anxious tone, his steady gray eyes probing the Shootin' Fool's blue ones.

The sheriff was a medium-sized, middle-aged hombre, with a broad, friendly face.

"Well"—the Shootin' Fool managed to sit up and gently patted the egglike bump that was rising on his head—"I reckon I can't be dead, or it wouldn't hurt as it does."

"No, yuh ain't dead," grunted the sheriff, seemingly not overjoyed.

"Wh-wh-what ha-happened?" Lucius stared at the older officer. "The last I remember, a horse seemed about to tear me to pieces with its hoofs, and—"

"An' Sid Hastings was stole," groaned Alcorn, snatching off his gray Stetson and plucking worriedly at the few stiff red hairs that ringed his shiny bald pate.

"It looks like our chances o' convictin' Al Dixon was blowed up complete," horned in Hank Rogers, in a drawling voice.

He was a tall, lanky native of the prickly-pear country, with a skin like sun-cured leather and a long, dismally drooping black mustache. He spat a brown stream of tobacco juice into the dust, shifted his bulging quid from one lean cheek to the other, and wiped his horny right hand across the hairy decoration on his upper lip.

The Shootin' Fool looked from one of his friends to the other. Seldom had he seen either of them look so disappointed.

"Without Hastings's testimony thar ain't a chance in the world of our provin' a case against Dixon," admitted Sheriff Alcorn glumly.

Lucius scrambled hastily to his feet, ignoring the twinge of pain in his twisted ankle.

"What's the matter with looking for the cowboy, if he's that important?" he demanded.

Alcorn shrugged. "Me an' Hank don't dare leave town right now," he replied sadly. "With the trial startin' in a little while."

"Well, I'm not so important to the case," the young deputy interrupted. "I'll find Hastings."

"You?" The sheriff frowned. "I 'lowed, after the way thet hoss kicked yuh in the head, thet yuh wouldn't feel much like hittin' the trail."

The Shootin' Fool flushed. His head did ache, in the throbbing manner of a mashed thumb. But—

"Do you suppose you can delay dismissal of the case until I bring the puncher into court?" asked Lucius anxiously.

"Mebbe the judge will give us twenty-four hours. If we ain't showed nothin' by that time, I reckon the case'll be throwed out, all right." Alcorn rubbed his barren pate, with scant hope.

"Twenty-four hours! That ought to be all the time I need," snapped the deputy in a tone that was far more confident than he actually felt.

Pulling his white sombrero down carefully but firmly on his bruised head and jerking his twin holsters a little farther forward on his hips, he set off at once in the direction of the livery stable where he kept his horse.

"Hey! Don't yuh want a posse to go along with yuh?" Sheriff Alcorn yelled after him.

"No," replied the younger officer, hurrying his steps, elbowing his way roughly through the excited crowd.

Lucius Carey firmly believed that a large body of men was more often a handicap than a help on a trail. He liked to work alone, relying more upon stealth and clever head-work than upon sheer strength.

The hunt for the missing witness suited him perfectly. It promised plenty of danger and action to satisfy him.

As he cornered his own cayuse in the small corral back of the livery barn and saddled it, he almost forgot his headache because of his excitement. Then leading his critter through the stable to the street, he swung aboard, with the eyes of the crowd upon him, and happily jabbed his spurs into the animal's flanks.

The horse—a sleepy brown one, named Molasses because it ran so slowly—reared quickly and bolted off in a gallop at the unexpected jabs. Feeling himself to be the center of attraction, as Sid Hastings had been a few moments before his kidnaping, the Shootin' Fool was in his glory.

However, he did not let his love for show interfere with his common sense or duty. As soon as he was out of town, beyond the range of admiring glances, he became the grim, coolly thoughtful man hunter.

Letting Molasses slow down to a normal pace, he pushed his big hat back on his aching head and ran his fingers puzzledly through his straw-colored hair.

Although he had started out of Cotulla with an air of so much assurance, he knew that his problem was more difficult than he would have admitted publicly. He was on the trail of kidnapers whom he did not know, and who, undoubtedly, were too smart to leave a trail.

So close to town, they would only have to stick to the traveled roads for a short way to conceal their route completely.

"Such being the case"—Lucius stared with narrowing eyes, toward the northern horizon of prickly pear and mesquite—"I'll head for the Dash D. Dixon's ranch is close to the Rio Frio, and its canyons would be the logical place for the crooks to try and get rid of Hastings's body, if they kill him.

"There's just a chance that they might stop at the Dash D for food, or to see if anybody is on their trail."

Having decided on a course of action, however uncertain of producing results it might be, the deputy spurred his sleepy cayuse even more deeply than he had done on Main Street. Molasses started northward

along the dusty Rio Frio road at a record clip—for him. But his master did not let him follow along the easy highway more than a few hundred yards.

The Shootin' Fool knew short cuts all over the great pear thicket. And he imagined he could reach the Dash D Ranch more quickly by following them than by keeping to the road, since the latter wound about considerably.

Reining his horse into the chaparral, he drove it recklessly, ever toward the north. Sometimes great areas of prickly pear blocked the way, and the deputy had to circle them. Again and again, he was forced to pick his way through narrow trails, where thorns clutched at his gaudy shirt, and snakes slithered away beneath the pounding hoofs of his cayuse.

Nevertheless, Lucius made good time—better than he realized he was making. When he reached a point, late in the afternoon, that he knew could not be far from the Dash D Ranch, he supposed the kidnapers and their victim already must have arrived there an hour or so ahead of him.

As a result, since he was not yet in sight of the house, he was a little less cautious than he should have been. Turning back into the highway, where it made a great bend toward the ranch, he did not imagine for an instant that he could be cutting in ahead of the hombres he was seeking.

Dense green chaparral masked the road from the Shootin' Fool's view until he was right on it. And the noise that Molasses made in crashing through the brush drowned out the patter of the three cayuses coming from town.

"What the——" One of the kidnapers saw the deputy before he

spotted them, just coming around the bend after following the highway all the way from Cotulla.

Warned by the gruff yell of surprise, Lucius jerked his horse to the right, to face the two gunmen and their captive in the middle of the road. His blue eyes looked as if they were going to pop out of his head. And a crimson flush spread quickly to the tips of his ears.

The officer was more surprised than the men for whom he was searching.

Without their masks, the kidnapers were recognized by the deputy instantly. They were two of the most notorious killers and bad men in the Southwest, hunted by every sheriff and marshal in half a dozen States.

One was a tall, powerfully muscled hombre, with a swarthy complexion, and coarse, untrimmed black hair falling in ringlets over his broad shoulders. He got his name—"Scar" Evans—from the ugly purple mark of an old knife wound that zigzagged across his sneering, dished-in features and split his short nose so that it looked like a saddle.

The other outlaw, "Rattler" McGuire, was shorter and thinner, with skin and hair nearly as light as the Shootin' Fool's. His slitted greenish eyes were far different from the deputy's blue orbs, however. And his thin lips drew back over his fang-like teeth in a snarl of hatred for all law.

"It's thet fool deputy! I reckoned he was killed when my hoss stepped on him," yelled Rattler.

"His haid was too hard." Scar laughed. "But mebbe it won't be hard enough ter stop a bullet."

The big man's right hand moved with surprising quickness to the holster on his thigh.

"We'll kill him!" The slimmer

outlaw's fingers also clutched for his .45.

Lucius Carey saw the motions, as well as the stricken face of the kidnappers' victim. Hastings seemed to be appealing mutely to the deputy to save him.

His features were pale and haggard. And his eyes stared as if he were terrified.

The Shootin' Fool's hands moved with the speed of summer lightning. The two crooks were fast in their draws, but the innocent-appearing young officer was even faster.

He did not count the odds of two to one against him. And, with a six-gun in each hand, he might not have had to do so, if Rattler and Scar had been a little closer together. But Sid Hastings was between them, so that Lucius could not really watch them both at once.

As his .45s cleared the tops of his holsters, the deputy saw the larger of the gunmen jerking his weapon into the open. Naturally, in that split second, the Shootin' Fool did not spare even a fleeting glance at his other foe.

Crash! The six-gun in his right hand roared, leaping violently from the recoil.

Realizing that Scar's testimony might also be valuable in convicting Al Dixon, Lucius did not aim at the big outlaw's body, but at his gun hand. And the deputy just had time to see Scar's .45 fly out of his fingers, across the knuckles of which suddenly appeared a dripping crimson furrow—the mark of a hot, lead bullet.

Wham! Another explosion, not from his own guns, seemed to rock the Shootin' Fool in his saddle.

Blackness engulfed him like a torrent. For an instant, he felt himself slipping, and fought to save himself.

Then, as he pitched sidewise out of his saddle, he was not conscious of any sensation.

III.

It was pitch dark in the tiny building where Lucius Carey had been thrown roughly while he was still unconscious. Not a ray of light penetrated into the cell-like room.

After recovering his senses, the deputy lay perfectly quiet for a long time, wondering if he were only dreaming that he was alive. He blinked his eyes rapidly. Why was he unable to see anything but blackness?

His head ached terribly. He tried to raise his right hand to his brow, and discovered that his wrists were bound tightly behind his back.

That made him conscious of the pain in them, too. Trying to move his feet, he found that his ankles were also tied.

"Well, I'll be dog-goned! Where am I? Why am I here? And how am I going to get away?" he groaned, in a despairing tone.

He could not have expected an answer to his questions. But, almost startlingly, another voice came out of the darkness:

"Yo're in a tool shed at the Dash D. One o' the fellers that kidnaped me creased yuh with a bullet when yuh met us out in the road. Thar ain't no possibility o' gittin' away, I reckon." The last was said in a tone that was far more hopeless than the Shootin' Fool's had been.

"Huh?" Lucius grunted, struggling frantically but vainly at his bonds. "Are you Sid Hastings?"

"Yeah," replied the other inmate of the dark room.

"I came out from Cotulla to rescue you," declared the deputy.

"Are yuh plumb cuckoo?" snorted

the important witness. "I 'lowed, if yuh wasn't already knocked silly by that hoss, yuh would be by Rattler McGuire's bullet. I don't reckon any hombre could stand two licks like yuh got yestiddy, no matter how hard a head he had."

The Shootin' Fool bit his lip in the darkness to check a hot denial that he was crazy.

"Yesterday?" he asked, in amazement. "Do you mean—"

A short, mirthless laugh from the cowboy interrupted him.

"Shore, it was yestiddy that yuh went to sleep. I guess it's about three o'clock in the mornin' now," explained Hastings.

Three o'clock in the morning! Lucius Carey recalled that Sheriff Alcorn had told him he had twenty-four hours to find the witness. And about eighteen hours already were gone. Wasted?

"Gee! It'll get daylight pretty quick," growled the young officer.

"Uh-huh!" The puncher gave a loud sigh. "An' a lot o' good that'll do us. Yo'd better hope it stays dark forever."

"Why?" demanded the deputy.

"'Cause daylight means the end of me an' yuh," retorted Hastings. "After Rattler creased yuh yestiddy afternoon, he an' Scar Evans figured that wasn't no hurry in gittin' rid o' me last night, like they had planned to do. So they fetched us both hyar to the shed an' chucked us in."

"Jest as they shut the door, I heard 'em say as how they'd take us out when dawn comes, kill us, an' drap us into one o' them deep canyons runnin' down to the Rio Frio, whar we wouldn't be found till the buzzards had picked our bones clean."

That information started the Shootin' Fool tugging at his bonds

again. But he soon convinced himself that there was no hope of escape that way.

"Are you tied?" he called across the room to his fellow prisoner.

"Of course," replied the latter. "I can't wiggle a toe or a finger hardly."

"Your jaws seem to be working, at any rate. That may be some help to us," Lucius said.

"Meanin' jest what?" growled the cowboy. "It don't look like yuh would be so insultin' to a pard who was goin' to die with yuh in a little while."

"Don't let that worry you—yet," said the deputy, with a new note of hope in his voice. "I'm going to roll over to where you are, Hastings. Then you get busy on the ropes around my arms with your teeth. If you can get those knots free, we may have a chance."

"Yeah? What chance, without a gun, a knife, or a weapon of any kind? Even if we both got our ropes off, we couldn't get out. The door's locked, an' it's plenty strong," the puncher started to argue.

The Shootin' Fool did not bother answering. He already was moving as rapidly as he could, with his wrists and ankles tied.

Although it could not have been more than ten or twelve feet to the spot where Hastings lay, it seemed many times that distance to the deputy. When he rolled over on his back, it felt as if his arms, pinned beneath him, were going to break. Then it was a struggle to turn onto his stomach again.

The sharp tines of a pitchfork, lying upon the floor, ripped through Lucius's shirt and scraped his shoulder. He was lucky that they did not stab into his heart.

Trembling at his narrow escape from the unseen and unexpected death, the officer twisted himself

around and kicked the hay tool out of the way with both feet. He heard it strike against the door.

"Arc yuh comin'?" Sid Hastings growled out of the blackness.

"I'm coming. Keep your shirt on," grunted the Shootin' Fool, heaving himself on toward the other's voice.

Panting from his efforts, Lucius reached the place where the cowboy was stretched out against the wall. A final roll put his back and bound wrists toward the witness.

"Now get busy with your teeth on those knots," the deputy ordered.

Apparently Hastings realized that their only hope of escape lay in his obeying. He went to work like a squirrel, without a word of protest.

For the next three quarters of an hour, it would have been difficult to say who suffered more—the puncher, struggling feverishly to untie the knots with his teeth, or the Shootin' Fool, watching the gray light of dawn begin to creep in through the crack beneath the door.

It must have seemed to both that the suspense was endless, that their chance for freedom was diminishing to nothing. But just when Lucius was beginning to expect their captors at the door at any moment, he felt the rope about his arms suddenly loosen.

Sid Hastings's frantic efforts had not been in vain. The Shootin' Fool wrenched his wrists out of the now slack loops of rope and rubbed them vigorously with his numbed fingers to restore their circulation.

In a few minutes, he was able to go to work on the bonds about his ankles. It did not take him long to unfasten the knots there. Then he stood up, bending over his companion, starting to untie him.

Thump! A heavy footstep outside the door jerked him around be-

fore he had hardly touched Hastings's ropes.

"We'll git rid o' the cowboy an' thet fool deputy pronto now," came Scar Evans's snarling voice, as a key grated in the lock of the door. "It's jest as well we left 'em hyar till mornin'. We wouldn't 'a' had time ter hide their bodies last night, 'fore it got too dark fer us ter see."

"Yeah." Lucius Carey heard Rattler McGuire's reply. "But Al Dixon ought ter pay us double fer killin' the Shootin' Fool, too. We didn't contract with him ter git rid o' nobody but Hastin's."

The deputy's eyes strained ahead. Every nerve and muscle in his body was tense.

The door was opening inward!

IV.

With the spring of a mountain cat pouncing upon its prey, Lucius Carey leaped to the pitchfork and snatched it from the floor. Then, gripping the tool in both hands like a club, he whirled to meet his enemies, coming through the doorway.

Rattler McGuire was in the lead, Scar Evans two paces behind him.

"What the——" Seeing the deputy, unbound and on his feet, the smaller outlaw stopped suddenly and grabbed for his six-gun.

Smack! The Shootin' Fool swung the pitchfork with all his strength.

Its handle caught Rattler on his left temple. For an instant, the gunman reeled on his feet, while a blank expression swept over his pale face.

Then, with his fingers encircling the handle of his .45, he staggered backward. If his partner had not leaped quickly aside, the knocked-out bad man would have fallen on top of him.

"What the——" Scar repeated his companion's exclamation of sur-

prise and tore at his holstered six-gun.

But as the result of Lucius's bullet having wounded his right hand the day before, the big killer had his .45 slung on his left hip. And he was not nearly as fast on the draw with his left hand as he was with his right.

Nevertheless, Scar reached his weapon and was jerking it out of its holster, when the deputy sprang out of the doorway.

"I'll git yuh!" Scar snarled.

With a wild yell, the Shootin' Fool reversed the pitchfork, which he had used as a club on Rattler, and leaped at the second crook with the tines jabbing.

One of the slender points of the tool ripped through the outlaw's shirt on the left side, ripping the garment and leaving a little stain of crimson.

Scar gave a shriek as if he had been deeply stabbed, and started to run backward. In his fear of the tines, he seemed to forget all about the .45 at his waist.

"Stop and grab for the sky, you dirty murderer!" shouted Lucius, prodding with the pitchfork like a puncher poking cattle through a loading chute.

The gunman evidently was too terrified to halt. His eyes wide with fear and his ugly, swarthy features drained of most of their color, he continued retreating.

But suddenly he backed into the high wooden fence of the Dash D horse corral.

With a grunt of panic, he tried to turn aside, to dodge the horrible death that seemed so near. But instantly the Shootin' Fool grasped his opportunity and flung the tines of the pitchfork up so that they pressed against the crook's throat.

"Put 'em up!" barked the deputy.

"Empty!" he added, as his foe started to raise his hands, with his six-gun still clutched loosely in his left one.

With the points of the pitchfork pricking his neck, Scar let his .45 drop into his holster and waved his arms frantically above his head.

"Don't kill me," he begged in an imploring tone.

Lucius Carey snatched the six-gun from the tamed bad man's thigh and laughed.

"Don't worry." With the weapon aimed threateningly at Scar's midriff, the deputy spared a glance toward the unconscious Rattler. "I wouldn't kill you for anything. I have too much respect for the rope to want to cheat it.

"You and your partner will go back to Cotulla with Sid Hastings and me. And if I don't miss my guess, you'll have the pleasure of hanging with your employer, Al Dixon."

The judge, a grim, white-haired man named William Clay, pounded fiercely on the desk in front of him with his gavel and glared at the sheriff, the veteran deputy, and the prosecuting attorney.

The small courtroom was packed and overflowing with spectators. Hard-faced ranchers and cowboys jammed the long benches, perched on the window sills, or stood shoulder to shoulder in the aisles.

However, an air of disappointment hung over the crowd. Neighbor whispered to neighbor and scowled.

Judge Clay rapped once more for order. He stared at the prosecuting attorney.

"Do you mean to say," Clay growled, "that you cannot produce a single witness who saw the prisoner shoot Mr. Paine, as you charge?"

The prosecutor, a youngish man named Clyde Wilbur, turned sheepishly toward Sheriff Alcorn. It was evident that the State's attorney was bitterly chagrined by the collapse of his case.

Alcorn rubbed his bald head nervously. And Hank Rogers tugged at the drooping ends of his long mustache and chewed his quid of tobacco tirelessly.

In a chair a few feet away sat the prisoner, whispering and laughing with his lawyer. Dixon was a large, florid-faced hombre, with steel-gray hair, closely cropped on his bullet-shaped head, evil, piggish eyes, and a sneer.

With the two of them to watch him, Alcorn and Hank had not thought it necessary to keep the handcuffs on the Dash D owner in court.

Throwing his muscular right arm across the shoulders of his defense attorney, Dixon turned in his chair and leered at the officers, as much as to say:

"Yuh poor saps! Yuh ought to had better sense than ter think yuh could put the deadwood on me."

The twenty-four hours that the sheriff had told Lucius Carey he would have to find the missing witness, Sid Hastings, were up.

Alcorn coughed, then said: "Yore honor, if yo'll give us more time, I'm shore my deputy'll return with the one witness who's important to this case. I—"

"Bah!" The judge's eyes flashed rebukingly. "This court has other things to attend to besides wait while you try to build up your case."

"Can't we have another short continuance?" cut in the prosecutor desperately. "Don't dismiss the case yet, your honor. Please."

Clay glared. "I gave you a continuance yesterday," he growled.

"You promised that Lucius Carey would have your vital witness in court to-day. The defendant will please stand up."

With a sneer over his shoulder at Sheriff Alcorn, Dixon got up from his chair and faced the judge.

"Prisoner!" The latter's voice rang sharply in the hushed court room. "For want of any evidence against you, I now dis—"

Before he could complete the word that would have freed the Dash D owner, a sudden commotion at the doorway stopped him. Instantly every hombre in the room was on his feet, trying to see what was happening.

