

ALL STORIES COMPLETE
WILD WEST★



WEEKLY
NOV. 23, 1929

15¢
20¢ IN
CANADA

LOBO.
THE TERRIBLE
By
CLEVE ENDICOTT



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Inside front cover

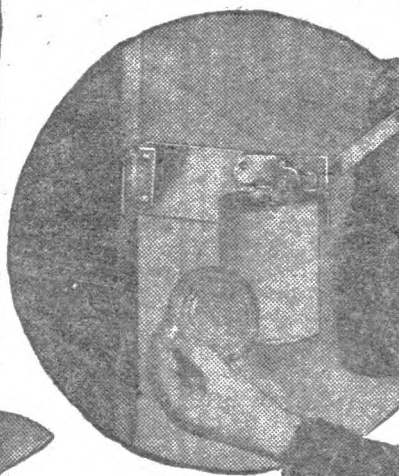
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Wild West Weekly [Vol. 45 No. 6, Whole No. 1414, November 23, 1929] (Street & Smith Corporation, 15¢, pulp, cover by Remington Schuyler) []

- Lobo, the Terrible [Billy West & Circle J] · Cleve Endicott (by Norman W. Hay) · nv
- The Fightin' Maverick · Nelse Anderson (by Paul S. Powers) · nv
- The Nester of Purple Draw · Andrew A. Griffin (by Kingsley Moses) · nv
- The Bar U Twins Scotch a Viper [Bar U Twins] · Charles E. Barnes · ss
- That Fool Purp · Rex McKay · ss
- The Whistlin' Kid Tails On [The Whistlin' Kid] · Emery Jackson (by J. Allan Dunn) · ss
- Robbers' Lake [Jim Hazel] · Lee Harrington (by Reginald C. Barker) · ss
- Them Bar M Bar Steers [Lum Yates] · Collins Hafford (by Galen C. Colin) · ss

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New!



Patented

Just A Twist Of The Wrist

Banishes Old-Style Can Openers to the Scrap Heap and
BRINGS AGENTS \$5 to \$12 IN AN HOUR

WOMEN universally detest the old-style can opener. Yet in every home in the land cans are being opened with it, often several times a day. Imagine how thankfully they welcome this new method—this automatic way of doing their most distasteful job. With the Speedo can opening machine you can just put the can in the machine, turn the handle, and almost instantly the job is done.

No wonder salesmen everywhere are finding this invention a truly revolutionary money maker!

A "Million Dollar" Can Opening Machine

The Speedo holds the can—opens it—slips up the lid so you can grab it—and gives you back the can without a drop spilled, without any rough edges to snag your fingers—all in a couple of seconds! It's so easy even a 10-year-old child can do it in perfect safety! No wonder women—and men, too—simply go wild over it! No wonder Speedo salesmen often sell to every house in the block and make up to \$10 an hour.

End This Waste and Danger

You undoubtedly know what a nasty, dangerous job it is to open cans with the old-fashioned can opener. You have to back your way along slowly—ripping a jagged furrow around the edge. Next thing you know, the can opener slips. Good night! You've torn a hole in your finger. As liable as not it will get infected and stay sore a long time. Perhaps even your life will be endangered from blood poisoning!

You may be lucky enough to get the can open without cutting yourself. But there's still the fact to consider that the ragged edge of tin left around the top makes it almost impossible to pour out all of the food. Yet now, all this trouble, waste and danger is ended.

Generous Free Test Offer

Frankly, men, I realize that the profit possibilities of this proposition as outlined briefly here may seem almost incredible to you. So I've worked out a plan by which you can examine the invention and test its profit without risking one penny.

Get my free test offer while the territory you want is still open—I'll hold it for you while you make the test. I'll send you all the facts about \$75 to \$150 a week. I'll also tell you about another fast selling item that brings you two profits on every call. All you risk is a 2c stamp—so grab your pencil and shoot me the coupon right now.

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4500 Mary Ave (Est. over 20 years) St. Louis, Mo.

AGENTS!



Full Time \$265 in a Week

"Here is my record for first 30 days with Speedo:

June 13, 60 Speedos;
June 20, 84 Speedos;
June 30, 192 Speedos;
July 4, 278 Speedos.
Speedo sells to 8 out of 10 prospects."