They were not long in discovering what it was. Elbowing the spectators aside roughly, there came Lucius Carey and Sid Hastings, shoving two bound and scared-looking prisoners ahead of them.

The deputy's face was pale and haggard, but his bright-blue eyes flashed exultantly.

"Here, your honor," he cried, pushing rapidly down the aisle, "is the missing witness, Sid Hastings! You may also be interested in the testimony of the two gunmen that Al Dixon hired to kill the witness."

For a long second after Lucius's announcement, a man could have heard a pin drop anywhere in the courtroom. Then:

"The case is saved!" drawled Hank Rogers. "Hooray fer Loo-shis!"

The Dash D owner must have realized that his game of dodging penalties was played out. With a hoarse yell, he threw himself at the veteran deputy, snatching the officer's holstered six-gun into the open.

"Yuh won't hang me!" snarled the rancher. "An' I'll git a couple of yuh pesky law gents 'fore yuh plug me!"

Like a wolf at bay, he leaped back against the judge's desk, flourishing Hank's .45.

If he pulled the trigger in that crowded room, he could not miss hitting some one, whether it was one of the officers or not. Sneering, he swung the black muzzle of the weapon toward Sheriff Alcorn.

Sweat sprang out in beads on the sheriff's bald head. Everything had happened so quickly that he had not had time to reach his own six-gun. And every one of the spectators seemed to be paralyzed for the time being.

Only one person besides Al Dixon moved. And that was the Shootin' Fool Deputy.

Knocking aside a cowboy, Lucius leaped upon a bench and whipped his hands down toward his holsters. So quickly that no one could have seen the motions, his guns sprang out, jabbed forward over the heads of the crowd in front and spurted flame.

Crash-crash! The two shots were so close together that they sounded like one.

With a scream of pain and fear, Dixon dropped Hank Rogers's .45 and clutched at his wrist, shattered by the young deputy's bullets.

As quickly as it started, the danger was past. The guilty rancher cowered back against the judge's desk, moaning and whimpering.

Sheriff Alcorn rapidly took charge of the situation. Hank Rogers recovered his fallen, unfired six-gun from the floor. Judge Clay pounded furiously for order.

"Well!" The Shootin' Fool sprang down from the bench and elbowed his way to the front of the room. "It looks as if I had arrived in time, after all."

"Yeah." Sheriff Alcorn's single word of reply held volumes of praise for the young deputy.

"The best part of it"—Hank Rogers spat a brown stream on the floor—"is that you didn't plug Dixon, the skunk, through the heart, but let him live to be hung."

"Order in the court!" shouted Judge Clay, hammering on his desk. "The trial of Al Dixon for the murder of Shorty Paine will proceed."

An' there ain't much doubt as ter how that trial will turn out, either. Looshis shore saved the day fer the law. What he done ought ter help out his standin' in the town, too—make folks realize that he ain't no freak. He'll be back again, soon, in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, in another fast-movin' adventure. Watch fer him.





Brazos Lays Down The Law

By Philip F. Deere

Author of "Red Wolf's Trail Ends," etc.

CHAPTER I.

PROD PECK—HOSS THIEF.

THE man driving the six sleek saddle horses half turned his head. His right hand strayed down to the level of his hip where a six-gun sagged low on a loose belt.

"Yuh got some nice broncs there, stranger," drawled Paul Larrabee, the young waddy facing him.

"Yeah?" asked the stranger. "What's it to yuh, kid?"

Paul's voice was soft and smooth as he answered, but there was a note of iron in the tone.

"Why, nothin', stranger," he said, "savin' that two of 'em are mine."

The lean, dark stranger's gun was out then. He was fast and smooth on the draw, and he did not draw merely as a threat. He let his gun explode as it cleared the leather.

At that, he was too slow. Paul Larrabee's blued six-gun spoke first. The dark stranger swayed in his saddle and swore in agony as his own weapon slid from his hand and the bullet dug harmlessly into the dust. The startled broncs scattered.

Young Larrabee easily could have killed the man. But he had been content to do no more than shatter his shoulder.

"You might've picked 'em up by accident," the young man explained.

"But seems as if—bein' so touchy —" He did not bother to finish his sentence, deciding merely to sit his three-quarter-bred blue roan filly and let the other talk.

Paul thought that his own action had said about all that was necessary. Just one look at this stranger, as a matter of fact, was enough to show that the fellow was a villain.

Obviously, too, he was not of the Southwest. The black sombrero he wore was pinched to a peak in a fashion not seen hereabouts. He wore corduroy breeches and leggings instead of the usual chaps and boots. And he spoke in a harsh, high voice unlike the gentle Southern drawl.

"I just happened tuh be ridin' through," he grumbled now. "I was headin' for fair week at Redbonnet with this remuda of mine. Could I help it, if a couple of strays picked up with my horses?"

"What's your name," the young stockman snapped, ignoring the evident weakness of the man's attempted explanation.

Fair Week at Redbonnet was more than a month away yet. A man who knows he has horses which are not his own, does not try to protect them by gunfire, if his possession is accidental.

"Peck—Prod Peck," the man in the black hat answered. "From—north yonder."

"Very well. Keep travelin', Peck. But be careful how your hosses pick up stray friends in these parts, brother. Likely tuh get yuh into more trouble."

The scattered saddle horses, which had stampeded for little more than a half mile, now came circling back. Paul whistled three sharp notes. A white-stockinged bay and a pretty chestnut two-year-old pricked up their ears and came trotting to him.

A whining note of complaint came into Peck's voice. "How far do I have to ride with this busted shoulder?"

Paul noticed then that the man still had some use of his right arm. "I reckon that your shoulder's not busted."

He drove his filly in close, and keeping an eye on Peck's left hand—for there was likely to be another gun on him somewhere—examined the fellow's wound. Yes, the shot had just nicked the bone evidently.

The bullet's shock had served the purpose of disarming the stranger, but it certainly had not crippled him. Here was no cause for excessive sympathy.

"Redbonnet's fifty miles, but you'll find a doctor at Hardpan. That's only ten mile from here."

Whistling up his horses, Paul whirled and was gone. He did not see "Prod" Peck tugging at a small caliber derringer which had been tucked inside his shirt.

It did not matter, fortunately. For by the time Peck had the toy gun out and had clumsily slipped the safety catch Paul was more than a hundred yards away.

And Prod Peck, horse thief and gambler, did not choose to gamble on the chance of trying a small .32 at that range, when the other fellow had a long .45 with which to reply.

Peck preferred to gamble on certainties. And, by the time he had recovered his own six-gun from the chaparral, Paul Larrabee was a long way toward his own home ranch.

CHAPTER II.

"WASTIN' YOUR TIME!"

THE whole horse country was astir in the anticipation of the racing at the Redbonnet fair week. There were to be a dozen events,

with generous purses contributed by wealthy stockmen as well as the fair association. But the great feature on Saturday afternoon was the widely advertised and famous Bellamy Mile.

Famous old "Brazos" Bellamy, three times governor of the State, and as tough an old fighter as ever whipped raiding Apaches or half-breed bad men, had hung up a ten-thousand-dollar prize for the winner of that race. Ambitious owners came from far and near to enter their horses.

But when word went round that the "Keno" Kendall's white colt—a beautiful animal known as White Flash—had been entered, the local breeders mostly withdrew their entries from the feature event and decided to try out their animals in races where they'd have some chance of winning.

For White Flash had been accurately timed over a measured mile, and had done it in one minute and thirty-seven seconds—only a couple of seconds short of the world's record.

Paul Larrabee, of course, knew all about White Flash's fame. But he continued to train his own pet filly, Bluebell, for the big contest. Till White Flash had been imported, Bluebell was the fastest thing which had ever run over the prairie. Lacking the means for measuring an exact mile, Paul did not know precisely what time his blue roan could make. But he thought—

"Keno Kendall's not goin' to scare me out, Saba."

Paul was going carefully over Bluebell's legs, while Saba, his one hired hand—a withered Mexican of sixty years—held the white-stockinged bay and the chestnut.

"Bad," grumbled Saba, who never wasted language.

"What's bad? My idea about racing Bluebell? Or—"

"Keno," said Saba.

"He ain't such a sweet hombre. And he's made a million dollars, which he don't mind spendin' on hosuses."

"Stole," Saba grunted.

"The million? Or the hosuses?"

"Both likely."

"Oh, now! He offered me a fine price for Bluebell."

"Will ag'in. Look!" Three men were topping the knoll where stood the ranch's windmill. "Keno," Saba grunted.

It was indeed Keno Kendall, the rich man of that Redbonnet country, a man universally feared—and generally hated. He had beaten and bullied his way to the top.

You could always spot Keno Kendall a mile off by the lurid richness of his costume. He always wore a huge white Stetson, often with a band of gold nuggets around the crown. He favored bright-blue shirts and orange-colored chaps, heavy with silver ornaments. Yes, that would be Keno, all right.

"But who's his friends?" Paul asked, as he fed Bluebell a carrot.

"Dudes."

They were city folk certainly. One was a tall man in a derby hat and a long coat with wide skirts such as park riders rig themselves out in.

The other a small, wiry fellow, in neat Bedford cord gray and high black boots. Both men rode postage stamps—the flat, English type of saddle.

"Hyah, kid!" Keno reared back his gigantic buckskin and waved a fringed gauntlet. Keno liked to affect the tone of bluff good fellowship. "Make yuh acquainted with my friends—Mr. Roth and Monk Macy of Chicago."

"Light an' stretch your legs a while," Paul invited politely, if not enthusiastically.

He guessed accurately that Keno had come to offer him a new price for Bluebell. The other two, by every indication, would be racing men from the city tracks.

So they were. Mr. Roth "wrote a book"—in other words was a professional gambler. Monk Macy, of course, was a jockey. They both looked over Bluebell keenly, and took in the white-stockinged bay and the chestnut, too.

On the porch, after a while, over cooling drinks, they came round to the subject of purchase. Keno, in fact, did raise his offer for Bluebell to the extraordinary sum of a flat ten thousand dollars.

"No, thanks, said Paul.

"*Bueno*," agreed the uninvited Saba, squatting at the foot of the steps, chewing a straw.

If looks could kill a man, Keno's angry glance would have slain the Mexican.

"Yore danged peon seems tuh know a lot!" the rich man snarled. "You take advice from a Mex stable hand, Larrabee?"

"Right often." Paul's voice was quiet enough, but there was a hard chill in his blue eye. "About hosses, anyway."

Keno started off again. He built up a fine argument to prove that he really ought to be the owner of Bluebell. After a while he even shoved up his price a bit.

Paul just let him talk. He was busy with his own thoughts. Why should a man offer to pay more for an animal than he could win on the richest race? Particularly when the man who was bidding was the owner of the sensational White Flash. Something was mighty funny here!

"You're just wastin' your breath,

Kendall," Paul said at last, rising. "And wastin' your friends' time, too. Adios!"

That was the end of the conference. Kendall once more assumed his hearty air of good fellowship. "So I just got tuh beat yuh fair an' square, Paul!" he bluffed.

"Looks like," Paul agreed.

He watched the trio depart, with brows still wrinkled in puzzlement.

Keno wanted that filly real bad. Why? In Paul's honest heart there was little knowledge of the devices of tricky gamblers.

Keno might control other horses in the Bellamy Mile, but Paul's horse he had no influence over. None of this was clear in the young stockman's mind, however. He fell asleep that night, puzzling.

CHAPTER III.

FIRE!

PAUL awakened, that night, in a terrible brilliance. He did not need to look out his ranch-house window to see what had happened. His barn was afire.

Yet Saba had not yelled to summon aid.

How could that have happened? The faithful Mexican slept in the barn for the very purpose of protecting Bluebell and three other choice saddle horses which were too valuable to be allowed to run loose on the range, or even exposed in the pasture lot. Being raised as racing stock, these broncs would be worth many hundreds of dollars.

Out rushed the young stockman, furious with anger and alarm. He did not even pause for boots or hat; but he did snatch up his gun belt as he ran. Some one had set this fire with evil intent. If he could find that man—

Yes, in the lurid flame a dark fig-

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ure was just scuttling around the rear end of the barn.

"Sabal!" Paul shouted, then fired.

In the tricky, flaring light the shot must have gone wild. The slinking, scrambling figure vanished.

Paul leaped to follow, then halted as he realized the need for immediate action. First he must save his vaquero and his horses. They would still be inside the barn. He must get them out somehow.

Yes, no doubt of that! Loose hay piled about the barn's walls flamed up savagely. Through the barred door within came the sound of frantic, trampling hoofs, and the bumping of heavy bodies confined in their box stalls.

Paul slung himself against the door. It was still barred. Saba was therefore inside. Paul shouted. No answer. Was Saba drugged—or dead?

Paul lunged his whole weight against the barred door. Stoutly built, it would not give at all. But there was room enough between the edge of the door and the jamb to insert a knife. Fortunately, Paul always carried a Bowie knife in a sheath at the back of his gun belt.

Whipping out that strong blade he deftly pried up the bar. He was in time. Lurid, scarlet tongues of flame lapped in through the cracks of the wall's planking; but the fire had not really yet caught the interior.

Dark as was the inside of the barn, the light of the fire through the now open door made it possible to see dimly. A big, dark shape brushed by. Then another, nearly knocking Paul over.

So the horses were loose from their box stalls. Now how could that be, since the enemy had obviously been unable to penetrate there? And where was Saba?

Repeated shouts brought no answer. The horses were madly milling round. Paul could just sense them and dimly see them in time to avoid their staggering, plunging bulks. He must get them out immediately.

But first he must find his man. Saba ought to be in the first stall. No, that stall was empty.

Then, as the fire mounted and the light grew steadily brighter, young Larrabee grasped one detail which made things clear. The panicked horses were not entirely free; all four had been loosely knotted together by their halter ropes.

So, poor Saba had wakened, and had tried to do something all by himself! And then— Yes, there was something black and bulky at the far end of the stable that Bluebell had occupied.

Paul dodged his way to the spot. Yes, the unconscious vaquero was there, all huddled up in the corner. The crimson staining the old fellow's head, and an arm woefully crumpled, showed how the faithful Mexican had been kicked and trampled in his valiant effort to save his charges.

The horses, all snarled up in their halter ropes, and wild with fear, came staggering and reeling to that corner where Paul knelt. Lifting Saba's senseless form in his arms, and protecting it as best he could with his body, Paul wedged himself into the angle of the walls. The terrified animals brushed by, trampling and kicking, but the corner saved the men from being crushed by the brute weight.

Aloft, one corner of the barn flared open and fell in. There was a shower of sparks and small, burning fragments of timber. Immediately, of course, the powdery bedding straw of the stalls began to flicker

and flame. And two of the horses screamed horribly as blazing embers seared them.

The injured man had to be got out first, however. Paul gathered the frail body in his arms again and ran for the door. The four horses, madly milling, struck him twice. Once he was down on his knees; but managed to stagger up again.

By a miracle of luck he reached the door. There he fell again, banged down by a hoof which landed agonizingly on his thigh. But luckily he fell clear, out over the doorsill.

The empty hay wain stood close by. Onto this Paul tossed his *mozo*'s body. There it would be safe from trampling, when the horses were finally lead out—if they were lead out.

Thud! And splinters flew from the wain just under Paul's fingers.

That had been no cracking and popping of the conflagration. It was a gunshot.

Paul's six-gun came out, and he fired as he swung round. Once again, he just glimpsed the enemy's dark figure at the far angle of the burning building. And again the skulker vanished.

There was no time now to follow. With a deafening roar and crash another section of the roof collapsed. Now, indeed, the whole floor of the barn was burning. If the horses were not got out instantly—

"Dang the hick that got Bluebell tied!" the young owner groaned. "If she'd only been loose—"

That had been Saba's mistake. The intelligent, handy little filly might quite possibly have led the others to safety, if she had been allowed her own head. The faithful, but dull and slow-witted Saba had probably not considered that. In the minute or two he had had, be-

fore being knocked down, he had thought only of rescuing all the horses at once. That had been a mistake.

Now it made Paul's task terribly difficult. But recklessly, desperately, he leaped back into that tempest of flame and smoke and hurled himself directly in amongst the whirling horses.

They knocked him here and there. A dozen times he almost fell under churning hoofs. Then, by luck, his left hand caught Bluebell's halter close up to her flaring, foam-lathered nostrils.

"Bluebell!" he shouted. "Blue—girl!"

Blinded with fear, and frenzied with pain of the other animals' kicks and buffetings, the filly was, of course, incapable of immediate obedience to his voice. But she did tense herself for an instant, trying to get steady and understand Paul's soothing voice.

Two blazing planks dropped from the roof. Instinctively the filly reared. The other horses swung around, screaming again.

Paul, battered, spinning, and dizzy, did the one thing he could. His knife slashed Bluebell free from the others. He hooked his fingers into her neck loop.

"Come, girl! Come, girl!" he called.

Blindly, almost unwittingly, but still conscious of her master's command, she allowed herself to be dragged, staggering, out to the open. Paul ran her ten rods clear. Then turned to save the others.

But suddenly the whole barn roof sagged in. A whirl of flame went spiraling up against the dark sky. The ground quaked and shivered as the roof-tree, joists, timbers, planks, and shingling crashed to the earth in smashing impact.

CHAPTER IV.

LYNCH LAW.

THE walls of the barn still burned furiously when, having laid the unconscious but still breathing Saba on his own bed in the ranch house, and seen that Bluebell was safe out in the white-barred corral, Paul scouted about to try to pick up some trace of the fiend who had set the fire.

He had not far to seek. Rolled in the dust was a black, oddly shaped sombrero. A bullet had punctured its pinched-in peak. But—and Paul searched till daylight—there was no other trace of the hat's owner. It was easy, however, to guess who that man was.

And Saba, frightfully bruised, but able to walk again, just nodded when Paul told him it must be Prod Peck's work.

"Him," the old Mexican agreed, "we get, boss."

"I get! You're not fit to travel," insisted Paul.

"Can walk! Can ride!"

"No," the boss concluded. "What you need, old pardner is a good bath—all over—in hoss liniment."

"No bath," was the sincere protest. "Catch cold."

Paul grinned for the first time since the tragedy of the night. "It would be a sort o' new experience for you, anyway, I reckon, Saba."

But that was Paul Larrabee's only jest. He had a grim duty to discharge. He expected to have to discharge it himself.

Except for the evidence of the stranger's hat, he had no reasonable proof that this fellow who called himself "Prod" Peck had actually set the fire. The hombre was a stranger in the community, so far as Paul knew.

Almost certainly he had another

hat somewhere in his belongings. If so, there was no other witness who could testify that the sombrero was Peck's property. And in the confusion and glare of the fiery night, Paul could not even be sure that it had been Peck at whom he had shot. But it couldn't have been any one else.

Thus, before noon, when Saba's injuries had been dressed, and the last embers of the fire extinguished, Paul had saddled Bluebell and was off on his stern mission of justice.

His quest, however, was to prove far more difficult than he had expected. At the village of Hardpan, where the young stockman had many friends, Prod Peck had not been seen.

Here and there, on the long trail to Redbonnet, Paul questioned the people he met—grangers, sheepherders, waddies on circle or just drifting. They all denied knowledge of any one answering Peck's description.

Had the man's story that he was heading for Redbonnet been entirely a falsehood? Scarcely likely, Paul thought. Peck had a couple of race horses in his own string, beside the two which he had stolen—the same two that had been so wantonly destroyed.

Except for the Redbonnet Fair, there was nowhere else in this country for a man would be going with racing animals.

In the county seat itself, Paul was careful in his inquiries, for this was Keno Kendall's home range. Here the bully was feared and powerful. Word had probably been passed that Paul was no favorite with the local boss.

Indeed, after three days of futile search, after hours of watchful lounging in Redbonnet's favorite saloon, The Palace, Paul was as far

as ever from finding the rogue he sought.

Finally, there seemed nothing else to do but take the case to the sheriff.

Sheriff Rattray was a calm man, elderly, cool-headed, and with a reputation for hard and even-handed justice. He was a typical Westerner of the old West, letting folks settle their own difficulties, as long as they fought on the level, but not above hanging a murderer or stick-up man himself—"tuh save decent folks taxes," as he put it.