M. Orloff, Va.

PART TIME

14 Sales in 2 Hours
J. J. Corwin, Ark., says: "Send more order books. I sold first 14 orders in 2 hours."

SPARE TIME

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Barb, W. Va., says: "Was only out a few evenings, and got 20 orders."

\$2,000.00 PRIZES

Now Being Given in Cash to Agents. Write for Details.

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Yes, rush me the facts and details of your **FREE OFFER.**

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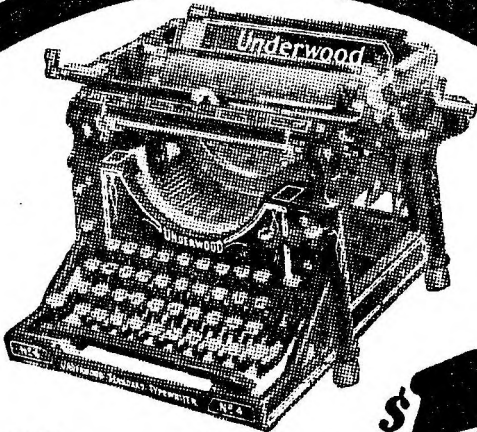
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6

Genuine UNDERWOOD Below 1/2 Price

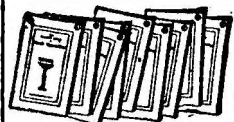


NOW ONLY DOWN

Standard 4-Row Keyboard

Think of it! Only \$1.00 brings the World's most famous Underwood Typewriter for 10 days' free trial. Lowest price and easiest terms ever offered. Pay only 10c a day on easy monthly payment plan. This is the full size standard Underwood 4-row keyboard typewriter, manufactured to sell for \$100.00.

Typewriting Course FREE



We teach you free. Complete Home Study Course of the famous Van Sant Speed Typewriting System, fully illustrated, easily learned, used in schools, business offices, everywhere.

Do not confuse this 4-row standard office model Underwood with other trail machines originally costing only one-half as much.

Easy Terms 10 Day FREE Trial

This late model Underwood, specially priced at \$39.90 (cash) is the lowest price ever quoted; has modern improvements, including 4-row keyboard, two-color ribbon, back spacer, ribbon reverse, tabulator, release, shift lock and many other improvements. Beautifully refinished and renewed. Looks and operates like brand new.

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No. 8 L. C. Smith	\$100. " "	" "	\$39.90 " "
No. 5 Woodstock	\$100. " "	" "	\$39.90 " "

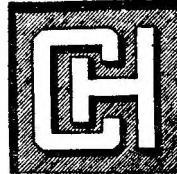
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231 W. Monroe St., Chicago, Illinois

☐ No. 4 Underwood ☐ No. 8 L. C. Smith
☐ No. 10 Remington ☐ No. 5 Woodstock

Send typewriter checked above for 10 days' Free Trial. I am enclosing \$1 deposit with understanding that it will be returned if the typewriter is not satisfactory. If I keep it I will pay \$3 a month until \$44.90 (term price) is paid.

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DANCING JUDITH	Cerale Stanton and Heath Hasken
LOST ANTHILL MINE	Arthur P. Hankins
THE SILENT CRACKSMAN	John Jay Chichester
RESTLESS GUNS	William Colt MacDonald
ANGEL FACE	Vivian Grey
SPRUCE VALLEY	Frank Richardson Pierce
THE BEAK OF DEATH	
	Lillian Bennet-Thompson and George Hubbard
RIDIN' JIM GORMAN	Joseph Mantague
THE GIRL AT THE STAGE DOOR	Beulah Paynter
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HAUNTED BELLS	Madeleine Sharps Buchanan
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JUDY THE TORCH	Arthur P. Hankins
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Per Copy

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10 Inches Off Waistline In 35 Days

"I reduced from 48 inches to 38 inches in 35 days," says R. E. Johnson, of Akron, O., "just by wearing a Director Belt. Stomach now firm, doesn't sag and I feel fine."

The Director Belt gets at the cause of fat and quickly removes it by its gentle, kneading, massaging action on the abdomen, which causes the fat to be dissolved and absorbed. Thousands have proved it and doctors recommend it as the natural way to reduce. Stop drugs, exercises and dieting. Try this easy way.