In local, personal quarrels the sheriff was slow in taking a hand. He had the name of being neither opposed to, nor partial to, Keno Kendall. He listened gravely to Paul's charge.

"No such hombre has strayed this way," he allowed at last, stroking his neatly trimmed white beard. "An', furthermore, son, if a man o' such conformation and markin's *did* come moochin' into hyar, I dunna as I could hold him. You allow yuh cain't take yore oath on him!"

"Here's the hat." Paul produced the only article of evidence.

"Unusual, but not convincin'." Rattray poked his finger through the hole in the crown and spun the battered felt round and round. "If we had some one who knowed Peck wore this hat—"

"I know it."

"Yuh cain't be State's attorney, jedge, jury, an' witness, too, son. Mebbe it ain't jestice, but it's a law."

"I never could understand some things about the law!" Paul blurted hotly, rising and preparing to depart.

The sheriff smiled sadly. "You ain't the only one, son. I been fol-lerin' that blindfolded lady fer thutty years myself, an' I ain't

never entirely caught up with her." He rose and yawned. "Dusty work, this arguin'. Let's sashay 'cross to the Palace, son, and sort o' liquidate our gills."

But that drink was doomed to be postponed. Out of the front door of the Palace surprisingly—for at this sunset hour business at the bar was always at its best—came trooping half a dozen of the leading citizens.

"Hey, sheriff," called a feed-and-grain merchant, "Keno Kendall's caught him a hoss thief!"

"Hanged 'im yet?" was the cool inquiry.

What happened to such a low varmint as a horse thief was usually too unimportant to take up Sheriff Rattray's time. Horse thieves deserved only hanging, anyway, and it didn't much matter who did the job.

"But I'd ought tuh ride out fer the ceremony," the sheriff allowed. "Who was the critter?"

"Stranger," some one supplied. "A kind o' peaker, dark-skinned feller. Henry Gowanus, the sheep-herder, seen him sneakin' around last night an'—"

But Paul, forking Bluebell to follow the sheriff, hardly heeded the rest of the story. "A peaked, dark-skinned feller!" Who could that be but Prod Peck!

A headlong gallop through the twilight took the riders along the edge of Keno Kendall's vast Double K spread. This was the choicest country of the whole range land. Paul looked at the lush pasturage which clothed the rolling hills for miles and miles. What a marvelous range over which to run horses and cattle!

The riders' destination, from the direction in which they were headed, seemed to be the first shoulder of the foothills which here began to

mount to the Great Divide. An outcrop formed a knob at the southernmost extremity of the range. Dark figures clustered upon the slope of that spur beneath a gnarled and ancient apple tree.

This stumpy, wind-lashed tree stretched out its black arms against the background of the crimson sunset as if in writhing, unnatural gestures. An unusual variety for these parts, the sentinel tree appeared nearly to have perished under the scorching winds and pitiless glare of the summer's sun.

Sparse leaves dangled from its twigs; and it had never borne fruit. This dying, lonesome landmark was indeed a fit expression of ugliness and decay.

So the fruit is now bore seemed gruesomely appropriate.

From its stoutest, twisted limb a swaying body swung. At the end of its rope that sorry bundle of rags which had once been human twisted slowly and more slowly.

Soon it would hang motionless, until the wind of the night, and of many and many a night following, should come to tease and play with it, until rags and flesh fell away and there remained only a rattling skeleton.

But such grisly thoughts as these did not bother the spirits of the riders who were grouped behind the big bulk of Keno Kendall.

"Hyah, sheriff! Hyah, boys!" the stockman greeted, as jovially as if he had just come from nothing more serious than a barbecue. "Was a little job had tuh be topped off. It's finished."

"Huh, caught 'im right in the act? No mistake?" Sheriff Rattray inquired. "Runnin' yore hosses, Kendall?"

"Sho' enough. My racin' stock." The big man pointed. And there,

sure enough, was White Flash, a black stallion, and a handsome roan mare, all lathered and with manes and tails tangled with burs and brambles. "Danged cuss thought he was gettin' clean away," Kendall concluded. "He overbet his hand."

A dozen of the horsemen who were grouped behind Keno nodded. Most of the crowd were cowboys, but the gambler, Roth, and the jockey Monk Macy, were present, too. Paul Larrabee suddenly felt that the gang was eying him rather than the rest of the sheriff's company.

Then Kendall remarked. "If you set yore man onto this, Larrabee, you shore done him no favor."

"My man——" Paul began. Then looked carefully, for the first time, at that woefully dangling object. "Why, Peck——"

But it wasn't Peck. It had once been Saba.

CHAPTER V. SUSPICION.

THE long ride home was a dreary journey for Bluebell's sad young owner. It had taken four of Sheriff Rattray's men to hold him and disarm him when, in his first shock of grief and rage, he had tried to kill Kendall.

But there wasn't the shadow of doubt that poor old Saba had been caught red-handed. In his ignorance and doglike devotion, it must have occurred to the unfortunate peon that he would be doing his master a favor by stealing his enemy's choicest race horses. So he had left his duties at home, stolen down here to the Double K, and waited for his chance.

He had actually succeeded at last in fogging off White Flash and two of the racer's stablemates. But he

had tried to haze them home, while it was still day. A lone sheep-herder had seen him and sent in the alarm.

Kendall's men, better mounted, had quickly run the poor wretch down. And then they had settled the case in their own way—the time-honored way of the range.

There was nothing Paul could do about the matter. Public sentiment had been entirely against Saba and with Keno. When Paul could reason calmly and clearly again, he had to admit the justice of that.

Worse, there was the grave suspicion that he himself, Paul Larabee, had put his vaquero up to this tricky play. Before he parted company with the sheriff's band, Paul had heard men hinting at that, whispering their suspicions, looking at him with sidelong contempt. Yes, many Redbonnet men seemed really to believe that poor Saba had been acting under his master's orders.

Nor was there any way in which Paul might disprove this ugly suspicion. He was a comparative stranger in the county town and had the reputation of being a solitary soul—a man who played a lone hand.

No man ever went through a harder stretch of time than Paul spent in the next three weeks. With Saba gone, the stock scattered over the wide range and strayed into the mountains. The half dozen horses in the pasture lot were weak and ganted for water. As a constant reminder of disaster, there was the black ruin of the barn.

Working grimly and alone, Paul rounded up a few head of beef cattle. He penned them and fed them his last measures of grain, preparatory to driving them to town and selling them for whatever they might bring.

They would fetch two or three

hundred dollars, no more. That was all he would have in the world except the filly Bluebell.

But if Bluebell could win the great race—

Riding a lean, white-stockinged cow pony, with the blue filly on a lead, Paul started out for Redbonnet, four days before the date of the Bellamy Mile. He intended to spend two nights and the best part of three days on the comparatively short journey.

Bluebell was unshod and he wanted to save her feet, and only the expert blacksmith at Redbonnet could forge the featherweight racing plates he wanted Bluebell to wear.

Another buckskin broncho carried Paul's war bags, his long Winchester, and a spare six-gun. He had practically the total amount of his property with him. And the three hundred and six dollars he had received for his cows at the loading pens made up his fortune.

In Paul's mind the reasons for his successive misfortunes were not at all clear yet. The man who called himself Peck had been responsible for the burning of the barn, even if Paul couldn't prove it.

Saba's stupid and fatal folly had been just the natural action of such a simple-minded soul as the faithful Mexican. Somebody had tried to injure his master—well he would get even with somebody. That was the way the poor, dumb, loyal cuss must have argued.

And the result? Saba had been hanged for it, and Paul put under suspicion of having ordered the theft of Keno's racing ace, White Flash.

At Hardpan, the little cow town where Paul had previously been popular, he was aware now that men deliberately avoided him. Saba's action had certainly put him under

a cloud, even here on his home range.

Even Ike Jenkins, who sold feed, and was usually servile in his politeness, growled:

"What yuh usjn' fer money?"

"This!" Paul slung a silver dollar into the dust at the fellow's feet, as he dismounted and helped himself to a double scoopful of the grain.

Paul slept on the open range that night as was his habit from March to December, but his sleep was nervous and fitful. He had haltered all three horses together and then run a lariat to his own fingers.

If anything happened to them now, he was through—just a saddle bum again, drifting across country looking for any old job.

Arrived in the holiday throng of Redbonnet, he stayed no longer than to plank down his \$100 entrance fee at racing headquarters. He did not even ask what else was entered.

He did not care to hang around among men whose faces were plainly hostile. Up Ring Canyon three miles was a deserted prospector's cabin that would serve him as home and racing stable, he knew. He preferred to act the hermit.

He did, of course, stop long enough to get Bluebell shod. And the blacksmith, Erickson, was the only man who did not meet Paul scowlingly.

"You haf nerve, Mr. Larrabee. De oders all vas scratdtched ven Vhite Flash and dod Tchicago Brown vas entered."

Only three horses? That was disappointing. There were generally ten or a dozen in the Bellamy Mile.

"Everybody scratched, huh? And what is this Chicago Brown hoss?"

"I only seed him vunce. Py golies, eighteen hants high, he iss! Some colt, dod vum!"

"Who's the owner?"

A horse eighteen hands high—six feet at the withers! Some colt, for sure!

"Lake Michigan Stables. Dod means nodding. You know, Mr. Larrabee." He had finished his job neatly. "Yust de same, I bet twenty dollars on your filly, Mr. Larrabee."

"Glad some one believes in me!" Paul gripped the huge, hairy hand.

It was certainly a relief to find somebody who was still friendly.

Erickson winked one round, blue eye. "Vell, I got ten tuh vun, too, Mr. Larrabee."

So that vas how things shaped up? This Chicago Brown and White Flash had been made even-money favorites. Paul's horse was considered just a rank outsider—hopeless. Paul slept little that night either, nervously watchful.

At daybreak, having watered his three animals and given them a liberal feed of grain, he did drop off for a couple of hours. He did not have to present Bluebell in the paddock until half past four—thirty minutes before the Bellamy Mile—the grand climax—was called.

Noon arrived at last. Paul watered but did not feed again. Time dragged slowly. But finally, riding the white-stockinged bronc, it was time to start for the fair grounds.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BELLAMY MILE.

FROM hundreds of miles round about, the people had come—ranchers, nesters, sheepmen, cowboys, miners, grizzled, morose old sourdoughs. There was the usual sprinkling, too, of the parasites from the city—gamblers, salesmen, touts, medicine peddlers.

The hastily constructed grand stand was reserved for the bril-

liantly dressed womenfolk with their escorts. But the great mass of the crowd milled around the paddock, an old corral patched up to serve the purpose.

The good colt White Flash, led by the proud Keno Kendall himself, was the first to appear in the paddock. Monk Macy in a bright-blue silk blouse, white breeches, and an orange cap, walked at the colt's flank watching each dainty, mincing step. White Flash was perfect, no doubt of that.

Paul Larrabee wore no racing silks. A clean white shirt and dark trousers tucked into calfskin boots would do him for a costume. He had even discarded his sombrero hat, and his blond hair shone in the slanting sunlight.

More than a few of the spectators whispered and mumbled among themselves, when they saw Paul and his blue roan. The filly was certainly stepping high and proud—a beautiful, keenly drawn little creature.

"I'll take some more of that ten to one on the Bluebell mare. She don't look so bad." That was some city sport talking to Roth, the bookmaker friend of Keno Kendall.

"I'll lay another sawbuck on 'er myself," chimed in "Windy" Reilly from Grove Canyon.

"Make it two!" Windy's pardner, known elegantly as "Badgerlip," waved a handful of greasy dollar bills.

Roth growled: "I'm only layin' five tuh one now, gents. Take it or leave it."

Snarling and jeering at Roth they took it, however. Obviously, whatever the experts might think, the crowd liked the looks of Bluebell. In his heart, Paul was proud as he led his pet round and round the ring. He had already placed the two hun-

dred dollars he had left at ten to one on himself.

Then Keno took the opportunity to say out of the corner of his mouth as Paul drew near: "I'll still give yuh ten tuh one, whatever that yallow dog Roth thinks, Larrabee."

"Not a cent left, Kendall."

Big Keno turned his own horse and surveyed his rival's entry. "Waal," he said finally, "I'll just lay yuh ten thousand against yore mare."

"Yeah? You were offerin' ten thousand flat for her, not long ago."

"That ain't now. Nobody'll give you a better price."

Paul knew that that was the truth. The ten thousand Keno had once offered was merely to keep Bluebell out of the race. Nobody else in that whole country would want any race horse ten thousand dollars' worth.

Bluebell's pretty head was on the young stockman's shoulder as Paul said calmly. "You're on, Kendall. It's a bet."

He had hardly uttered the words before the Chicago brown horse entered the paddock. The horse, a giant all of eighteen hands high, was ridden—not led—by Prod Peck.

Paul could not suppress a start of surprise as he recognized the horse thief. Somehow he had thought of Peck as just a common thief, a range wolf, a kind of human vermin.

But the man now, dressed for action in khaki shirt and breeches and a black-visored jockey cap, evidently knew the game he was going up against. He handled his horse like a professional, all right.

Paul's instinct was to fly at the man and give him the beating he deserved then and there.

"You dirty murderer!" he said softly, staring white-faced up at the man on the huge brown.

"Back up, young fella!" some one spoke sharply behind Paul. "Jest now this's a hoss race."

That was Brazos Bellamy—a small, erect little man with bristling white mustache. Any one would have recognized him instantly from his pictures.

The peppery little ex-governor always dressed in a long-tailed gray cutaway coat, a tall, stiff collar, the points of which stuck up to the very ends of his mustache, and a puffy tie fastened with a bull's head the size of a walnut, fashioned of solid gold, with rubies for eyes and branching horns of platinum.

Paul nodded. "All right," he said. "But after—"

"After, for all o' me," old Brazos snapped grimly. "You kin take each other apart—for all o' me, I say—tuh see what makes yuh tick."

The clear, sweet note of a bugle sounded from the track to proclaim that the time had come to start the big race. Brazos promptly swung himself upon a crazily splotched paint pony to lead the procession to the post.

This was the fiery little man's regular habit. At the post he would dismount and serve as starter himself. Then he would climb up into the judges' box to decide the finish. This was the Bellamy Mile, all right.

Paul was still seething with anger as he rode out, second in the line, with White Flash leading and Peck's brown, which was listed as Brutus, bringing up the rear. If he did nothing else in the world he would beat Peck. And then—

"Rein in, Larrabee," he told himself. "Cuttin' didoes now does no good. Steady, Bluebell."

As a rider's emotions always communicate themselves to his horse, Bluebell was mincing and side-step-

ping. This was no time for her to be nervous.

But the three came into line at the web barrier with hardly an instant of delay. Instantly Brazos sprung it.

Intentionally or not the brown on the outside immediately swerved over toward Paul. But the young rancher was ready for any little trick like that, and swung out his knee to prevent any attempt at bumping.

That fraction of a second's delay let White Flash go out on the rail ahead, however. That didn't bother Paul. He had figured on letting Bluebell make her run on the home stretch.

He was sure his mare had as much speed as either of the others, and when the pinch came, he believed that she would show even more heart. They went past the shrieking stand nicely bunched—White Flash, Bluebell directly behind, Peck's brown Brutus slightly out, its huge head towering alongside Paul's shoulder.

The rhythmic *tunk-a-ta—tunk-a-ta—tunk-a-ta* of the fast gallop sent Paul's blood beating hotly. He forgot all personal feelings in the glowing thrill of the race. He forgot that defeat would mean the loss of all he had in the world—the loss even of the beloved animal which now bore him along so swiftly and smoothly.

For, when she hit her best stride, sitting Bluebell was easier than riding a rocking-chair. There was just a gentle sway to your body, and the lash of the wind in your face.

Paul didn't have to urge the mare. It was glad to give all it had. He just rode low to cut the wind and hummed an unconscious little tune. He was still trailing White Flash as they ran up the long back stretch.

Peck's brown had dropped slightly behind. Paul could no longer see the huge brute, but his ear could catch the thunder of its hoofs not so very far back there. A mean horse, was Paul's opinion, an ugly horse which might not have any heart. But he wasn't counting on that. He was figuring only on holding close to the white's croup; so that when they swung into the stretch going home he——

There was where the tricky riding would come in. It would all depend on what path White Flash would take there at the last turn. Instantly Paul must guess what was going to happen and guide his own mount accordingly.

It would not do to try to run up alongside of White Flash on the curve. That would mean traveling a greater distance round the arc of the track, of course. And, most dangerous, when they came to the straightaway, Monk Macy might carry the white colt wide and thus carry Paul and the blue roan wide, too, toward the outer fence.

That would be fatal. For either Monk Macy could then straighten out and dash for the finish line, or Peck's brown Brutus might slip through the gap while the leaders wasted distance sidling over.

No, Paul would rate his blue roan comfortably along in the rear, till they came to the end of the bend. Then, if White Flash skidded out, Paul could nip inside. If the white hugged the rail Paul could come up and have a straight run for it without peril of interference.

For Paul knew that he could come up. His knees, his whole body, told him that Bluebell had all the strength in the world left. The rider's sensitive hands could feel the gentle, steady tug of the reins.

Yes, the game little filly wanted

to go now. She was fighting to run past her rival.

"So-girl-so!" Paul whispered, then hummed the tripping, fast-stepping tune of "Turkey in the Straw":

"If yuh want tuh ride a dandy, ride a sweet, blue hoss.
If yuh want tuh ride a dandy, ride that hoss, of coss!
If yuh want tuh ride a dandy, ride a blue roan mare.
Jest gallop tuh the finish: leave the rest nowhere!"

Clamorously the roar of the excited crowd came down the wind to Bluebell's rider now. Right over the mare's crest, between her ears, he could see the huge, black mass of the crowd there by the winning post. So they were arriving at the home stretch!

Yes, and White Flash was swerving wide. Coming into the straight from a curve, a horse's speed often carries it out a way. And actually the white colt seemed to falter.

Quick as a wink Paul took up. Another wisp of a second and he would have run into the leader. But now he could slip inside. He jockeyed Bluebell into the opening neatly. Now for the straight run home!

A big, brown bulk surged up beside Paul's right knee then. Brutus, lathered and wild-eyed, had come on with a terrific plunge. The brown head was almost on Paul's shoulder, so close was Peck riding his huge horse.

"Now, give us what yuh got, girl!" The young stockman crouched low.

But he sensed the promise of victory. With all his speed White Flash had lost ground by running out. Peck's brown Brutus was just about through. The animal's head was too high, and even in the gigan-

tic lunge of its desperate, last effort it was apparent that the brute staggered.

Yes, in the straight furlong which remained, Bluebell ought to go home like an arrow. Beneath him Paul felt the mare extend herself. She had plenty of power left. She was—

Paul's vision of the mob ahead, down there at the finish line, suddenly reeled and wavered. The great bulk of the brown horse seemed to lean over to crush him. Under him Bluebell swerved and toppled sidewise, drove crashing through the inner fence.

Deliberately Peck had slung his huge horse in to bump Bluebell off the course. And Peck, himself came crashing through, too. Together, amid broken posts and splintered rails, both horses slid to the ground. Both riders were thrown heavily.

While alone, down the empty straightaway, White Flash breezed to victory.

CHAPTER VII.

"A PRIVATE FIGHT."

DIZZILY Paul tried to get to his feet, but the shivering shock of his fall still numbed him. For a moment, he could not distinguish anything plainly. Then, as one sees dimly through a whirling snow-storm, his eyes focused on the two horses, up again and madly running away.

But it was not the horses which occupied Paul's befuddled thoughts just then. He wanted to get at Prod Peck, to get his hands into the throat of that villainous enemy who had now robbed him of everything he had in the world.

A deliberate foul! Nothing else could have explained Peck's move. Despairing of winning himself he

had resolved at least to put Paul out.

Ah, there the treacherous wolf was! Like a drunkard, seeing only dimly, scarcely able to control his quivering legs, Paul lurched forward to combat.

Peck, equally jarred and groggy, tried to pull himself erect to meet the attack. Like the talons of birds of prey, the hands of both men clawed feebly at each other.

Neither was armed, of course—a rider in a race carries not an ounce more weight than he has to. Neither man, after the shock of the fall, was more than half conscious. Therefore, almost immediately, onlookers dragged the two apart.