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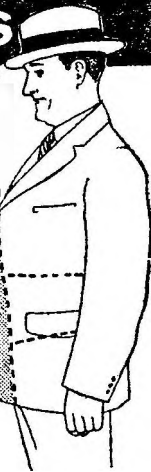
Let us prove our claims. We'll send a Director for trial. If you don't get results you owe nothing. You don't risk a penny. Write for trial offer, doctors' endorsements and letters from users. Mail the coupon NOW!

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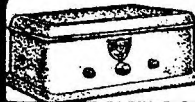
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198 pages of radio bargains. New Screen Grid, all-electric, A. C. Sets in beautiful consoles—also battery operated sets as low as \$16.95. Write today for free catalog.
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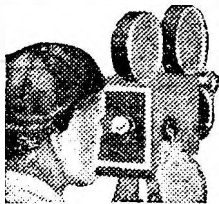
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No human being can escape the harmful effects of tobacco. Don't try to quit without assistance. Let our simple inexpensive remedy help you. A complete treatment costs but \$2.00. Every penny promptly refunded if you do not get desired results.

Ours is a harmless preparation, carefully compounded to overcome the condition that will make quitting of tobacco pleasant, and easy. It comes with a money back guarantee.

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YES—I'll give you an opportunity to start right in making \$15 a day. I'll show you an easy way to get plenty of money to pay your bills, to buy new clothes, house furnishings, a radio, take pleasure trips, etc. Just send for the facts. You can make big money immediately.



Van Allen Made \$100 a Week

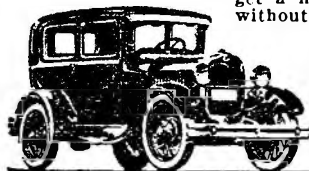
L. C. Van Allen, of Illinois, \$23-a-week oil company worker, mailed a coupon like the one shown here. Shortly afterward he reported profits of more than \$100 a week. Gustav Karnath, Minnesota farm laborer, needed cash at once. I showed him how to make \$20.35 in just 5 hours. Mrs. B. L. Hodges, of N. Y., tried my remarkable plan for getting quick money. Now she writes, "Making more money than ever before—from \$18 to \$20 a day."

No Course of Training Necessary

You don't need any capital or experience. You simply act as my Representative in your locality and look after my interests there. It's easy. All you have to do is take care of orders for my line of fast-selling Groceries, Toilet Articles and Household Necessities among your friends and my established customers. I have a million dollar business and thousands of customers. They must order from you because I never sell through stores. You alone get the profits on all business from your locality.

Ford Tudor Sedan Without Cost

If you want ready cash—an unusual chance to make \$15 a day starting at once—just send me your name. Start in spare time if you want to. Stuart made \$18 in 2½ hours' spare time. You have everything to gain. It costs nothing to investigate. Simply mail the coupon. I will rush full particulars by return mail. I will show you how to get a new Ford Tudor Sedan without cost. This is NOT a



contest. I offer you the car as an extra reward or bonus—in addition to your large cash profits. Don't miss this chance. Mail coupon today—SURE!

MAIL THIS NOW!

Albert Mills, Pres., American Products Co.,
6828 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.

Without cost or obligation, tell me about your new proposition that offers a chance to make quick profits of \$15 a day. Also explain your generous Ford Sedan Offer.

Name

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© A. P. Co. (Print or Write Plainly)

Learn Electricity by Actual Work



LEARN TO EARN \$60 A WEEK AND UP!

or Go in Business for Yourself

Yes, three months at the *Great School of Coyne*, located in Chicago, the Electrical Center of the World, will make you an *Electrical Expert* capable of commanding big pay. The whole world of electricity is open to the practical man—the man who has had actual experience with electrical apparatus. Coyne gives you a practical training on the greatest outlay of electrical apparatus of any institution in the World; everything from door bells to power plants.

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Good Books

IMPULSIVE YOUTH

By Vivian Grey

She was rich. And he was poor. She gave him up because she didn't want to break his mother's heart, the heart of the woman who had saved and scrimped so that he might go to college and get away from the manual labor that seemed destined for him.