And it was Brazos Bellamy, striding up in savage indignation now, who forcibly expressed the general sentiment of the spectators.

"Peck, yuh dawg!" he barked. "In all my days on the turf I never seen such a dirty foul. Get away from here, Peck, afore yuh're tarred an' feathered!"

"Let—let me at 'im!" choked Paul, almost sobbing with rage. "Let me get my hands on him!"

"I don't blame yuh, boy," said old Brazos. "To be robbed that way! But this thing's fer you and Peck tuh settle. We're maintainin' law an' order here in Redbonnet tonight. We don't aim tuh have no riot on our hands."

One of Sheriff Rattray's men had already caught Peck's horse, and was boosting that rogue into the saddle.

"Make yoreself scarce in these parts, mister," the sheriff advised meaningly. "Do I never see you again, it'll be too soon to suit me."

A throng of suddenly sympathetic friends surrounded Paul and consoled with him. Gossip flies fast, and almost every one at the race

meet by this time knew the cruel loss that this young stranger had suffered.

So when Keno Kendall came riding with his gang to claim and lead off Bluebell, there was a general chorus of ugly and insulting comment.

Keno, accustomed to having his own way, sat silent and glowering, while two of his waddies snubbed Bluebell in between their saddle horns.

There were thirty armed riders behind Kendall, and his prestige and power were so great that he knew he was in no real danger. But he certainly did not relish the things he had to sit there and hear.

As for Paul, he blindly turned away and went stumbling back to the oak tree near the paddock where he had hitched his scrubby little cayuse. That and the ancient pack horse were his only worldly possessions. He'd sat in the big game—and lost.

Luckily a few of his new friends pressed close on behind him. For before he had gone fifty paces he tripped forward and lost consciousness.

He awoke—how long afterward he could not tell—in a strange room. Outside, through the open door, he could see that it was dark. A lamp with wick turned low burned on a table near by.

His head ached wickedly. But he found that he could sit up on the battered leather couch where he had been stretched, and move his arms and legs without discomfort.

"Come to, eh?" said a familiar voice at the door, and Sheriff Rattray strode in. "But yuh better rest where yuh lay. Doc says yuh got a slight concussion. Not serious; but take it easy."

"I'd ought to be moochin' on," Paul objected.

He was surprised to hear his own voice, wobbly and thin. He had been hurt more seriously than he suspected.

"Forget it," the sheriff said kindly. "I'd stay an' set a while myself, except that they've started a ruckus up yonder on the hill, an' I got tuh go see what the excitement is."

He snatched up his rifle from the corner and was gone into the pitch-black night.

Sick and dizzy as Paul Larrabee still was, he revolted at the idea of staying inside. Sooner or later, he'd have to set off on his long, dreary trip homeward.

Without money, without stock, without the thing he prized most in the world—the pretty little Bluebell filly—he must start all over again. And he might just as well be on his way right now.

Down at the end of the street a splash of light from the Palace indicated the center of celebration. Some one there would be able to tell Paul where his bronc and pack horse had been stabled.

He'd been too dull to think to ask Rattray about that—and the sheriff had never doubted that his guest would spend the night anyway.

Yes, they were whooping it up in the Palace, all right. There was a solid barrier of customers across the bar, the roulette table and the faro bank were thriving, and from the rear came the thump of dancing feet and the blare of crude music.

Hands jammed into empty pockets, Paul stepped into the full glare of the lights of the glittering festive resort.

Eyes momentarily dazzled by the illumination, head still aching sickeningly, Paul stared about him dully

to try to distinguish a possible friendly face.

The sheriff and the sheriff's men were, of course, off on the hill investigating whatever ruckus had summoned them—some Arapahoe or Apache trouble undoubtedly.

Others who might have spoken to this young stranger were prudently restrained by a certain circumstance just then. Keno Kendall's crowd had practically taken over the Palace for their own private entertainment this evening.

Even Paul presently recognized this. For there, in all the display of his flamboyant finery, was Keno Kendall himself, wedged into one corner of the bar with the tall gambler, Roth, the apelike jockey, Macy—and Prod Peck!

Paul Larrabee did not hesitate. He did not pause to consider how it happened that this fellow, who had been warned out of town, should have the nerve to be here now, public reveling.

He gave not the slightest heed to the knowledge that he was among enemies. He neither weighed consequences nor forecast the probable outcome. He had been shamefully wronged and cheated. He had nothing more to lose.

Like a wounded cougar he leaped across the room, seized Peck by the back of the vest, and spun the man about to face him.

Knifing or shooting Prod Peck would be no satisfaction. Paul wanted to take his revenge against this foe with hard, bare fists alone, beat him and pound him till the ruffian whimpered; give the scoundrel a lesson he'd remember all the rest of his life. Blind with justified fury, Paul's knobby knuckles smashed into Peck's face.

He only got in a couple of punches, though. Then Kendall's

men surged in, the sheer weight of their mass jamming the fighters up against the wall. Neither enemy could budge.

Fortunately the press of men's bodies had prevented any one from getting at his weapon. It was just a smiling, pushing mob. A dozen hostile hands clutched at Paul and tried to pull him away; but he was wedged against the wall so tight they could not budge him.

And others now decided that they would take a hand in this game. Kendall's influence was not so great that he could bulldoze the whole county.

There were plenty of tough, independent waddies and ranchers in the Palace that night who were determined to see fair play. A number of these hard hombres started climbing up the backs of the crowd and striking out right and left with their fists.

"Gents! Gents!" yelled "Bull" Burlingham, owner of the Palace. "Lay off—hear me! Lay off!"

Bull was a ringy old roughneck himself. Fighting in a man's place never paid a proprietor any profits—just ended up by messing the floor with a corpse or two. That didn't matter, but a fight was also likely to produce a lot of broken glassware—which mattered a lot.

"Quit it, yuh hear, 'fore I drill yuh!"

But Bull was cagy enough to know that to start shooting would just make matters worse. He was a resourceful citizen, Bull was. He now employed a most effective weapon.

The swamper had just finished mopping up the narrow alley behind the bar. There was a full pail of filthy water, diluted with mud, spilled liquor, soapsuds and stale beer. This sweet mess Bull now

hurled right into the middle of Keno's crowd—bucket and all.

Gasping and swearing, men spluttered and drew back. Bull vaulted the bar, right into the middle of the ruckus.

"Hear me!" he roared. "You barflies! This yere is a private fight, savvy. No battle royal, mind! Peck an' this boy's got grievances—one against the other. Waal, let dawg eat dawg! They're welcome to chaw each other. But, private, gents, private!"

"Listen, Bull—" Keno Kendall began.

"I'm dealin' this hand, Kendall," answered the black-jowled Burlingham. "And how we'll arrange things is this way—"

Always eager for something new, men drew back and listened. Bull's idea for settling the feud was short and sweet.

Behind the bar was a windowless poker room, used for big games at which onlookers were not welcome. Prod Peck and Paul Larrabee were to be left alone in that room.

But first, two six-guns loaded with but a single bullet apiece were to be placed in the center of the poker table. The lamp above the table was to be extinguished, and then the door slammed shut. Each man would grab a gun—if he could. Very sweet and simple!

"Nor we won't open the door till one man so requests," Bull concluded, smiling. "Only one man. We don't want tuh hear two hollerin'."

Peck's face had gone gray as this grim proposal was being outlined. The fellow might have the sly courage of a slinking coyote, but to fight to the death in the dark—

He was allowed no choice in the matter, however. For though Keno grumbled protests, it was evident

that he had no intention to intervene. The door of the poker room was thrown open. Two cowmen offered their guns, which Bull unloaded save for a single bullet chambered beneath the cocked hammer of each.

The two guns then were placed upon the center of the table. Peck and Paul were carefully searched to be sure that neither had any concealed weapon—not so much as a pocketknife. Then each man was placed a couple of yards from the table on opposite sides.

"When the door slams," Bull pronounced, "fly to it!"

"If we both miss—" Peck's voice wavered.

"I've seen six-guns used fer blackjacks—right handy, too," Bull told him. "Let yore conscience be yore guide."

The door was slammed shut.

CHAPTER VIII.

BRAZOS TELLS 'EM.

THERE was tomblike silence in the utter blackness of the tightly closed room. Paul held his breath instinctively. What would be Prod Peck's first move?

Would the fellow endeavor to steal in noiselessly in order to possess himself of a weapon? Or would his nerves be unequal to the tension, and would he plunge abruptly forward to the table and try to grab a gun? Had he the cold courage to delay? or would he risk all by attempting to shoot instantly?

It was a grisly, gruesome test, this game of death in the dark.

For if one man fired—and missed—he would almost certainly prove an easy victim for the other. If, on the other hand, one man could arm himself first and then determine the exact position of his enemy, that

lucky man could scarcely fail to emerge victorious from this desperate encounter.

A tiny shuffling sound upon the matting of the floor impelled Paul to crouch, vibrantly attentive. With the sly stealth of a cat Peck must be moving to the table. Paul crept forward also, thankful that his calf-skin boots, thin-soled and soft, made no sound. He felt the table's rim with the tips of his fingers.

There he poised alert. But Peck's movements were equally guarded. No swishing or creaking betrayed him. So, inch by inch, Paul's right hand crept toward the table's center. If possible he would arm himself before Peck even knew it.

Paul's crawling, sensitive fingers touched cool, hard steel. There was the gun, at last! He swept it into the palm of his hand—

A twinge of pain shot through his arm. His thumb was caught and pinched tight. Somehow he could not grasp the revolver.

As quickly as the shock of the pain, just as quickly was he aware of what had happened. Somehow he had jarred the cocked hammer. It had snapped down, pinning his thumb. He must release the hammer with his left hand, not letting the gun drop.

Another hand brushed against his—a hand with a six-gun in it. A snarling voice exulted: "Agh, there yuh—"

Paul flung himself backward, expecting the flame of the shot in his face. His knee struck the under side of the table. He might tip it up for a momentary shield. He forgot that the gun still pinched his thumb. The gun jerked free.

The lancing flash of fire came then, a yard or so out to the right. Instantly, another flash answered.

Paul's quick wit perceived what

had happened. As he had accidentally slung the gun off, the hammer had snapped home. Flying through the air the gun had exploded. And Peck, misled, had blazed back.

"So!" Paul exulted, leaping on the table and lunging straight across to where the other had been revealed in the brief double flash of the shots. His hands touched his enemy's body. He clutched and gripped.

Peck writhed and battled with all the frantic abandon of a creature who can expect only a dreadful doom. He bit and clawed and struck madly. He tried to slug Paul on the head with the now empty six-gun.

But in that utter darkness he couldn't effectively use the gun as a club. Swiftly Paul wrenched the heavy weapon away and slung it onto the floor.

Then Paul's sliding right hand slid from his opponent's shoulder up to the neck-band of the man's shirt. Paul took a good grip there.

"Now, yuh crook," Paul whispered hoarsely, "I'll give yuh a little treatment!"

Peck writhed and slung his arms savagely, but he could not see where to hit. Paul, guided by his own grip on the man's throat, drove home his left fist to nose and mouth and eyes.

"Foul me!" *Slam!* Paul landed. "Cheat me, would you!" The hard knuckles crashed again. "Why?" *Bang!* "Tell me!" A smash which shattered teeth! "Why?"

"Don't! Don't!" That was the whine of panic.

"Talk quick, then. Why?"

"Keno! Keno made me!"

"So?" Paul whispered to himself. Then raised his voice to a shout: "Open up! Open that door!"

Light flooded into the black room. Bull Burlingham barred the open-

ing; but a dozen others peered in, over and under the wide-extended arms.

"Why, they ain't neither one dead!" a small voice squeaked almost disappointedly.

"No. But Peck has somethin' to tell you all," Paul snapped back. "Speak up loud an' plain, yuh worm, so's every one in the place can hear yuh!"

"Kendall made me foul the race. He made me!" The voice was a wail of terror. Paul maintained his strangling hold on the man's neck-band. He could cut off his breath by a wrist twist.

"Yuh see, I was ridin' Kendall's hoss to—"

"A danged lie!" shouted the cattle baron. "That was Peck's own hoss."

"Yours or his?" Paul's left fist hovered.

"Hisin! Hisin!" screamed Peck, gone completely yellow.

"That's it!" Paul swung his victim gently back and fro, literally holding him erect as a man might support a scarecrow. "So brown Brutus was one of Keno's hosses, too, eh? You aimed to be right sure o' winnin', Mr. Good-sport Kendall?"

"I tell yuh it's a lie."

There was a ripple in the jamming crowd, and men gave way to make passage for a newcomer. It was Brazos Bellamy.

"Stand back a ways, gentlemen," Brazos said in his hard, crisp voice. "I got a question or two to ask. Will you kindly drag that ugly thing out into the light with you, Larrabee?"

Paul shoved his whimpering prisoner forward until, lined up alongside Keno Kendall, all three faced the fiery little ex-governor.

"So that's what happened?" said

Brazos Bellamy, his quiet voice infinitely ominous. "You run two hosses in my race? That's how she lays, is it, Kendall?"

"I tell yuh the man is lyin'!"

"Toot! Toot! Don't tell me that! You think I was born last Feb'y? Brown Brutus is a registered hoss. The sales will show in any racin' records. As soon as we get in touch with Chicago, or Louisville, or New Orleans—"

Kendall was fit to choke. But he did not make the error of even touching his gun; nor did the mob that followed him. They might be supreme in this county; but even they knew they couldn't control the whole sentiment of Texas. Brazos Bellamy was State law.

And now he laid down the law further. "What's more, Mr. Kendall"—he hissed the title contemptuously—"racin' rules have always said that a foul by one hoss in a race disqualifies *all the other hosses of that owner.*"

"Fact—at's right—it's the truth!" came the sudden cries, as men all through the crowd recognized what bearing this would have on the race's outcome.

"So you'll cough up yore winnin's, Mr. Kendall, an' pay bets to all you owe 'em to. An', further an' moreover, Mr. Kendall, you'll give my ten-thousand-dollar prize to Paul Larrabee here, together with the bet you made him—the blue roan filly you stole. For Larrabee wins the race. With both yore hosses barred he was the only entry."

"But I tell you—" Kendall weakly began.

But Brazos Bellamy stopped him. The long white mustache seemed to curl and bristle, the eyes were fiery with scorn. Words came in a precise, polished tone:

"And I tell you, Keno Kendall,

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you low-down, sneakin' cheat, that if you're ever seen on a race track again in Texas, Louisiana, Mexico —you insidious, belly-wrigglin' insect—or in Canada, England, France, or points north or east—you slimy sidewinder—the first honest man who identifies you—you double-crossin', thimble-riggin' rat—will do humanity a favor by

shootin' you like a sick horse. Forgive me for befolin' a noble animal.

“And then he'll just leave you to lay there—you nasty chunk o' carrion—until some one has to bury you quick to keep you from bein' the offense and stench to decent nostrils which you are in life, Mr. Kendall.

“Good night!”



FOOLING THE BEAR

AN Indian who was out shooting antelope had with him a bright red cloth, which he would spread on a bush to attract the antelope.

These animals have a great deal of curiosity, and are especially attracted by anything red. If the scent of the hunter is not caught by them, the shy creatures will get well within range to satisfy their curiosity about anything strange.

After a while, the Indian caught sight of a pair of antelopes in the distance, set up his red cloth, and hid himself near it. He was rewarded by bagging one of the animals. As it was growing dusk and the man was a long way from camp, he skinned the antelope quickly, made a pack of the meat, and started for home.

He was among the hills and had to keep a sharp lookout for grizzlies, which abounded thereabouts. He gripped hard on his gun and hurried along.

Presently he heard a snort and a growl that told him a bear was behind. He started on a run, but heard the bear drawing nearer. He didn't want to drop the meat, for his companions were waiting for it in camp, and that would mean no supper. But the bear was gaining and something had to be done.

With one hand he unloosened the pack and dropped a piece of meat, but, to his horror and surprise, the bear passed it, and still came on.

Then he dropped another piece, but that didn't appeal to the persistent bear any more than the first. Finally he thought that perhaps it was the red cloth that the animal was following. A man has to think quick, and act quicker, when a bear is following at his heels on the run.

The Indian wrapped a piece of meat in the red cloth and dropped it with the antelope skin. Then he ran like the wind.

It was still light enough for the bear to see the bright red color, and to the Indian's relief, he heard it stop. He had not dared use his gun for fear he might only wound it and make it more dangerous.

So far, the bear had not shown any signs of anger, with the exception of a few low growls.

As soon as the hunter heard it stop, he sprinted off at increased speed. He no longer felt any fear, for he knew that the delay would give him time to get to safety.

He arrived at the camp with about one half of his meat, but it was better than nothing. The supper was quickly cooked, but the bear didn't show up.



Polecat Trappin'

A "Lum Yates" Story

By Collins Hafford

Author of "An Outlaw Hoss Shows His Stuff," etc.

IT'S bad business to ride through new country, with your eyes dreamy and half closed, and your mind far from your surroundings. Lum Yates—slim, dark-haired Missouri puncher from the Bar M—should have known that.

He would have known it, if the warm afternoon sun hadn't stroked his back with its pleasant rays; if the hills hadn't been so dark green and rich purple; and if the wild flowers of spring hadn't been poking their colorful heads above the thick green carpet of grass.

Lum had ridden out from the Bar M spread, a full fifty miles back down the flat country, at noon the day before. His destination was Buenas Almas, a little cow town well up in the foothills.

There was no hurry to get there. "Sandy" McClure—owner of the Bar M outfit—had heard of a bunch of yearling steers for sale at the Flying A spread, and he sent Lum to look them over. Buenas Almas was twenty-five miles farther on, and the Flying A still farther.

There was no chance to reach the town before dark, and Lum would have to make camp that night, anyway. It didn't make much difference where he stopped. There was plenty of water and grass almost anywhere in the hills.

He rode slowly, letting Snake, his blue outlaw horse, choose his own gait. His long right leg was hooked around the saddle horn, and his slender body swayed easily with the motion of the blue cayuse.

Job—Lumi's little yellow dog—was hot on the trail of a jack rabbit, and Lum watched through half-closed eyes, a faint smile on his clean-cut face.

"Jes' look at thet little dawg, Snake! He's been chasin' rabbits all his life, an' he ain't ketched one yet. But does he give up? I'll say he—"

Zing! Rip-p-p! Whee-ee! The barest fraction of a second after the warning whistle of the bullet—not time enough for Lum to realize what it was, to duck or swing aside—the slug ripped across the side of his head!

Black spots danced before his eyes. His head whirled. Blackness, deep and profound, seemed to envelop him. He felt himself swaying in his saddle. Then he knew no more.

The blue outlaw horse had leaped ahead at the first sound of the singing bullet. But when Lum swayed and pitched from the saddle, the intelligent animal came to a stiff-legged halt.

Job stopped his chase and sped toward the riderless horse at the sound of the shot. Growls, deep and fierce, welled up in the tiny animal's throat.

And when the black-bearded, evil-faced ruffian hoisted his body from the thicket of brush and stole toward Lum, Job fairly shook with wrath. His teeth bared in a snarl of killing rage as he faced the man approaching.

But the killer's snarl matched Job's. His face writhed and twisted! His gaze continually shot backward over his shoulder, and there was a hunted look in his eyes.

Bending low, the man raced toward the blue outlaw horse, and the prone puncher on the ground. Job's growl warned him, but did not stop

him. He lifted his six-gun once more.

But Job knew what that gesture meant. Many times before, the little dog had faced a six-gun, and every time, it meant the agony of a raking bullet. He had long ago learned to take no chances. Like a tiny yellow blur, Job disappeared into the brush.

The slinking man reached Lum's side. Snake snorted and backed off, but halted in a few yards. The man worked swiftly, and when he at last straightened his lanky form, his appearance was far different.

Where he had been dressed in dirty, ragged clothing before, now he wore a clean blue shirt, a pair of white Angora chaps, inlaid boots and a wide gray Stetson—the clothing which only a few minutes before, had garbed the unconscious Bar M waddy. Beside Lum was piled the dirty clothing and the disreputable boots of the dry-gulcher.

Now the bushwhacker approached Snake. The blue outlaw horse snorted its distaste for the killer. But the man grasped the reins and held on. At last, trained to obey, Snake allowed the man to climb into the saddle.

A cruel grin spread across the twisted face as he headed the horse to the southwest. But Snake's first move wiped the leer from his countenance.

As horse and rider disappeared over the broken range of hills, a mile from the spot where Lum lay, Snake was still venting his dislike for the man in a series of zigzagging pitches.

II.

How long Lum lay unconscious, he was never to know. But it could not have been more than a couple of hours, for the sun was just sink-

ing below the jagged range of hills to the west when he awoke.

He couldn't be sure just what it was that first brought consciousness. It might have been the steady but faint beat of horses' hoofs that reached his ear, there against the ground. Or it might have been Job's cold muzzle on his face.

He blinked his eyes twice. Even the dimming light pained them. His head throbbed as if some one was beating upon it with steady strokes of a hammer.

He put his hand unsteadily to the side of his head. His fingers encountered something sticky. He pulled them away, and gasped when he saw that they were stained with crimson.

Gritting his teeth, he hoisted himself to a sitting position. His eyes swept the brush and rocks about him, and he saw the heap of dirty clothing. Then he glanced down at his own body.

His brain fairly reeled, for he was clothed only in undershirt, blue pants, and socks. Now he looked wildly about, for it had just dawned upon him that Snake was gone, too.

"Bushwhacked! An' robbed!" he gasped. "Clothes gone! An' Snake's gone, too! The dirty skunk!"

A lump of desperation came up into his throat. He was twenty miles from the nearest town—in a country he did not know—afoot and only half clothed!

Job whined in sympathy, and he licked his bewildered master's hand. But almost instantly the whimper changed to a growl of warning.

And only then did Lum realize that he had been hearing the thump of hoofs. Unsteadily he got to his knees and scanned the surrounding hills over the tops of the bushes.

"Tlet bushwhacker, Job—is he comin' back? What is it, feller?"

There was no one in sight, but that could easily be true. For the hills hemmed him in until he could see no more than a hundred yards in either direction. And the light was dimming, would change to dusk and darkness before many minutes.

Swiftly he turned to the heap of clothing, and in spite of his disgust, he pulled on the torn bullhide chaps and the scuffed, run-over boots. Then he put the shapeless, dust-caked hat on his head.

Once more he raised his head above the protecting bushes. But almost immediately he dropped back, crouching low on the rocky ground. For a half dozen grim riders were outlined against the sky line to the east—and they were slowly coming straight toward him.

"Quiet, Job!" he hissed, dropping his hand to the little dog's head.

Steathily he withdrew into the thick clump of juniper brush some ten feet to his right. In this closely knit tangle, he crouched low. So motionless and silent he lay that a watcher would take him for a rock or stump.

Clump-clump! The sound of the plodding horses came louder. Then, one by one, the riders filed into the cleared place where Lum had awakened.

There they pulled to a halt, and in the last fading light Lum caught the dull gleam of a star on the shirt front of the man who appeared to be the leader.

"The sheriff an' a posse!" was the thought that flicked through Lum's brain.

He was on the point of rising and making his plight known to these men, when the leader's voice halted him:

"This here is about the spot where thet waddy tol' us we'd find the killer! 'Lowed he was too bad hurt

to move! But he must have been lyin' to us!"

"Mebbe he was jest playin' possum!" spoke up one of the others. "Reckon he's high-tailed it inter the hills before now!"

"Thet hombre didn't look like no honest waddy to me, in spite of his straight story," added another of the riders. "Mebbe he is in cahoots with the killer!" Then he shook his head slowly. "But thet blue hoss didn't look like no outlaw's brone! Right likely lookin' piece of hoss-flesh!"

The sheriff broke in! "Ain't no use to hunt fer him in a pack no longer. Dark's comin' on. The rest of yuh waddies head back fer town. Me, I get a hunch I know where he's holed up, an' I'm goin' to play it!"

"Yuh mean the——"

"Yep! Thet little blind canyon four-five miles over inter the hills! It's the place I'd head fer, if I was an outlaw! Plenty water, plenty cover!"

"You're right! Let's make for that canyon!"

Once more, the sheriff shook his head. "Nope. I'm goin' alone. One's better than a dozen. He'd hear us comin', if we all rode down on him. I figure I can jump him, afore the skunk knows I'm anywhere near."

"You're the boss, but we shore hate to miss the fun," answered one of the riders.

"Mebbe he ain't there, after all," answered the sheriff consolingly. "An' thet canyon is well out o' yore road to town. Yuh waddies head back to *Buenas Almas*. I'll be comin' in by mornin'. Jest wish me luck."

Now the five riders turned their horses' heads to the west. The sheriff watched them disappear in

the gloom before he moved. And Lum watched the officer.

Twice he almost decided to speak to the man and tell his story. But each time thought better of it. The sheriff would not believe him—probably shoot first and question afterwards.

And, too, there were Snake and his own clothing to think about. If the sheriff took him to town, the bushwhacker would be well on his way out of danger, before Lum could prove his case.

It would be much better to let the sheriff follow his hunch, and then follow the sheriff. There was no doubt in Lum's mind that the bushwhacker had been the man who sent the posse to this spot.

The outlaw would be sure that the posse would find the unconscious man and take him to *Buenas Almas*. And that would give him plenty of time to reach safety. Probably right now the killer was holed up in that blind canyon for the night, chuckling over the trick he had played on the officer and his men and on the lone Bar M waddy.

When the posse disappeared, the sheriff straightened in his saddle and gathered up the reins. As he headed his horse into the hills, Lum stole from his shelter.

He waited until the sound of hoofs died down. Then, with a strip of cloth ripped from the ragged shirt left him by the killer, he made a leash for Job.

"Go get him, feller! Trail him!"

The little dog whined softly as it sniffed the ground. Then, his hair bristling, Job followed in the path of the sheriff.

Over jagged ridges, down steep slopes, through deep-sashed canyons, the little dog and the slim Bar M puncher kept doggedly to the trail. Lum's keen sense of distance

told him that fully four miles of tough going were behind him.

But now Job's rumbling growl was beginning to take on a hoarser, fiercer note. And he strained at the thin leash until Lum was forced to speak sharply to him:

"Slow up, feller! This ain't no time to be raisin' Cain."

Now they clambered up a short, steep slope. At its top, Job came to a halt. And as Lum inched up beside the little dog, a gasp came from his throat. For they were on the very rim of a canyon about twenty feet deep.

And down below was something moving. He strained his ears, as he silenced Job. Now he made out low, but pain-filled groans in the darkness.

"Somebody's hurt! Likely rode into the canyon in the dark!" he muttered to himself.

For a full five minutes, he lay flat upon the brink of the canyon. Did he dare go down there in the darkness? Did he dare risk the chance of a bullet?

"Thet hombre's hurted bad," he muttered at last. "He's needin' help—an' I'm the hombre who's got to give it to him!"

He stole softly along the edge of the steep wall of the canyon, until he found a narrow, twisting path down to its floor.

With redoubled caution, he took this trail. The floor of the canyon was thickly studded with jagged boulders, and the slim puncher was forced to feel his way toward the spot from which the groans had come.

III.

But at last, as noiseless as a ghost—and as invisible in the gloom—he reached the shelter of a great boulder. The groans came more plainly

now. They were just on the other side of the rock.

For a long moment, he crouched, listening. Then he shook his head slowly. Nobody could fake such sounds of agony. Whoever was beyond that rock was hurt—and hurt badly. He'd have to chance a bullet, for the man must be aided.

Silently he wriggled forward, circling the boulder. From flat on the ground, he could make out the jagged outlines of the other boulders, of the walls of the canyon, of the trees and brush on its rim.

But now his eyes were steadily ahead, narrowed and unblinking. As he rounded the boulder, he paused for a moment as he tried to pierce the gloom. At first he could make out nothing but rocks.

Then one of the rocks appeared to move, and a deep, agony-filled groan came from it. Like a puzzle, the shapeless mass took on the form of a man's body, prone on the canyon floor.

Once more, Lum wriggled forward, fairly holding his breath. He reached the man's side, and still no sign that the groaning figure had sensed a strange presence.

Lum's hand touched the man lightly, then stole downward to the holster at the man's hip. Now, with a swift movement, the Bar M puncher snatched the six-gun from the oiled leather.

Only then did the stranger appear to realize that he was not alone. The groan changed to a rasping oath as Lum leaped to his feet and covered the injured man with the six-gun.

"Yuh—yuh blasted killer!" rasped the man. "Yuh wouldn't have had the nerve to jump me, if yuh hadn't knowed—"

But the effort was too much for him. He slumped back, and a half-

stifled moan came from between his lips. But in that instant, Lum had recognized the voice as that of the sheriff.

"I ain't the killer, misteh!" he said swiftly. "I'm the man yo' was lookin' fo' back theah in the rocks, but I neveh killed nobody! I'm huntin' thet bushwhackeh, jest' like yo' are."

The sheriff tried to pull himself to a sitting position again, but could not make it. He slumped down heavily.

"Thet's a good story, blast yuh! But you ain't puttin' nothin' over on me," he grunted. "Go ahead an' shoot, blast yore murderin' hide! Yuh got me down. I got a broken leg, an' yuh got my six-gun. Thet's the kind of odds yo're always lookin' for!"

For a moment, Lum did not answer. He sensed the uselessness of arguing. Half mad with agony, the officer's keenness of judgment would be warped.

"Yo're hoss, misteh—wheah is he?" snapped Lum.

"Reckon yuh heard him high-tailin' it past yuh!" rasped the officer. "How else would yuh know I was down here? Yuh know well enough what happened. Yuh know he stopped sudden on the edge of the canyon, an' I went over his head. If I hadn't been thinkin' about yore stinkin' hide, an' what I was goin' to do to yuh, I'd never 'a' got pitched off."

"An' a broken laig is all thet's the matteh with yo'?"

"Thet, an' some bruises. But it's enough, ain't it?"

Once more, Lum was silent for a second. But his keen brain was working like lightning. The sheriff would have to reach a doctor soon. But his horse was gone, and Lum was afoot, too. Only one horse in

miles—and that one possibly gone by this time.

"I'm offerin' yo' the only chance they is, misteh." Lum's voice was low and steady. "Yo' can figger I'm the killeh yo're huntin', an' yo'll probably die from yore hurts! Or yo' can tell me wheah thet blind canyon is, an' I'll make a try fo' the *real* bushwhacker, an' my blue hoss!"

A harsh oath was the answer. Then, for a moment, both men were silent. Lum fairly held his breath, hoping that the sheriff was a good gambler. And he won.

"Thet canyon is jest beyond the next range. Foller this draw to the south end, turn to yore right until yuh hit the first stream. Then foller it until yuh head right inter the blind canyon. An' if yo're Bleary Burns, an' I'm directin' yuh to a hideout, I hope yuh break yore blasted neck."

"Thanks, misteh!" snapped Lum. "If Bleary Burns is in the canyon, an' I can best him, I'll be back afteh yo' in a houah or so. If I don't come back, yo' ain't no worse off than yo' was."

He stooped and dragged the wounded sheriff to a softer patch of ground, straightened the broken leg as well as he could, then whirled and disappeared in the darkness. A grunt, half of pain and half of hope, was the last sound he heard, as he sped along the floor of the slash.

Until he left the canyon and headed up the abrupt slope of the range of hills ahead, he had to feel his way in the intense darkness. But out of the shadows of the canyon's depths, the starlight pricked out the lines of the boulders and brush.

Here he increased his pace to a speed that kept Job trotting to remain at his heels. He labored up

the slope and across the jagged ridge.

On the down trail, he redoubled his caution. A loosened rock might go hurtling down the slope, crashing a warning that could be heard for a long way in the thin air of the mountain night.

Almost at the foot of the slope, a narrow, rushing mountain stream halted him. Without hesitation, he turned to the right as the sheriff had directed.

And now he called out all his trail sense. If the killer was holed up in the blind canyon, as he hoped was the case, a misstep would warn the alert outlaw.

IV.

For a half mile, the ghostlike figure of the slim puncher and the tiny dog at his heels flitted from rock to rock, from bush to bush. Not a sound marked their movements.

Now, at Lum's right, the slope of the creek bank began to grow steeper. In another hundred yards it was a wall, fully fifty feet high, and set back about twenty or thirty yards from the stream.

Then the left bank became more abrupt, and soon it made the other wall of a canyon. Lum halted and listened with straining ears. All he could hear was the murmur of the water and the fainter sound from far ahead where the stream evidently tumbled over the end of the blind canyon in a falls.

Just where the killer would be holed up, if he was in the canyon—Lum had no idea. With ears attuned to every tiny sound, and eyes narrowed to mere slits in an attempt to pierce the darkness, Lum stole ahead.

The canyon bent sharply to the left just ahead. He could see the shadowy right wall where it appar-

ently merged with the left. For a moment, he was sure he had come to the blind end—sure that no one was holed up here, after all.

But then, as he stole softly forward, he caught the faint flicker of reflected light on the steep wall. And at the same instant, Job growled deep in his throat.

Lum stooped swiftly and caught Job's muzzle, his eyes still on the dim flicker of light. Then he drew his breath sharply. That light could mean only one thing—the killer's camp fire was just around the bend in the canyon!

"He's theah, Job!" whispered Lum. "An' he ain't lookin' fo' no one to jump him, else he wouldn't dare to have a fiah. Now we've foun' him, feller, what'll we do?"

Job whimpered softly, but almost instantly the whine changed into a deep-throated growl once more. And the little dog tugged at its leash in eagerness to forge ahead.

"Yo're wantin' to go on, feller, an' I ain't goin' to let no little yaller dawg back me down." He patted Job's head, but ordered him to heel.

Once more, he stole ahead. Twenty feet from the bend, he dropped flat and wriggled forward. Now, with his head thrust around the rock, he took in the scene before him.

A tiny fire burned dimly twenty yards ahead on the bank of the stream. Beside it, he could make out the form of a man wrapped snugly in a blanket, stretched upon the rock.

Between him and the man loomed a shapeless form. At first, he thought it was a rock. But then he realized that it was not, for he could see the fire and man underneath it.

Hardly had he begun to puzzle out what it was, when it moved. And Lum suddenly realized that it

was a horse, picketed out to graze on the lush grass.

"Snake!" Lum felt a surge of elation at this realization.

And with it came the hint of a plan to outwit the killer—to get the drop on him. He flattened out on the ground again and wriggled forward.

If only Snake did not warn the killer by a glad whinny of recognition! Then he remembered that Snake was not demonstrative, as horses go. Never had he heard the blue outlaw whinny.

In a tense three minutes, Lum drew himself erect not ten feet from the picketed horse. Only a quick jerk of its head and a pricking of sharp ears told Lum that he had been recognized.

Noislessly he stole to Snake's head and loosed the rope from about his neck. A swift pat on the sleek shoulder, and Lum faded into the darkness once more.

And now he circled the camp fire with the caution of an Apache. After what seemed an endless time, he crouched behind a boulder no mere than six feet from the blanket-wrapped killer.

For a long minute, he hunched there, listening intently. Then he caught the gurgle of a snore. He drew a deep breath of relief.

He gathered his long legs beneath him. Grasping the sheriff's six-gun in his hand, he raised it high. Then he pursed his lips and gave a low whistle—not loud enough to waken a soundly sleeping man, but plenty loud enough to reach Snake's ears.

For a moment, he feared that the blue outlaw horse would not heed the call. Then he caught the sound of hoofs on the rocks.

Once more, he whistled softly. Snake broke into a trot, clattering loudly on the rocky ground.

This sound apparently reached the mind of the sleeping man, for he jerked to a sitting position in his blanket. One fist went up to rub his eyes.

Then he turned toward the clattering sound. And at that split second, Lum leaped toward him. The slim puncher landed astraddle the man's legs.

The heavy six-gun came down with a crash. But the killer had instinctively thrown himself sidewise as Lum hurtled toward him. The descending gun missed the man's head, thudding heavily against his shoulder.

With a snarling, startled oath, "Bleary" Burns writhed from beneath Lum's feet. He struggled with the enveloping blanket desperately. Once more Lum struck at him with the six-gun—and once more he missed his mark.

Now the killer was on his feet. Still a bit befuddled by sleep, he charged Lum blindly. His heavy fists flailed out like the wings of a windmill. Lum leaped aside, but one fist caught him a glancing blow on the side of his head.

If it had not been for the gash left by the killer's bullet back there at the first encounter, the blow would have had little effect. But as the heavy fist raked Lum's wounded head, the pain was blindingly intense.

He ducked and twisted, fighting to bring his eyes to a focus again! Once more the killer charged him. And once more the fist raked his head.

Lum went down, his knees weak and blinding spots dancing before his eyes. Apparently the killer sensed that his opponent was in a bad way. For a harsh laugh came from his throat.

"Figgered yuh'd slicked me, huh?

Blast yore skinny hide! Yuh'll have to get up afore breakfast to do that!"

He crouched to spring upon the slim puncher with heavy-booted feet. But the leap was never made. A tiny yellow ball of fury hurtled out of the darkness.

With a growl that rivaled the killer's in wickedness, Job hurled himself at the man's legs. The little dog's teeth clicked as they met in the killer's thigh.

Just a second was all that Lum needed to clear his senses. And Job gave him that second. He staggered to his feet, a head-sized rock in his hand.

His long, sinewy arm drew back, then shot forward! The rock, guided by a skill that was learned in the Missouri hills, crashed into the killer's ribs.

The breath left the man's throat in a rasping gasp. His arms flailed as he fought for air. Then his legs buckled, and he slumped to the ground. Job leaped aside to avoid the falling body.

But when Lum staggered to the stricken man's side, Job had already

regained his hold. But only after the slim puncher had expertly bound Bleary Burns's hands behind him with the tie rope from Lum's own saddle, did he order Job to release his hold.

The killer's breath now came in great gasps. Never had consciousness left him. He struggled with the bonds until Lum thrust the muzzle of the sheriff's six-gun into his ribs.

"Yo' an' me are headin' back to wheah the sheriff is waitin' fo' yo', Bleary Burns! Reckon the sight of yo' will sort o' make his broken laig feel betteh. But befo' we staht, we're changin' clothes again. Yo've done wore respectable clothes long enough! All I'm hopin' is that there ain't no scent of polecat left on 'em!"

Thet shore was one close call fer Lum Yates. If the posse had 'a' found him back on the trail, or if the sheriff had heard him comin' in time ter draw his gun, it would 'a' been a plumb long time afore the slim waddy got back ter the Bar M. But yuh can always leave it ter Lum ter find some way out of a hole. Another story about him will be in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon. Watch fer it!



A SALT LAKE OF TEXAS

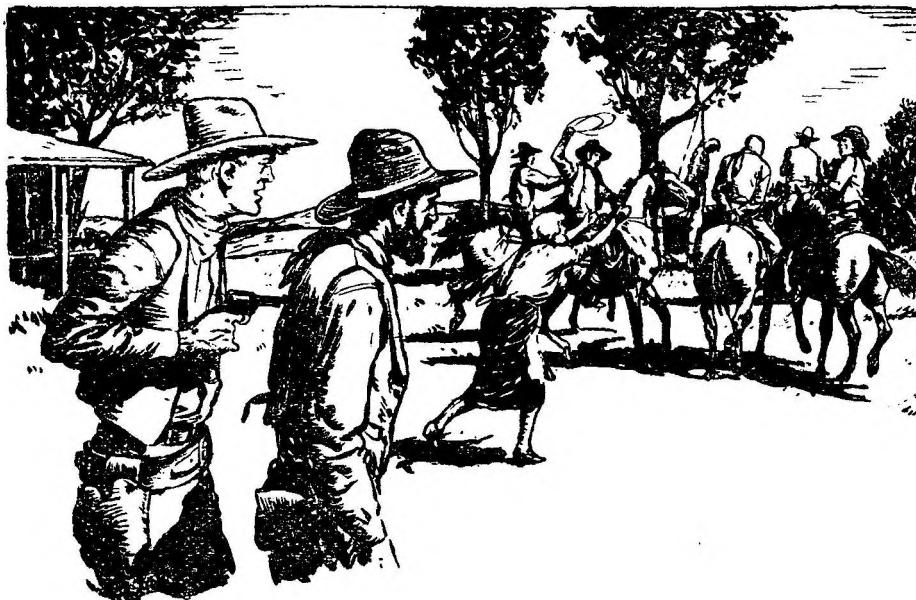
IN Andrews County, Texas, there is a most remarkable body of water known as Shafter Lake. This lake covers two sections of land, lies 3,500 feet above the sea level, and fifty feet below the elevation of the surrounding country. It is a lake of clear salt water, free from alkali.