It was an impulsive act, the sort of thing she was always doing, for at the start she had acted on impulse when she left her luxurious home to cast in her lot with the humble folk on the other side of the creek. It was impulse that sent her out at midnight to make her own way in the world, alone, with no money in her purse. And when Phil Rhoades found her and would bring her back, she refused, for she was determined that she would not stand in the way of the career of the man she loved.

In a way, it is true that most of us act on impulse at one time or another, trusting somehow to the hidden voices within us that our actions may be for the best. The author of this absorbing story tells what may happen when we make impulse the guide to life. It is a story of youth in the grip of a great love that is here before us, a book that we do not lay aside until the last page is read, and one that we take up again, for it is well worth the rereading.

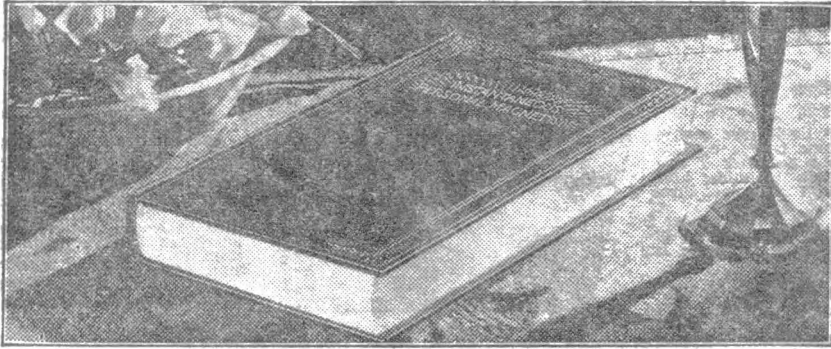
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This Singular Book Wiends a Strange Power Over Its Readers

—showing them how to magnetize their personality *almost at once!*



Will you read it 5 days FREE—to prove it can help multiply your present income?

A STRANGE book! A book that almost seems to cast a spell over every person who turns its pages!

A copy of this book was left lying on a hotel table for a few weeks. To quote the author, "Nearly 400 people saw it—read a few pages—and then sent for a copy!"

In another case, the author reported that a physician placed a copy in his waiting room where more than 200 patients saw the book—read part of it—and then ordered copies for themselves!

Why are men and women so profoundly affected by this book?—so anxious to get a copy? The answer is simple. The book reveals to them how any man or woman—young or old—can develop a Magnetic Personality! It explains how to develop the personal charm that attracts friends—the self-confidence that helps insure success in any business or profession.

It tells how to draw people to you—how to be popular—how to overcome timidity and self-consciousness—how to be well liked wherever you go.

Best of all—it tells you how to accomplish these results quickly and easily!

Whence Comes This Uncanny Volume?

Forty years ago, Edmund Shaftesbury, famous student of the hu-

man mind, set out to discover the secret of Personal Magnetism. He applied his discoveries to his friends. Results were astonishing! His methods seemed to transform people into *entirely new* beings!

Shaftesbury's fame spread. Great men came to him. Among his students and friends were Galdstone, Queen Victoria, Edwin Booth, Henry Ward Beecher, and Cardinal Gibbons.

Until recently, Shaftesbury's teachings have been available only to people who could pay \$25 to \$50 each for instruction books. Now, some of his most important teachings have been collected in a single volume, at a price *within the reach of all!* Furthermore, in this volume are revealed hundreds of Shaftesbury's discoveries never before put into print.

Strange Effect on Readers

Readers of this book quickly learn the secret of attracting others—of influencing the men and women around them. Not by force

—not by loud argument—but rather by applying certain simple, scientific rules that enable them to play on people's feelings just as a skilled violinist plays upon a violin.

Is it any wonder thousands of men and women say they are overjoyed with the results they have received? One enthusiast said of this volume, "Things I have read there I would never have dreamed of." Another wrote, "I would not give up what Shaftesbury has taught me for \$100,000!"

In your everyday life—in social life—and especially in business, you will find this book of immense value. It will help you to attract new friends and to gain the promotion and increased income which seem to come so easily to men and women who have developed **MAGNETIC PERSONALITY!**

Read This Book 5 Days FREE

Merely mail coupon below and this remarkable volume, with cover in handsome dark burgundy cloth, gold embossed, will be sent you for free examination. If you aren't stirred and inspired in the 5-day free period, return it and pay us nothing. Otherwise keep it as your own and remit the special price of only \$3 in full payment.

You are the sole judge. You do not pay unless you are absolutely delighted. And then only \$3. Don't delay! Clip and mail the coupon NOW. Ralston University Press, Dept. 86-T, Meriden, Conn.

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All right—I'll be the judge. You may send me the volume "Instantaneous Personal Magnetism" for 5 days' FREE EXAMINATION in my home. Within the 5 days, I will either remit the special low price of only \$3 or return the book without cost or obligation.

Name

Address

City State

Special cash price \$2.00 if payment accompanies coupon. This saves heavy book-keeping and clerical expense. Money refunded if dissatisfied and book is returned within five days.

Book Tells You

How to develop a magnetic personality.

How to gain nerve control.

How to read people's feelings by watching their mouths.

How to end awkwardness and timidity.

How to utilize your subconscious mind.

How to get ahead in your business or profession.

—and dozens of other vital topics.

Please mention this magazine when answering advertisements

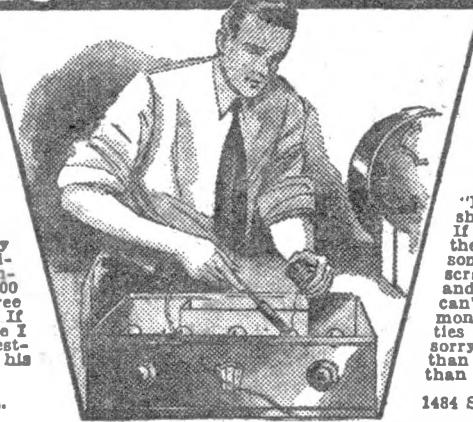
Be A RADIO Expert



Seldom Under \$100 a Week

"My earnings in Radio are many times greater than I ever anticipated they would be when I enrolled. They seldom fall under \$100 a week. My profits for the past three months were \$577, \$645, \$465. If your course cost 4 or 5 times more I would still consider it a good investment. You give a man more for his money than anybody else."

E. E. WINBORNE,
1414 W. 48th St., Norfolk, Va.



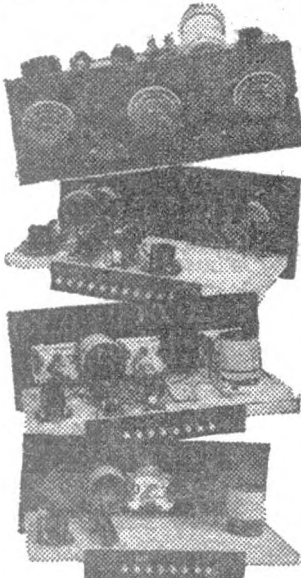
Making \$400 a Month

"I really believe that every man should take your course in Radio. If he has anything in him at all there is every chance for him to get some place. The field hasn't been scratched and it is getting bigger and better every day. A man just can't go wrong. I was making good money but could see the opportunities in Radio. Believe me, I am not sorry, as I have made more money than ever before. I have made more than \$400 each month."

J. G. DAHLSTEAD,
1484 So. 15th St., Salt Lake City, Utah.

Many make \$50 to \$200 a week

I GIVE YOU THE RADIO PARTS FOR A HOME EXPERIMENTAL LABORATORY



WITH THEM YOU CAN BUILD 100 CIRCUITS. 4 YOU BUILD ARE SHOWN HERE MY BOOK EXPLAINS THIS PRACTICAL, FASCINATING WAY OF LEARNING RADIO AT HOME

This is Radios Biggest Year

Don't slave your life away for \$25, \$35 and \$40 a week in a no-future job. You're foolish to be satisfied with less than \$50, \$80 or \$75 a week for more than the short time it takes to get ready for Radio. That is what the good Radio jobs pay. And \$50 to \$75 a week is only the beginning. Many lead to as high as \$200 to \$250 a week.

Big Growth Making Hundreds of Fine Jobs Yearly

Over 300,000 jobs have already been made by Radio's amazing growth. It continues to grow and expand fast. This big growth can put you ahead fast. I have doubled and tripled salaries. I have shown hundreds how to make much more money in Radio than they were making in other fields. Let me show you what I can do for you.