In this respect it differs from other salt lakes of the Southwest, which are heavily charged with alkali.

Shafter Lake is fed by flood rains,

and has no outlet. The remarkable feature of this lake is that the grass grows almost to the water's edge. There is no vegetation of any kind in the lake, and no fish exist in its waters.

In the dry season, the water evaporates to some extent, but does not disappear entirely. It leaves shallows covered with a heavy deposit of salt, coarse of grain, but absolutely pure in quality.



Hangin's On Two-spoke Wheel

By George C. Henderson

Author of "The Gun Rider," etc.

AS "Sandy" McWhortle reined his bay mustang to a sudden halt in the narrow rocky defile his right hand dropped to the butt of his six-gun. Ahead of him a horseman had abruptly dismounted, swinging his bronc around, blocking the trail.

Sandy darted a quick glance behind him—too late. Out of the brush that bordered the road appeared a bristly bearded, double-gunned cowboy, sliding his cayuse down the steep bank in a shower of dirt and gravel. Two more men followed him.

A thrill shot through Sandy McWhortle. He had begun to grow

suspicious of the rider ahead of him, who would neither let Sandy pass nor get far ahead of McWhortle. Now he was sure it was some kind of a trap. They had him pocketed, cut off from escape, front and rear. High rock walls rising on each side hemmed him in.

"It must be a mistake," he told himself.

He had no enemies. One glance at his twenty-dollar bronc, old saddle and faded clothes would convince any robber he was not worth holding up. Sandy was just what he seemed—a happy-go-lucky, rambling cow-puncher.

"They must think I'm somebody

else," he assured himself, drawing off the trail and waiting with both palms resting on his saddle horn, away from his gun.

The three gunmen came jogging toward him, silent, hard-faced. All rode Two-spoke Wheel horses, he noted. All watched Sandy coldly, suspiciously. Six hard eyes bored through the strange cowboy, taking in his tanned, hawk features; big, humorous mouth; square jaw; old clothes; Nevada-branded bronc, and the single wooden-handled six-gun girded to his right leg.

Without lifting a hand or speaking a word, they rode slowly past him at a fast trot. A few yards beyond him they broke into a gallop.

Sandy gulped in a deep breath. "Heck! I'm gettin' as jumpy as an old woman!" he chuckled. 'Thought sure I was in for a ruckus. Them hombres did act kind of funny, too. Well, old bronc, I'll be seein' 'em again, because I hanker to ride for that Two-spoke Wheel outfit. I've heerd tell they shore set a danged good table."

Ten minutes riding brought McWhortle to the hitch rack of a rambling frame ranch house. Sandy liked "vittles," and plenty of 'em. That's why he came out of his way to get here. Old Bob Hufford, manager of the English-owned Two-spoke Wheel, was famous all down the line for feeding his men well.

As Sandy swung down and loosened the saddle cinch a black-bearded man came down the walk from the house toward him. An enormous dark sombrero and a flaring calfskin vest flapping open made his bulging chest seem larger.

Two .45s rested in fancy holsters against his chaps. From beneath bushy brows and long, dark lashes, his shining, jet-black eyes watched

Sandy as a rattlesnake watches a bird.

Sandy's hazel eyes clashed with black ones. From descriptions he had heard, he knew that this hombre was "Blacky" Goodall, foreman of this ranch under Bob Hufford. Again a queer feeling of danger filled McWhortle.

The place was very quiet except for the strangest, most heart-rending sound. Inside the house a woman was crying as if her heart would break.

Sandy tramped up to Blacky, his single gun flapping against his leg, spurs dragging.

"My name is McWhortle, Mr. Goodall," said Sandy. "I'm lookin' for work."

Blacky's catfish mouth opened slightly. "I'm not putting on any more men," he said in a harsh, disagreeable voice.

Down by the bunk house there was a commotion. Cowboys, some mounted, were milling about. Loud talking burst forth. One rider in the center of the pack was bareheaded. He sat stiff and awkward.

It was a moment before Sandy saw that the fellow's hands were bound, and that his captors were forcing the prisoner toward a patch of cottonwood trees. Inside the house the sobbing rose to a piercing cry. Sobbing words burst from tortured lips. A gruff masculine voice cut in.

Sandy flashed a startled glance at Blacky, who was watching him keenly. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

"Necktie party," answered Blacky coolly. "Rustlers getting some manila medicine. It's none of your affair. S'posen you ride."

Sandy's hazel eyes glinted. "I don't have to be told when to ride or where," he said evenly.

Blacky stiffened. His big hands moved until his thumbs were hooked in his belt above the butts of six-guns.

"Don't get ringy with me," he growled. "We're a peaceable outfit, but you can get trouble here if you're asking for it."

Sandy let one hip sag. His hands hung idly at his sides. He was still grinning, showing his white teeth. Smile wrinkles gathered about his eyes.

"Let's have it," he drawled. "I never knowed anybody to be so accommodatin' as you—with a perfect stranger. You even give me an escort comin' in."

Blacky scowled, but did not offer to draw. The flat, deadly report of a rifle came from the cottonwood patch. It was followed by sputtering explosions, a volley of shots that ended abruptly. In the blank silence that ensued, the words of the woman in the house became understandable.

"Bob!" she cried. "Come back! Don't let them kill you! Come back to me!" Her voice trailed off into a choking moan.

Sandy's taut nerves were tingling. Those shots had been fired into the body of a man dangling from a tree with a rope around his neck. This necktie party was grim, deadly business.

"That's the finish of one more hoss thief," said Blacky Goodall with satisfaction. He was no longer glaring at Sandy. "You got off on the wrong foot, cowboy. Mebbe you got excited, seein' that feller led away to be hung. Them rustlers got a fair trial by a jury of cattlemen and cowboys. We ketched us a mighty big outlaw in our trap. Lots bigger'n we ever suspected. That's why the woman is bawlin'. But it'll soon be over, and she'll forget him.

"I'm telling you this, cowboy, so you won't go 'way and spread scandal about us. We don't want a bad rep. Stay and talk to some of the others if yo're doubtful. We got nothin' to hide."

Blacky's sudden change of front knocked Sandy's pegs from under him. A rash plan had formed in his mind. He was all keyed up to kill this rat-eyed foreman, then rush the house and rescue that woman who was crying so piteously.

But Blacky's half apology and explanation left Sandy torn by conflicting doubts. Not knowing who might be right or wrong, he hesitated.

Down at the bunk house another prisoner was being forcibly hoisted onto a horse. He was a little old man. He was feeble, tottering, and his hair was silvery. But his spirit was unbroken.

"Keep your hands off o' me, you thieving coyotes!" he shouted. "You'll suffer for this. I'm innocent. Every man of you knows it. What kind of rats are you to murder an old man just because he discovered your crooked game?"

An arm flashed in front of the old man's face. A steel-studded wrist cuff smashed into the aged, wrinkled features. The prisoner jerked back his head, crimson staining his lips.

Behind him Sandy heard the sudden tinkle and crash of broken glass. Through a smashed windowpane he saw a little old lady with a stove poker in her hand.

The next instant she jumped out of the window, fell in a heap, struggled to her feet, and came running straight toward him, her eyes fixed on the group at the bunk house. Gray hair fell down over her bent shoulders. Long skirts whipped about her legs as she ran. Her arms

were lifted, and piteous cries came from her lips.

"Bob!" she cried. "Wait! I'm coming. Wait for me. Don't let them take you away. Have mercy on me!"

She stumbled and started to fall. Sandy leaped in, caught her and held her up. Blacky grabbed her arm as she struggled to free herself. She lifted a tear-stained, trembling face to Sandy. Her pale lips quivered visibly.

"Let me go!" she begged. "Let me go to him. Oh, oh, don't let them hang him!"

Sandy's hard eyes flashed questioningly to Blacky Goodall. The foreman made a wry face.

"It's her husband," explained Blacky. "We caught him dead to rights. He was manager of this spread—my boss. He was robbing the outfit blind, putting the blame on me. I told the wrangler to keep her in the house, but the fool let her go. Here he comes now." Blacky shook his fist at the crestfallen wrangler. "Go on over there with the rest of the men, you idiot!" he ordered. "I'll look after Mrs. Hufford myself."

The wrangler kept going toward the bunk house. Sandy was staring at Blacky in amazement.

"Hufford?" he asked. "She is Mrs. Hufford? Then that old man they got is Bob Hufford."

"And a slick, mealy-mouthed, and yaller old crook he was," finished Blacky. "He had us all fooled. Made 'em think I stole the stuff until we proved he got the money. We just hung two of 'em, and now Bob is the last." Blacky raised his voice. "Go along with him, boys, and get it over," he yelled.

Mrs. Hufford's limp, panting body suddenly jerked into life. She lurched forward so quickly that she

broke Sandy's grip. Only Blacky held her.

"No, no, no!" she cried. "Don't do it! Don't kill my husband! Please have mercy!"

II.

It was more than Sandy could bear. He did not know right from wrong here. He knew it was foolhardy to butt into another man's game. But he couldn't help himself. In an instant his gun snaked out of its holster and jammed hard against Blacky's ribs.

"Turn loose of her, feller!" he said quietly. "Let go of the lady and tell yore men to hold up. I'll kill you if you don't!"

Blacky hesitated, head turned toward Sandy, eyes wide with sudden fear.

"Yo're locoed, cowboy!" burst out the Two-spoke Wheel foreman. "You can't buck a dozen men. Be careful what you do. Yo're just excited."

Blacky kept his hold on Mrs. Hufford, who saw and heard nothing except the happenings at the bunk house. The lynchers were around old Bob, forcing him toward the cottonwood grove. Hufford's gray head could be seen bobbing around as he fought vainly to get free.

"Do as I told you, Goodall!" said Sandy in a cold, even tone. "I won't hesitate to kill you. You're a rattle-snake! I knew it the first time I saw you. Order your men to stop right now!"

Something in the cowboy's quiet tone warned Blacky to obey. He relaxed his hold on Mrs. Hufford, letting her lunge forward, staggering in the direction of the hanging crew.

"Hold up!" yelped Blacky. "Wait a minute there. I—"

A sharp jab of the six-gun cut him

short. "That'll be enough," advised Sandy. "They've stopped. If they ask questions, answer them careful unless you want a slug in your in-nards."

An angry growl went up from the men as they milled to a halt and turned their horses, facing toward Blacky Goodall. They opened a path for Mrs. Hufford, who ran to her bound husband, caught at the ropes that held his arms, and then sank to the ground.

A cowboy raised her up. Some one lifted old Bob out of the saddle and put him down beside his wife, who had fainted. A short cowboy with a scarred chin gave a few sharp commands and then came tramping toward Blacky and Sandy, followed by two more gunmen.

Blacky smiled grimly. "I warned you, feller," he said. "Here come three cattlemen, all bosses of ranches. They helped try Bob fair and square. I'm giving you one more chance to be sensible and put down yore gun. You cain't fight all of us."

Sandy's eyes narrowed. His heart was pumping rapidly. The three gunmen were coming closer and closer, eyes fixed suspiciously on the strange cow-puncher. In another minute Sandy knew that his bluff would be called. He must either act quickly or give up.

An inspiration came to him. Settling his horny thumb against the Colt hammer, he pressed hard. The gun clicked back to full cock. Blacky winced and looked down at the weapon, startled.

"Tell them to go back and bring Bob with 'em to your office," ordered Sandy smoothly. "My finger's squeezing the trigger. There's only one way to stop it."

Blacky Goodall did not want to die. He talked—fast and loud.

"Hey, there, Gunner," he bawled. "Go back and get Bob. Bring him to my office. It's important. Hurry!" There was a frantic note in his last wail.

"Gunner," the scar-chinned gent, halted and glared at Blacky and then at Sandy, who stood slightly behind Goodall, his gun hidden from view.

"What's the matter?" demanded Gunner. "What's up, Blacky?"

Blacky gulped. "Never mind," he cried excitedly. "It's important. Get Bob quick! Bring him to my office. I've got to talk to you."

Gunner said something to the two gun fighters with him. Growling and grumbling, they started back to get Bob. Sandy gave Blacky a shove toward the house.

"Git agoing," he commanded. "You made an appointment. Now we got to keep it. Head right for yore office."

Blacky obeyed without further resistance. "Yo're askin' for it," he said grimly. "I don't know yore game, but yuh can't win. Them three boys may get Bob and bring him to my office, but what of it? What will you do then?" Blacky's words poured thick and fast from his lips as he stomped up the steps and entered the house.

He halted before a closed door, as if to let Sandy go in ahead of him.

Sandy let out a grunt. "Wouldn't be polite for me to go first, mister," he chuckled. "Age before beauty."

Blacky turned the knob and pulled. His bulk filled the doorway. Sandy was right behind him, gun barrel pressed against the foreman's spine, watchful for tricks. The cowboy didn't know just what he aimed to do. He had to use his wits and watch for the breaks.

Blacky steadied himself, each big hand pressed against the door frame.

Sandy saw the black-bearded foreman step forward with his right leg. A crackle of suspicion was just flaring through his mind when Blacky dropped out of sight!

The move, releasing the pressure of Sandy's gun, caused him to lurch forward. His eyes looked into the black depths of a cellar, at a slit of light, narrow steps, a clutter of boxes, barrels, rubbish. A dark shape moved on the cellar floor.

A tongue of flame licked up from the shadowy figure in the cellar. The door panel cracked.

Sandy jerked back without returning the fire and slammed the door. Blacky had tricked him. He had jumped clear of the steps down into the cellar before the cowboy could even pull trigger.

There was a moment of silence. Sandy, standing there staring at the jagged bullet hole in the door, heard the splintering of glass in the narrow cellar window and Blacky's voice giving the alarm.

"Hey, Gunner, Clem, Horsley!" Blacky was howling. "Come here! West side o' the house. I'm locked in the cellar. Hurry! I got another hoss thief."

Muttering angrily, Sandy cast a swift glance around the big one-story house. He had bungled. The cat was out of the bag. Any slim chance he had of rescuing Bob Hufford was gone. What could he do now?

Only for a split second did he hesitate; then he was on his way to the door, a sudden hope flaming up. In the excitement they might leave old Bob unguarded.

Through the open door he saw men running rapidly toward the west side of the house. Old Bob was nowhere in sight out in the yard.

Cautiously Sandy stepped onto the porch. A grapevine still protected him from view. He heard

hard breathing and turned his head. Two men stood before him, not ten feet away.

Their backs were turned. The smaller man was old, barcheaded, silvery-haired. His hands were tied behind his back with pigging strings. It was old Bob Hufford.

Sandy did not wait to identify old Bob's captor. Clubbing his gun, he whipped back his arm and slashed out at the sombreroed head.

The gunman spun half around and fell with a grunt, limp as a rag. Sandy's knife was out and sawing at the ropes around Bob's wrists almost before the gun fighter hit the rickety boards of the porch. The upturned face of the fallen man was marred by a scar on his chin. It was Gunner.

Shoving old Bob into the house, Sandy turned about, picked up Gunner, and began dragging him under the matted roots and leaves of the grape arbor. Gunner was out cold. Crimson ran down over his cheek. Sandy's blow had probably fractured his skull.

Sandy could hear Blacky yelling commands to his men. "Surround the house! He's still inside. Guard every door and window! He can't get away." Blacky's tone was frantic.

Sandy ducked through the door into the house just as two men came running into view, guns in hand. Had they seen him? He hoped not. They did not yell a challenge, anyhow.

He found old Bob in front of the gun rack, pawing at a rifle with numb and swollen fingers that refused to work. The old man turned a haggard face to him, staring at Sandy blankly. The cowboy had to hold him to keep him from falling.

"Who are you?" he burst out. "I don't know you. Why—"

Sandy took the trembling arm of the old ranch manager and forced Hufford into the shadowy shelter of the enormous fireplace. The sun was down. It was beginning to get dark.

The shouting outside had subsided, but Sandy was not deceived. That merely meant that the cow-punchers had taken their places on watch at windows and doors. He was trapped, and with him was old Bob Hufford.

"Are there any secret hideouts in this place, Mr. Hufford?" asked Sandy. "You know what I mean—hidden cellars, secret panels, get-away doors. We're surrounded," he continued as the stunned old man just stared at him. "I've rescued you from them lynchers, but they'll get back at us double strong if we don't work fast. We can't stand 'em off. They're too many for us."

Old Bob shook his head. "There's no way out," he said dully, hopelessly. "Let me get my rifle. My fingers are limber now. You go! I'll fight to the death. This is none of your affair. Mother is down at the bunk house, fainted. She won't be hurt. I can shoot now without thinkin' of her. Them fellers wouldn't hurt an old lady, mean as they are."

Old Bob tried to rise, but his wabbly legs gave way. Sandy rested a reassuring hand on his arm.

"Listen!" he whispered. "Hear that sound down cellar? Blacky is comin' up. I got an idea. Talk low, Mr. Hufford. Give me the low-down about this business. I'm just a boomer cowboy. Mebbe I can win myself a job. Blacky claims you were tried fair and square by a jury of other cattlemen."

"That's a lie!" snapped the old man. "Three of them that claims to be cattlemen are fakes—hoss thieves financed by Blacky. He staked

them to a few head of stock each to ring me about with enemies. They organized their own bogus association and got seated firm in the saddle before they framed up on me."

"Horsley and McMullen are the only real cattlemen out there, and they've been fooled and roped in. I can't prove it, but I know Blacky done this with money he stole from the Two-spoke Wheel right under my nose. Say, cowboy, how do you horn in here? What's yore name?"

"Sandy McWhortle of the McWhortles of Whortleville," answered the cowboy lightly. "Tell me this, gran'pop. Did you ever search this geezer for incriminatin' papers? He must have some, with all the business he does?"

"Sure, he was searched," snorted Bob, "but he don't tote no papers. He's got a cache right in this house. I know he's got it, but I've never been able to find it."

"It's up to us to make him show where it is," mused Sandy. "If we could prove you innocent, Horsley and McMullen might come over to our side. Huh?"

His eyes were fixed on the few coals smoldering in the fireplace. Abruptly he turned, grabbed a pile of papers, and tossed them on the fire. As it flamed he plucked a moth-eaten bobcat skin from the floor, snatched a cover from a table, and threw both on the blaze. A vile odor of burning hair and cloth filled the room.

Shoving the speechless old ranch manager back out of the way, Sandy pulled the smoking mess of cloth and hide onto the floor. Foul-smelling smoke rose and billowed through the place.

"Fire!" yelled Sandy, pulling old Bob down behind a chair. "Fire! The place is on fire."

III.

Echoing shouts went up from the ambushers outside as smoke poured through open windows and doors. The cellar door swung back and Blacky Goodall rushed in.

It was quite dark inside now. The foreman could not see the cause of the blaze. He cast one glance around and darted into a bedroom.

Sandy was after him like a cougar stalking a deer. He halted on the threshold, eyes fixed on Blacky, who was pulling a bed away from the wall.

Blacky had a hunting knife in his hand. He pried a board free and threw it on the floor. For a moment he was bent down. When he straightened up he had a handful of papers.

Six-gun in hand, Sandy stepped through the doorway.

"Stop where you are, Blacky!" he ordered. "The jig's up."

Blacky's foot halted in mid-step. He seemed on the verge of surrendering. Abruptly he lurched aside, whirled, dragged his gun. A spurt of flame leaped from his .45.

Sandy squeezed trigger. The big Colt jerked from the recoil. Before his amazed eyes it jumped from his fingers and fell to the floor. Sandy saw his right arm drop to his side. Crimson began to run down the sleeve. He was hit.