Many Make \$5 to \$25 Extra A Week Almost at Once

The day you start I will show you how to do 10 Radio jobs most common in every neighborhood so you can begin making extra money. Frank Golden, 329 Walnut St., Newark, N. J., says, "I made over \$900 in my spare time in about 10 months." This is the world-famous course that pays for itself.

I Will Train You at Home in Your Spare Time

Hold your job. My 50-50 method of training—one-half from lesson books and one-half from practical experiments using Six Big Outfits of Parts given without extra charge, makes learning at home easy, fascinating. It is unequalled. It gives you practical Radio

experience while learning. You don't have to be a high school or college graduate. Many of my most successful graduates didn't finish the grades.

Your Money Back if Not Satisfied

My training is right up-to-the-minute with Radio's latest developments. Television, Talking Movies, Radio in Aviation, Screen Grid Tubes, A.C. Sets are included. It fits you for Radio factories, broadcasting stations, a spare-time or full-time business of your own, operating on board ship which gives you world-wide travel without expense, commercial land stations, research laboratories and many more branches. Every penny will be returned if after completion you are not satisfied with the lessons and instruction service.

FREE Book Tells What Radio Offers You

"Rich Rewards in Radio" gives you the facts about Radio, what your prospects are for the future, how you can get in without delay, what you can make. It explains our lifetime Employment Service after graduation and many other fine features. Get a copy AT ONCE.

J. E. SMITH, Pres.,
Dept. 9YX,
National Radio Institute
Washington, D.C.



Jumps From \$35 to \$100 a Week



"It is certainly great sport to do Radio work and a profitable one too. I had the pleasure of earning \$110 last week servicing and selling sets. I have made as high as \$241 in two weeks. Before I entered Radio I was making \$35 a week. You started me off on the right foot by giving me the knowledge every man should have to succeed in Radio."

J. A. VAUGHN,
4202 Arsenal St., St. Louis, Mo.

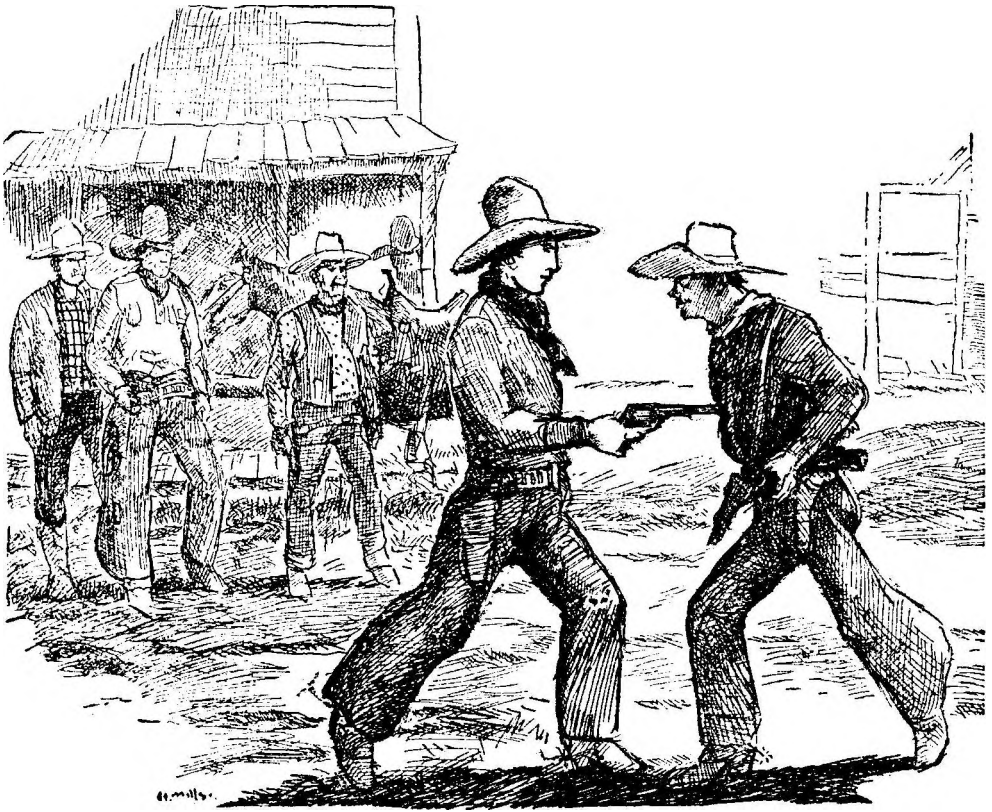
Mail this Coupon at Once

J. E. Smith, President,
National Radio Institute,
Dept. 9YX,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," your book on Radio's opportunities for big success.

Name _____
Address _____ Age _____
City _____ State _____





Lobo, The Terrible

A "Billy West" Novelette

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "The Masked Sheriff of Maverick," etc.

CHAPTER I.

CRY OF ALARM.

YUH clumsy gawk!" Boisterously howled with throaty derision, this insult echoing up the main drag of Barnblaze, Wyoming, compelled loungers and roustabouts in front of the central saloon and pool room to take quick notice.

It looked like a scrap from every angle, which meant lead slinging. Something had happened at the narrow post-office corner involving two hom-bres of different caliber.

WW-1F

"What do yuh mean, bumpin' inter me?"

Now spectators saw that the speaker was Blackman, the wolfer. A stocky, unkempt fellow, whose swarthy skin and quick movements bespoke a Mexican strain in his blood, he was a dangerous foe. More than ready with his temper, he fought at the drop of a hat, and fought well with fists, knives, or six-guns. He stood slightly hunched over, chin stuck sharply out, eyes fiery with hate.

Blackman was addressing a young red-headed cowboy, whom he evidently had collided with in turning the corner

on the close, rickety plank sidewalk. This chap, a stranger in town, was inclined to be tall, and the bumping had staggered him almost into the gutter. His hat fell off, he got slightly tangled in his chaps and spurs, and he did look awkward for a moment, hardly knowing what to do.

He might have apologized, except for the insults, which painted his freckled face, big beaked nose, and large ears a glowing red. He, too, had a temper which was easily aroused by injustice.

The collision had been an accident, the redhead knew for sure, and at once he felt that the epithets were uncalled for. He was no waddy to back down, despite the treacherous aspect of the wolfer. The moment that he recovered his balance, he talked turkey in sharp range language—the only brand which he knew.

"Dry up, hombre!" he snapped. "Watch where you're goin' yoreself, and go easy with who yuh is speakin' to."

"Galoot!" yelled Blackman, his fingers hanging like talons over his holstered six-guns. "I'm goin' ter stow lead in yore legs ter keep 'em closer ter the street."

Blackman meant that he was going to try to do that. For the words were hardly out of his tobacco-stained mouth before the young redhead unleashed into action.

The puncher unwhipped into a strange sidling motion which brought his tall frame in a bending-down-and-up motion as he stepped into the wolfer as if colliding with him again.

The puncher's draw was so fast that Blackman's hands only reached his gun butts before he found the redhead's weapon prodding him in the midriff.

"Ugh!" grunted the wolfer, half in astonishment, half in pain, as he fell back.

"Go on and draw!" taunted the red-headed waddy. "Go on! Yuh said yuh was goin' ter. Why don't yuh?"

He followed Blackman's backward

march, still prodding the ugly wolfer in the midriff. And Blackman fell back still farther, his eyes now wide with fear, his hands out in front of him as if to hold off the waddy. Gone was the wolfer's bravado. The yellow streak came to the fore.

"I was just kiddin'!" he whined. "I didn' mean——"

Now a crowd was gathering in the gutter and behind the pair. They came up on the run, discovering that there was to be no shooting which would have sent them scampering the other way for shelter.

Few of the citizens of the tough cow town liked Blackman, who was a bully with a bad temper. And it was a pleasure for them to see that he had picked on the wrong hombre this time. They were ready to egg the redhead on and to gibe at the wolfer.

But the young waddy was not the man to take advantage of his foe. He had merely defended himself and was willing to call quits, as Blackman began stuttering his apologies.

"No, I know yuh didn't mean to say those things," interrupted the redhead. "That collision was an accident—yore fault as much as mine. There was nothin' to hand out insults about."