Before him he saw Blacky on one knee, steadyng his six-gun. The Colt's black muzzle covered Sandy. Blacky was hit, too, in the leg, but he still could shoot.

"Got you now, you interferin' young fool!" snarled Goodall between clenched teeth. "I'm going to kill you."

Sandy tensed his muscles to leap forward. In front of him was his fallen gun. He might duck, scoop

it up, and get in a few shots before Blacky finished him. He gathered himself for the leap.

Something whistled past his ear. A dark object hit Blacky. It was a stick of wood. Old Bob had thrown it.

Sandy was leaping in just as the stick hit Blacky. The blow turned the gun aside. It roared deafeningly. The slug shattered a mirror.

"Bad luck for somebody!" yipped Sandy.

His good left hand held his six-gun. He lashed out at the head of the kneeling foreman, missed, struck a shoulder. The force of the swing threw Sandy off balance. He fell over Blacky, all sprawled out.

The foreman fired again. The bullet cut through Sandy's clothing, set it afire. He could feel the heat, smell the burning cloth.

Sandy's groping left arm caught Blacky's wrist, forced it back. Blacky was weakening, and Sandy shook the six-gun from his fingers with a series of quick jerks. He felt Goodall's body go limp.

Old Bob Hufford was batting at the fire that burned Sandy's coat. From the direction of the living room came the clatter of pounding heels, shouts, angry oaths. The fight was not over. In another minute Blacky's gunmen would be in on them.

Sandy reached an arm under Blacky's back and lifted him to a sitting posture.

"Get back of me, Mr. Hufford!" he ordered. "There's Blacky's gun. Load it! Them hyenas will have to shoot Goodall before they get us. Hey, out there! Go easy, you coyotes! We got Blacky pris'ner, and we'll kill him if you crowd us."

Old Bob's fingers worked rapidly, plugging shells into Blacky's .45. Sandy had his own wooden-handled

six-gun in his left hand, aimed at the door.

Their backs were to the wall. Blacky was propped up in front of them as a shield. The package of papers and bills from the hidden cache lay on the floor.

Outside in the other room the creak of leather rigging and low talking told Sandy that the whole pack was closing in. There was a moment of argument; then a challenging voice asked:

"Is that the truth, Blacky? Have they got you pris'ner?"

"Yes," groaned Blacky. "Don't shoot! Talk it over! They can't get away."

Sandy turned to old Bob. "Anybody out there you want to say a word to?" he asked. "There's Blacky's secret papers on the floor. Would you trust them jaspers to give you a square deal?"

"There's Horsley and McMullen," said Bob. "I'll talk to them. But where did you get Blacky's papers?"

"I made him reveal his cache himself," grunted Sandy. "Scared him. He thought the house was burning. Figured he had to get his loot or lose it. Talk to Horsley and McMullen. Tell 'em to come in here with their men."

Old Bob Hufford complied. There was a hot argument outside. Some of the men were in favor of starting shooting in spite of Blacky's peril. Blacky pleaded with them. He threatened and begged. He snapped out orders to his own men.

After a few minutes confusion two cattlemen and three cowboys entered the room and stood staring at the trio huddled in the corner. A one-eyed man seemed to be the leader. This was Horsley.

"I got my proof, Horsley," said old Bob. "This hombre tricked Blacky into opening his cache by

faking a fire. See that hole in the wall where he pried out a board? That was his hideout, here in his bedroom. There's the papers on the floor. Look at the money, too. Where would he get so much money honestly?"

There was a racket outside—the sound of men running, hoarse shouts, then the pound of hoofs as riders galloped away.

The one-eyed Horsley, stooping to pick up the package of bills and papers, jerked erect with the documents and whirled toward the door. "What's going on out there?" he shouted. "What's the matter?"

There was no answer. Horsley turned puzzled eyes on Sandy McWhortle and Bob Hufford.

"Them's the real cattle thieves, Mr. Horsley," said Sandy, grinning. "They know the jig's up, and they've high-tailed it. What's in them papers? Light a lamp and look at them."

Horsley complied, while old Bob Hufford tightened a tourniquet around Sandy's arm. Beneath the yellow glow of the kerosene lamp he spread more than four thousand dollars in bills, along with other papers which indicated that Blacky Goodall had financed the fake association.

A man came in supporting Mrs. Hufford. She ran to old Bob's arms with a cry of joy.

Sandy turned toward the door. Blacky was blurting out a confession, but that did not interest McWhortle. He was so sleepy that he just had to find a place to lie down. He staggered from weakness. Some one caught him by the arm. It was Bob Hufford.

"No you don't, son," cried old Bob Hufford. "You don't git away from us so easy. I got to have another foreman for the Two-spoke Wheel, and you're nominated."

Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral



This department is offered in order to preserve the old cowboy songs and frontier ballads that have come down to us by word of mouth from our grandfathers. It is also intended to help you folks who enjoy collecting Western songs.

If you want to find the words to some cowboy song, write and tell us about it. We'll do our best to find it for you and publish it in the magazine. If you know any of the old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

Send all communications, with your name and address printed clearly, to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

HI thar, folks! How be yuh this week? All ready for some more songs an' such? Waal, I got 'em for yuh. Jest collect in a circle, sort of, clear yore throats, an' give me a minute tuh tune my ol' fiddle, an' we'll git goin'.

While I'm tunin'—sometimes this hyar fiddle acts kind o' stubborn in thet respect, an' it takes a little time tuh git all the squeaks out of it—I got tuh say a few words about this hyar department.

Two things is still happenin' regular—I'm gettin' requests tuh send copies o' songs tuh readin' hombres; an', also, I'm receivin' a lot o' songs tuh be published, without one word

regardin' who wrote 'em, or when, or why.

Now, I realize as how thar may be times when yuh simply don't know nothin' about a song but the words. But thar ain't no use fer yuh tuh keep on askin' me tuh send yuh songs, when yuh know thet all I kin do is tuh try tuh print 'em in 3W, so thet everybody kin enjoy 'em. Get the idea? I can't send out no songs tuh any one.

Now, I reckon this ol' thingamagig is in tune about as near as it'll ever be—but don't git tuh thinkin' I ain't satisfied with it! Yuh remember the idee o' the song I printed last week called "The Old Cow Hawss"? Waal, when I go tuh

heaven, I'm hopin' I can take this hyar ol' fiddle along, too.

It ain't only the cowboys that kin complain about that dreary, weary life an' such. Once in a while a Texas Ranger tells his troubles in song, too, an' this hyar hombre shore sounds plenty discouraged.

THE DISHEARTENED RANGER

Come listen to a Ranger, you kind-hearted stranger,

This song, though a sad one, you're welcome to hear;

We've kept the Comanches away from your ranches,

And followed them far o'er the Texas frontier.

We're weary of scouting, of traveling, and routing

The bloodthirsty villains o'er prairie and wood;

No rest for the sinner, no breakfast or dinner,

But he lies in a supperless bed in the mud.

No corn or potatoes, no bread or tomatoes, But jerked beef as dry as the sole of your shoe;

All day without drinking, all night without winking,

I'll tell you, kind stranger, this will never do.

Those great alligators, the State legislators, Are puffing and blowing two thirds of their time,

But windy orations about Rangers and rations

Never put in our pockets one tenth of a dime.

They do not regard us, they will not reward us,

Though hungry and haggard with holes in our coats;

But election is coming, and they will be drumming

And praising our valor to purchase our votes.

For glory and payment, for vittles and raiment,

No longer we'll fight on the Texas frontier;

So guard your own ranches, and mind the Comanches,

Or surely they'll scalp you in less than a year.

Though sore it may grieve you, the Rangers must leave you

Exposed to the arrows and knives of the foe;

So herd your own cattle and fight your own battle,

For home to the States I'm determined to go.

Where churches have steeples, and laws are more equal,

Where houses have people and ladies are kind;

Where work is regarded and worth is rewarded;

Where pumpkins are plenty and pockets are lined.

Your wives and your daughters we have guarded from slaughter,

Through conflicts and struggles I shudder to tell.

No more we'll defend them, to God we'll commend them;

To the frontier of Texas we bid a farewell.

Now, let's go on tuh the next. Hyar's a song by a fella who has supplied us with a lot o' dandy ones. I reckon I don't need tuh say anything about it—it tells its own story.

THE OLD-TIMER

By Henry Herbert Knibbs

Morning on the Malibu, mist across the ranges,

Ponies bucking everywhere. "Whoop! And let 'er buck!"

Bud is standin' on his head; Bill is makin' changes

In his style of language, and he's havin' plenty luck!

"When it comes to ridin' broncs—listen to me, stranger—

Takes a hoss that is a hoss to pile your Uncle Jim.

Whoa! You think you're goin' to dump a ol'-time Texas Ranger?

Just excuse me for a spell; I'll take it out of him.

"Hump, you side of bacon, yuh! Spin till you get dizzy!

I could roll a cigarette while you are doin' such.

Now, perhaps, you think that you are keepin' me right busy?

Wisht I had my knittin', for you don't amount to much.

"As I was sayin', stranger—— Whump!
Now, ding that pinto devil!
Gosh-and-what-goes-with-it! but he piled
me sure enough;
I was ridin' on the square, and now I'm
on the level;
Serves me right for talkin' and pertendin'
I was tough.

"Ought to buy a rockin'-chair! Git a pair
of crutches!"
Hear the boys a-joshin' me now they got
the chant—
'Baldy's diggin' angleworms with his nose!'
Now such is
Mighty childish joshin'. Say, 'fore you
was wearin' pants

"I was ridin' broncs and didn't have to
pull no leather,
Broncs that pawed a star down every
time they took a jump.
I wasn't sixty-two them days; I didn't feel
the weather.
Give me forty year off and I'll lick you
in a lump!"

"Laugh, you movin'-picture kids; think
you're punchin' cattle?
I was raised in Texas, where a steer was
called a steer;
I have done some ridin' that would make
your eyeteeth rattle;
From the Tonto to Montana, ridin'
range for forty year.

"Guess I got 'em thinkin' now—thinkin'
strong and quiet.
Mad at *them*? Why, stranger, I'm a
old-time buckaroo;
Don't get mad at nothin'. If they're wish-
ful, let 'em try it,
Ridin' range and ropin', when they're
turned of sixty-two."

Hyar's a peppy little song:

THE SKEWBALD BLACK

It was down to Red River I came,
Prepared to play a darned tough game—
Whoa! Skew, till I saddle you, whoa!
I cross the river to the ranch where I in-
tended to work,
With a big six-shooter and a derned good
dirk—
Whoa! Skew, till I saddle you, whoa!

They roped me out a skewbald black
With a double set-fast on his back—
Whoa! Skew, till I saddle you, whoa!
And when I was mounted on his back,
The boys all yelled, "Just give him slack!"
Whoa! Skew, till I saddle you, whoa!

They rolled and tumbled and yelled, egad,
For he threw me a-whirling all over the
sod—

Whoa! Skew, till I saddle you, whoa!

I went to the boss and I told him I'd re-
sign;

The fool tumbled over, and I thought he
was dyin'—

Whoa! Skew, till I saddle you, whoa!

And it's to Arkansaw I'll go back.
To hell with Texas and the skewbald
black—

Whoa! Skew, till I saddle you, whoa!

Like that one? Good! Now let's
see what else we got. Hyar's an-
other ol' song from thet ol'-time col-
lection o' songs called "The West-
ern Bell." I reckon mebbe yuh'll
like it.

OH, COME TO MY HOME IN THE WEST

Oh, come to my home in the West,
Where the rivers are broad and free,
The prairies in beauty are dressed,
And the wild deer boundeth in glee,
And the wild deer boundeth in glee.

CHORUS:

Our skies are the brightest,
Our hearts are the lightest,
For our hands find plenty to do;
The sweetest wild flowers
Spring up in our bowers,
And friends here are honest and true.

Oh, come to this beauteous land
Far away o'er the bright sunny wave;
Our prairies, so broad and so grand,
Are homes for the good and the brave,
Are homes for the good and the brave.

CHORUS.

Then come to my Western home,
Leave care and grief behind;
O'er mountain and valley, then come,
Where a greeting warm you will find,
Where a greeting warm you will find.

CHORUS.

Waal, thet's about enough for this
week, I reckon. But thar'll be more
next week, don't forget. So keep
yore spirits up till then. So long
an' good luck!



Western Pen Pals

Conducted by Sam Wills ~ Postmaster

Some day you're going out West yourself to the Western outdoors. It will be a nice thing to have friends out West when that time comes—friends who'll extend a hand o' welcome and put you onto things.

You can make these friends through this department of Wild West Weekly. The idea is to exchange information about different parts of the West—about ranches and camps, getting work, prospecting, and learning to rope and ride.

Letters are exchanged only between men and men, and between women and women. Let's get together and make this department a real help to readers of Wild West Weekly. I'll do my part by forwarding letters between parties likely to be interested in writing to one another. You do yours by always printing your whole name and address carefully on every letter you send to this department; and by giving the name and State of the Pen Pal you choose, as it appears in the magazine, as well as the date of the magazine in which you find him or her.

Address your letters to Sam Wills, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WHOOPEE, folks! *What* a pile o' letters I've got before me tuh-day! Come on, line up, pronto, an' let's git at 'em! We'll start with:

JOB HUNTERS

Give these folks a break if yuh can.

DEAR SAM: Do you know of any forester who would be interested in writing

to me? I'm interested in forestry, and some day would like to get a job as a ranger in the West around Colorado. I'd like all the info I can get about the work.

BRUCE ROBINSON, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR PEN PALS OUT WEST: Please tell me how I can become a cowboy. I am seventeen years old and can shoot and ride. I promise to answer all letters.

JOE CHERNENY, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: Would you please put me in touch with some ranch owner in Mon-

tana? I'm nineteen years old, have lots of nerve, and am handy with a gun. Would like a job as a rider on some ranch. I am a farmer.

LOICE JONAS, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: My girl friend and I are planning to go out West, and we shall have to work our way through to the coast. So we'd like some advice and also some friends before we start. We'd like some one to tell us the best route to Washington and the best places to find work. We are both experienced in all kinds of work. We hope to get good advice and lots of Pen Pals. MISSES AVON BUTTON AND

EMMA JENKINS, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I am seventeen years old and very strong. I have done housework, and also worked in a hospital, and in a restaurant as dishwasher. And I've taken care of children. Will some kind mother 'way out in the West, who has no daughter, take a poor lass to her heart and give her work? *Please, somebody!*

ANN KULCHAR, OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of twenty-one and wish to be out West. I would like to have a job on a ranch, doing any kind of odds and ends, or as a regular cowboy. Would like to have some Pen Pals from Arizona, Nevada, Texas, and Wyoming. Would appreciate all you can do to help me find a job.

OSCAR NESBITT, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of eighteen. I can ride and shoot fairly well, have been in the United States army, and am used to hard work. I'd like Pals from Arizona, Kansas, Texas, and New Mexico to write and give me the dope on jobs out there.

HENRY MITCHELL, OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to get in touch with some ranchers out West. I am seventeen years old and would like a job herding cattle. I understand that kind of work and will do it for reasonable wages. I can ride, rope, and shoot, so if you ranchers want a darned good hombre, write to

RAYMOND BLEUMBERG, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I am at present in the navy, but will be out in July. Although my home is in the East, I am thinking of getting a job in one of the Western States, when I'm paid off by the navy. I would greatly appreciate any information about

ranches and home life from fellows between the ages of seventeen and twenty-seven.

TAYLOR VON ASPERN, OF WASHINGTON.

DEAR SAM: Please put me in touch with some rancher. I would like to get work on a ranch. I would work for very little pay, if any one wants a good boy of nineteen. I'd also like some cowboy Pals from Colorado, Wyoming, Arizona, Texas, New Mexico, Montana, and Nevada.

WILLIAM COWCH, OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I'd like to work on a ranch in Montana, Colorado, Texas, or any of the ranch States. I love outdoor work, and am used to hard work. I am twenty years old.

HENRY LUSH, OF KANSAS.

DEAR SAM: I'm out of a job and wonder if any one could help me to find one. I'd consider any kind of work offered, anywhere. I'm twenty-two years old and would like Pals from everywhere.

RAYMOND MOORE, OF IOWA.

Steve Bubrin, o' Pennsylvania, is still lookin' for a job anywhere, an' he'd like tuh git it pronto.

LETTERS OF INTEREST

As most o' these are letters offerin' Western info, I know they'll be of int'rest tuh yuh.

DEAR SAM: I'd like very much to have some more correspondents through your magazine. I think some of the Pen Pals ought to be interested in Australia. We have cattle here, and outlaws, and ranches. I'd be glad to give information of any part of it to any one.

ROBERT LANGTON, OF AUSTRALIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I'm a lonesome widow of twenty-one. I love all sports. I'm a Western cowgirl. Please write; I promise to answer all.

ROSE, OF OREGON.

DEAR SAM: I'm seventeen years old and am working on father's stock ranch. I expect to go to college in California, as soon as I am able, and would like to have some Pen Pals from there—especially from Berkeley.

LEO KAMARAD, OF OREGON.

DEAR SAM: I am ten years old and live in Texas. I have two horses and can ride very well. Here's hoping that I get some Pen Pals.

CAROL KUNAN, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I'd like to hear from some one located in or near the Windriver Basin of Wyoming. I am twenty-one years old and was reared on a ranch in Montana. I have lived here in the Ozarks for a year, and can tell any one who cares to write a lot about this part of the country. I'm a good rider and roper and am starting West very soon, in the hope of getting work.

I. J. CROSS, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of sixteen and live on a ranch. I ride to school every day on my cow pony, Pal. I'd like some Pen Pals from out Oregon way, but will answer all who write. Come on, fellows, and be friendly. I'll tell you all about life on a big ranch.

RICHARD SHIRES, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a gal of sixteen, aching for Pen Pals from coast to coast. I don't care who you are, just so you write! I've lived in the wild and woolly State of Montana, so here's your chance to get some info.

GOLDIE JOHNSON, OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of sixteen. I live on a large ranch. I'd like to have some Pen Pals, for I am lonesome. I have lots of snaps from China and Japan and all over the world, and will be glad to give some to my Pals.

MARY, OF OREGON.

DEAR SAM: I'm a lonesome cowboy. I'd like some of your Eastern readers to write to me. I'll try to answer every letter I get, and I want them from Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, and thereabouts.

RUSSELL HARRIS, OF NEW MEXICO.

DEAR SAM: I'm just fifteen, but I'm a real cowgirl, and would be glad to write to any one who wants to know about cowboys and cowgirls. The first one who writes to me will have a snap of me in my cowgirl outfit.

MADGE MILLER, OF OREGON.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of ten and would like to have some Pen Pals. I am a pretty good rider and have a horse. I also like sports, such as hunting and fishing. So come on and write me.

WILLIAM MARTI, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some Pen Pals from anywhere. I am eighteen years old and am a trick rider and roper. I have ridden in several of the largest rodeos in the country. So come on, you Pen Pals, and give this lonely cowboy a letter.

TOM IMLAY, OF UTAH.

DEAR SAM: I'd like to hear from any one who is interested in ranch life, rodeos, and cowboy songs. I spend a lot of my time on a ranch.

BOB CLARK, OF MONTANA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of fifteen, and I live on a large, lonely ranch. I'd like to hear from girls in every State of the Union. Come on, girls, of any age, write to me.

E. MARIE SALGADO, OF CALIFORNIA.

SPECIAL REQUESTS

DEAR SAM: I would like to hear from some men who live in the Southern States and are interested in hunting with coon hounds. I have some coon-hound pups, and their mother died. I would like to get an old dog to train the pups with.

FLOYD PEACOCK, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: Could any one give me the address of a person or a place where I could buy a young mountain lion a few months old? I will appreciate any assistance I may receive from you or the Pen Pals.

L. C. WHITE, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I'm trying to locate a relative of mine, a man named Maxwell Higgins. He is about sixty-five years old, and the last time we heard of him he was the sheriff of Oklahoma County in Oklahoma—but that was forty years ago.

LOUIS CARPENTER, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I would like to get in touch with some Western Pen Pals and some real Indian boys of about sixteen or eighteen years. I'll answer all letters and give any info my Pals may want.

SMILEY SPEK, OF ILLINOIS.

HOBBIES

These folks each have special interests, like music or songs or stamps an' such.

DEAR SAM: I'm a young man of twenty-three and especially interested in guns, hunting, and fishing. I'd like to have let-

ters from Pals of my age who are interested in the same things. So come on, you hunters, and tell me all about yourselves. Incidentally, my other hobbies are stamps, books, and playing chess.

R. R. ROBERTSON, OF KANSAS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of seventeen and I love swimming. I'm the Junior A. A. A. swimming champion of New Jersey. I would like to have some Pen Pals who are good in that art.

SPEEDY, OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of fourteen and and would like to hear from any one, anywhere. I'm specially interested in music. I play the violin.

BETTY ELLIS, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of fifteen and live in the city. I would like to hear from Pals who make a hobby of fishing, hunting, and trapping. I also like woodcraft, and love to live out in the open.

CLAUDE AKERS, OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of eighteen and crazy about music. I play and sing all kinds of songs, and would like Pen Pals to send me all they know. I lived in Idaho for a while, and would like Pals from that State and elsewhere.

LOIS, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of seventeen, and would love to have Pen Pals from the possessions of the U. S. A. I love fiddle and guitar music, and am crazy about cowboy songs. I'd love to hear from a girl who plays the guitar or any other musical instrument, also one who knows songs.

WALLY, OF MINNESOTA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of seventeen. I love to dance, swim, and skate, and am full of fun. I have a great weakness for pets.

SUNSHINE, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I'm fifteen years old and a Boy Scout, stamp collector, and sportsman. I would like to have some Pen Pals, especially foreign ones.

WARD BRITTON, OF SOUTH DAKOTA.

PALS OUT WEST

Step up, Westerners, an' read these hyar calls for yuh. Thar's a lot of 'em.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man of twenty-five, and would like to hear from

cowboys and all who read the W. W. W. I love all sports, and know how to tell fortunes. A. LAWRENCE FRANCIS, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am seventeen and would like to correspond with a girl of the same age who would tell me something about the West. I will be glad to exchange photos and snaps of myself.

P. COOKER, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: I would like to get in touch with some real cowgirls. I am fifteen years old and love outdoor sports.

BETTY ELHERBE, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I'd like some Pen Pals from Texas, Arizona, Montana, Wisconsin, New Mexico, and Maryland. I'd like to hear about ranches principally.

CECIL KEER, OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of thirteen and am interested in cowboys. I would like some cowboy to send me info of the West and some cowboy songs.

JACK FISHER, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: Would like to hear from cowboys, especially in Texas, and other Pals from anywhere. I'm seventeen years old and live in the Northwest, about twenty miles from Mount Rainier.

CHESTER LANGE, OF WASHINGTON.

DEAR SAM: I'd like to have Pals from anywhere in Oregon. My husband is crazy about your magazine, too.

MARIE M., OF MINNESOTA.

Hello, hombres. I'd like to hear from some Pen Pals of the West. I hope to be out there some day. I want some cowboy songs, too. Will answer all letters.

VIRGIE GILLAM, OF KENTUCKY.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of thirteen and would like to hear from some Western Pen Pals. I'd also like to get some cowboy songs.

IRENE SOUTHARD, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: Although I've traveled through the West, I'm still a greenhorn about it, and would like to have some of your Pen Pals tell me about it.

WAITING FLO, OF SOUTH DAKOTA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of eighteen and would like some of the cowgirls to write to me.

ALICE FIRTH, OF AUSTRALIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of eighteen and would like to correspond with cowboys from any part of America.

LOUIS MARTIN, OF AUSTRALIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of eighteen and would like to hear from fellows out West. I'm an outdoor boy and enjoy all sports.

JACK HOLCOMB, OF MARYLAND.

DEAR SAM: I'm a married woman, thirty years old, and would like some Western Pals from any State to write to me.

MRS. ANNA DUNHAM, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I'd like to hear from folks living in the Northwest, especially in Oregon. I'll answer all letters pronto. I'm twenty-one.

J. DOWNING, OF MINNESOTA.

DEAR SAM: I'd like to get some Pen Pals from out West, in Arizona, Montana, or Texas. I also want some cowboy songs.

NELLIE LAMBERT, OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR SAM: I'd like to hear from lonely Westerners. Will welcome all letters from the West.

MR. JESSE HESINGTON.

OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have a few Pen Pals from the West. I am fourteen years old, and I like to sing cowboy songs.

DOROTHY KNOWLTON, OF MAINE.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of thirteen. I'm anxious to have some Western Pals who will tell me about cowgirls. I'd especially like to hear from Texas and New Mexico.

PHYLLIS LLOYD, OF MAINE.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of nineteen and would like to hear from some one in Texas. I'm a good hand with guns and horses. I'm going to Texas in the fall and would like to have friends there.

ADAM BEAUDRY, OF CONNECTICUT.

DEAR SAM: I'd like to have Pen Pals from any of the Western States who can give me info of them. I'd like some one between the ages of twelve and fifteen to write—especially if she lives on a ranch.

GRACE MONSERUD, OF IOWA.

DEAR SAM: I intend to take a trip West very soon, and would like to have some Pen Pals in Texas and Arizona. I am a boy of sixteen.

AL MARIOTT, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I have always wanted to be a cow boy. I can ride, shoot, and rope. I'd rather ride than eat. I'd like some cowpokes for Pen Pals.

JAMES WATHON, OF LOUISIANA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of nineteen and am interested in the West. I would like very much to know about things that are going on out there now. I'll gladly answer all letters sent to me.

IDA ELLIS, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of sixteen. I would like Pen Pals from any place out West. Please tell me about a cow-puncher's life.

VIC, OF MINNESOTA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of thirteen, and I would like to have some Pen Pals from the West. I can ride, rope, and shoot, and will exchange snaps and info.

JIMMY GREEN, OF MAINE.

Mickey, of Ohio, is a gal around sixteen years old, an' would love tuh have some Pen Pals out West.

LONESOME

These folks need cheerin' up.

DEAR SAM: I am eighteen years old and would love to hear from some girls around my age. Get your pens and paper, and write to a lonely girl.

LOIS POWERS, OF IOWA.

DEAR SAM: I'm nineteen years old and lonesome for Pen Pals. I'd be especially glad to hear from the West.

LONESOME TOOTS, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR MR. WILLS: I am awfully lonesome. Won't somebody write to me? I am a girl of fifteen.

MARIE CARROLL, OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM: A lonesome soldier, a patient in a military sanitarium, I would like some Pen Pals to cheer me up. I am forty years old, and saw active service in France. Under treatment now for wounds received over there. Was a rider with the old Buffalo Bill show before the War. Want Pals between twenty-five and fifty to write to me. EDWARD ANDREWS, OF TENNESSEE.

DEAR SAM: I'm a lonesome boy of nineteen. I'm working in an office all day;

but I like all kinds of sports, such as swimming, fishing, and hunting.

DEBS KING, OF TENNESSEE.

DEAR SAM: I'm just another lonesome girl of fourteen. I'd like to hear from Pen Pals in North Dakota and in Maine.

HELEN, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I'd like Pals from all over the world. I'm thirty-two, married, poor, and lonely—oh, so lonely! Live in a desolate wooded country. So, please, everyone, write to me.

CECILE DEERING, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: I'm a lonely boy of fifteen and would like some Pen Pals from all the Western States. If any one needs a hand on a ranch, I'll be there pronto.

MR. CLAIRE BUCKINGHAM,
OF MINNESOTA.

DEAR SAM: I'm one of these ordinary country junks, but I get awfully lonesome sometimes, so I'd like to have some Pen Pals, especially from the West and large cities in the East. I'm a boy of fifteen.

KENNETH NICHOLS, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I'm a lad of fifteen and very lonesome. I'd like some Pen Pals in the Western States to write to me pronto.

WILLIAM DIVINE, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonely girl of seventeen. I love all outdoor sports, and would like to have Pen Pals from all over the world, especially real cowgirls.

ESTHER HALL, OF KENTUCKY.

DEAR SAM: I am in need of Pen Pals, Western preferred, but all welcome. I am twenty-five years old, and lonesome. To all who'll send a stamp, I'll send an Indian arrowhead.

HENRY DENNY, OF KENTUCKY.

DEAR SAM: I'm a lonely kid of thirteen. I'd like to have some Pen Pals from any place; I don't care where.

BUD BERRY, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a lonely boy of seventeen, and would like to hear from Pen Pals from all parts of the U. S. A. I live on a farm.

JOE BAKER, OF NEW HAMPSHIRE.

DEAR SAM: I'd like some Pen Pals from the South. I'm nineteen, married, and lonely for the South, where I lived till

four years ago. I'd like lots of Pals, preferably married, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two.

MRS. GLADYS DAVIS, OF NEW YORK.

OTHER REQUESTS

Only room for a few more.

DEAR SAM: I'm seventeen years old and very fond of dancing and skating. I would like to have some Pen Pals from anywhere. I love to write letters.

KAY, OF MAINE.

DEAR SAM: I'm fifteen years old and the oldest of seven children. I'm desperately in need of Pen Pals. I'd like to hear from girls of all ages in all parts of the world.

RENA MACCONI, OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some Pals from all over the world. I am a girl of twenty, and I like all kinds of sports.

PEARLENE MOORE, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I'm eleven years old, and I would like some Pen Pals from anywhere in the U. S. A. I'll exchange snaps of different places.

HARRY CAMPBELL, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to hear from Pen Pals from far and wide. I ride horses and do a great deal of hunting with a .22 rifle.

V. THERIAULT, OF CANADA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of thirteen and would like to have some Pen Pals from all over the world.

MARCHEL GILLSON, OF MINNESOTA.

Bob, of Oregon, is interested in havin' Pals from all over the country write him pronto.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of sixteen and have nothing to do, so I'd like some Pen Pals. I have so many Western books that I give them away.

CORDIA HAWILL, OF ARKANSAS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of eighteen and would like to have some Pen Pals from all over the world. I expect to go out West and would like to be able to drop in on some Pen Pals en route.

HOWARD SHEPARD, OF VERMONT.

Whew! Folks, I reckon that's about all I kin manage for tuh-day. So long!

The Wranglers Corner



All letters intended for The Wranglers Corner should be addressed to The Range Boss, Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WAAAL, Boss," asks Lum Yates, at this week's meetin' o' the ol' Wranglers Corner, "what yuh figurin' on doin' to-night, huh? Have yuh got lots o' letters to read?"

The waddies has been at the Corner fer quite a spell, already, an' the slim puncher from the Bar M is gettin' worried about the business o' the meetin'. We chuckles an' winks at him.

"Letters did yuh say, Lum?" we asks. "Say, hombre, yuh don't know the half of it. We've been plumb snowed under with letters all week. If we read 'em all ter yuh, yuh'll be here till yore whiskers are as long as a wild hoss's tail."

There is a good crowd on hand ter night. Besides Lum Yates, them two young Texas Rangers, Hungry Hawkins and Rusty Bolivar, are settin' alongside o' Looshis Carey, the Shootin' Fool Deputy from Co-

tulla. An' o' course, the four hombres from Circle J is in their usual places.

"Tell yuh what we're goin' ter do this evenin', gents," we says. "There bein' such a stack o' letters, we're goin' ter see how many we can get read in one settin'. Thet won't leave no time fer arguin', Buck," we adds, turnin' toward the grizzled Montana waddy. "So remember that."

"I never argue, Boss," says the Circle J veteran, Buck Foster. "It's the redhead that always starts the fireworks."

"Oh, yeah?" begins Joe Scott. "Yuh danged ol'—"

But at a wink from us, their boss, Billy West, stops 'em right then and there, an' we picks up the first letter on the stack.

"Maybe some o' the readin' hombres kin help this gent out," we says, as we sees what the letter says. "We'll read it first off."

Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Please put this in the Wranglers Corner. I want back numbers of the W. W. W.—mostly those of the years 1927 and 1928, when the magazine cost ten cents. I'll pay the regular price to whoever can send me some. Tell the readers to write me, if they have any back numbers they would like to sell.

Yours truly,
3955 North Murray Avenue,
Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

"Hope he gits a hull flock o' them back numbers," we says. "But we hope, too, that the readin' hombres writes him first, an' don't jest send him a hull flock o' magazines that maybe he's already got."

Then we goes on ter the next one, which same is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading your magazine for about three years. I have also written in to the Corner about three times, with no result. See if you can print this one, will you?

Your whole spread is excellent, except for Lum Yates. He is the biggest coward I ever saw. I eat guys like him with pleasure.

Tell Buck Foster to keep on arguing with Joe Scott. Put more Bud Jones's stories in the magazine—also more of Silver Carroll.

Looshis Carey is a wonderful hombre. So is the Whistlin' Kid.

Billy West may be fast on the draw, but Buck Foster is faster with his fists. Put that bow-legged jasper into more fights, so I can enjoy them.

I'd like to see the Circle J outfit in the movies. Is there any chance?

Yours forever,
THE RAMBLING KID.
St. Paul, Minnesota.

"How about that, Billy?" we asks. "Any chance o' yuh fellers goin' inter the movies?"

"Naw!" says Buck Foster, before his boss kin answer.

Billy laughs an' agrees with Buck, but allows as how yuh never kin tell about sech things in this world.

Then we picks up another letter. This is it:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to the Corner. I have been reading "The Golden Lizard," by Walker Tompkins. It is a swell story, and I wish that he would write another story about the same young hombre—Irv Stoy.

I wish there weren't so many stories about Circle J. I'll bet that Billy West must have about a couple hundred thousand head of cattle by this time. Every time he appears on the scene lately, he's trying to buy some more cattle.

You ought to publish more stories about Johnny Forty-five, Sonny Tabor, Bud Jones, the Ranny Kid, and Lucius Carey. There ought to be another story about Deuce Brooks, too, and Silver Carroll.

Well, so long,
EDWARD KRYSINSKI.
Cleveland, Ohio.

After that, we picks up this one:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Since this is my first letter to you, I want to tell you that the W. W. W. is the only magazine I have ever really cared to read, and is by far the best of any I have read.

One day, I found a 3W on the sidewalk in front of our store. I picked it up and read it and have been reading them steadily ever since.

My favorites are Kid Wolf, Circle J, Irv Stoy, the Whistlin' Kid, and Deuce Brooks. The W. W. W. is not complete without Circle J and Kid Wolf.

Tell Buck Foster to lay off of Joe Scott, or Joe will hit him so hard some day that he will straighten out that long mustache.

Yours till Buck and Joe quit arguing,
JEFF BETROUS.

"Jest let that mangy redhead try ter straighten out my mustache!" yells Buck Foster. "I'll show him a thing or two he ain't expectin'. Help me, Hannah, I'll—"

"Shet up!" says Billy West.

Buck swallows hard, glares at Joe, an' settles back in his chair. We grins an' picks out another letter. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is our first letter to you. The 3W spread is the best ever.

There are only a few complaints, and a couple of compliments.

Our favorites are Kid Wolf, Sonny Tabor, Johnny Forty-five, Circle J, Lum Yates, and the Shootin' Fool.

Jim Hazel gets hit on the head too often. It ought to be too big for his hat, by this time.

And the Ranny Kid ought to kill Ad Bland, before the range hog gets a chance to try to kill him any more. Drill him, Kid, and get it over with.

Yours till Jim Hazel gets hit on the head again, **THE THREE BUGS.**

Birmingham, Alabama.

"Too bad Jimmy ain't here ter hear that," we says, chucklin'. "Maybe we could get him ter agree not ter git hit on the noggin' no more. He'd prob'ly be willin'."

Then we picks up another letter. This is what we draws:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I just read my first W. W. W. and turned at last to the Wranglers Corner—and almost burned up. I, for one, say that any one who doesn't like the Whistlin' Kid is crazy. I like all the characters in the 3W.

Sonny Tabor is my favorite, though. I don't think that even Kid Wolf or Billy West could kill him in a gun fight.

Kid Wolf is all right, but everybody makes too much of him—always hollering about him. It's a wonder he doesn't think he's a superman and get a swelled head.

Billy West is a good square shooter, and Joe Scott is not far behind him. Buck Foster is all right in his place. The only trouble is that his real place should be cutting wood for Sing Lo. That's where he'd be, too, if I were Billy West.

Jim Hazel is my third choice. He is fine. I'd like to visit him in the Thunder Birds for a week.

Listen, Boss—I want a Sonny Tabor story every week, or often, after this. The rest of the time you can put in what ever you want to.

That's all. Please print this. Good luck to all! **HARRY NICKENS.**

Alton, Illinois.

"Am that so?" roars Buck Foster. "Me cut wood fer that yaller little heathen? I'll be a horned toad, if that ain't the—"

But Billy catches our wink an' shuts Buck off ag'in. The veteran looks like he might explode any minute, but we goes right on with the letter-readin'. Here's the one we reads next:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This happens to be my first letter to the Corner, and if you don't print it, I won't write any more.

That hombre, F. E. Fox, is all wrong about Jim Hazel. The ranger is all right. Fox is the first one I have ever heard kick about him, and I have been reading 3W for over three years.

I like Kid Wolf best of all. Next come Sonny Tabor, Circle J, the Bar U twins, the Whistlin' Kid, Jim Hazel, Bud Jones, and the Ranny Kid.

Buck Foster is the spice of Circle J. I sure do wish that he would knock Joe Scott for a row of ash cans. Tell Buck to take good care of his mustache, till I write again.

A CONTENTED READER FROM THE SOUTH.

P. S. If you don't print this, I'll think the Corner is a big fake.

"Come on an' try knockin' me fer a row of ash cans or anythin' else, yuh locoed ol' sage hound!" laughs Joe Scott, lookin' at the veteran. I'll—"

"Stow it, Joe!" snaps Billy West.

The redhead calms down, lookin' sheepish. Buck looks as if he'd won the argument an' puffs up like a pigeon. Hidin' a grin, we begin readin' the next letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading the W. W. W. for about four months. I know that is not a very long time, compared with some of your old-time readers. But I don't think any of them like it any better than I do.

The first W. W. W. that I bought, I just read the stories and skipped the departments. Finally, one day, I discovered them. I read Fiddlin' Joe, and Western Pen Pals. I didn't like them much.

But then I came to the Wranglers Corner. It sure was fun to read what the different readers had to say about the different characters. I made up my mind that I would have my say, too.

My favorites are stories by William F. Bragg, then Cleve Endicott's Circle J—especially Buck Foster—then Clee Woods, Ward M. Stevens, and Emery Jackson.

Philip F. Deere's and Lee Harrington's stories will do, but Collins Hafford's Lum Yates stories are not so hot.

Why not leave out Lum and Jim Hazel once in a while and put in the Ranny Kid, Kid Wolf, and Bud Jones more often?

Don't get me wrong, Range Boss. I'm not trying to get your job or anything—just offering a few suggestions.

Buck Foster, will you send me a snapshot of you? I'd like to have it.

Good luck and success to all the waddies on the 3W spread. Yours truly,
BREVARD WALKER, JR.
Mobile, Alabama.

We looks up at the clock after readin' thet one an' sees thet it's time ter call the meetin' off fer another week. We does thet, an' the waddies all high-tail it fer their home ranges.

They'll be back next week, howsoever, an' so will

THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

Trail of the Crazy Cross

Novelette

By COLLINS HAFFORD

Lum Yates rides it ter the end an' finds out thet it leads him an' Zeke plumb inter a hull mess o' trouble with some tough hombres.

Boss of the Shoe String

Novelette

By CLEVE ENDICOTT

He was in a derned bad jam, an' there wa'n't no way out—that is, not until the saddle pard from Circle J throwed down with their six-guns an' smoked out some two-footed skunks.

Two Fightin' Hoss Thieves

Novelette

By WILLIAM A. TODD

Whenever they got together, there was trouble. One of 'em was a Texan—so thet trouble was usually gun trouble.

Also stories of the Whistlin' Kid, by Emery Jackson; Jim Hazel, Forest Ranger, by Lee Harrington; Shorty Masters, by Allan R. Bosworth—and other characters.

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