"Nothin' a-tall," muttered Blackman, his back now against the front wall of the post office. "I must 'a' kind o' lost my temper."

The redhead beamed a smile upon his late foe.

"That's the way to talk, hombre," he replied. "I must 'a' lost mine, too," he added. "An' now that yuh is showin' yoreself a gent, I'll do likewise."

He stepped back and holstered his drawn weapon. He pushed out his hand.

"Shake," he said. "We can be friends. My name's Joe Scott."

Blackman eyed him with incredulity for a few moments. He was not accustomed to this sort of thing, and he felt that the redhead might be ridiculing him as the crowd about them broke

into uproarious laughter. The wolfer, who had his scrapping reputation to uphold, knew he must make the most of the cordiality. So he tried to grin.

"Shore I'll shake," Blackman said. "It was misunderstandin' all round. I'm Blackman, the wolfer."

At this juncture three men pushed through the citizens standing in the gutter, and one after another they jumped up to the plank sidewalk. One of them, a broad-shouldered waddy attired in full range regalia, was of about the same age as the red-headed Joe Scott.

The other was a much older man, with weather-beaten face and long, drooping, grizzled mustache, a veteran of the cattle country if there ever was one. And the third was a small, slant-eyed, yellow-faced Chinaman whose gait and manner indicated that he was part and parcel of the outfit.

The three of them had come up on the run, thinking that trouble was brewing.

"What's wrong, Joe?" called the young, broad-shouldered newcomer, immediately identifying himself as the redhead's friend.

Joe Scott, still grinning, turned.

"Hello, Billy," he replied. "Nothin' is wrong. Meet a new acquaintance—Blackman, the wolfer." He pointed at his former foe.

"I'll be a horned toad if I didn't think there was a shootin' match!" exclaimed the second weather-beaten waddy.

"Not so, Buck," said Joe to the older puncher. "Me an' Blackman, the wolfer, just stopped ter talk. We got powerful interested in each other all of a sudden."

Blackman, his beady eyes narrowing with more fear as he saw the approach of three of the redhead's friends, hardly knew what to do. He might have planned on trying to turn the tables on his foe, hoping that some of his own friends in the crowd in the gutter would come to his aid.

But now that was impossible. Strange cow-punchers—as these three

men were—often stirred up too much trouble in Barnblaze, and the citizens could be counted on scattering.

Blackman still wondered if the red-head was taunting him, so he tried to be smooth.

"Yeah," he mumbled. "We was jest talkin'," he addressed the newcomers, "about me new business."

The crowd chuckled at this, for every one knew it not to be true. The young, broad-shouldered puncher, who had been called Billy, shot Blackman a keen glance of appraisal. So did the walrus-mustached stranger, Buck.

Both knew that the wolfer was trying to smooth things over. He was an ugly fellow, with treachery written all over his face. They feared for the safety of their red-headed pard, and while they didn't want to mix into his scrap, they did want to know what it was all about.

"What business was that?" asked "Buck" Foster, tugging at the end of a mustache. "Shootin' business?"

"Naw," hastily answered Blackman. "I'm a wolfer. Yuh see, I'm hired by the ranchers in this section to trap a lobo killer what is slaughterin' beef. Nobody kin catch the wolf except an hombre with a reputation like the one I got."

"Is that so, Joe?" asked the broad-shouldered Billy West, his tanned brow creasing with a frown.

The young redhead just addressed grinned broadly. He began to enjoy the part that he was playing, and was not above kidding his friends as well as his late foe.

"Shore," he answered. "I was just getting powerful interested in this hombre's story when yuh all come up. I'm hankerin' ter hear more, ain't yuh? Did yuh ever know 'bout such a cantankerous wolf what kills beef an' nobody kin catch like this hombre is jest tellin' 'bout?"

The weather-beaten Buck Foster, who was the most stupid fellow in the entire lot, immediately lost all of his suspi-

cions. He was taken in completely by Joe and the wolfer. At once his interest in the story of the lobo became tremendous, making him forget everything but his own overpowering curiosity.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" he exclaimed. "Am there sech a killer in these hyar parts. I heerd tell o' one back in '98 when I was ridin' circle fer the Bar Ten spread." He became deadly serious with Blackman. "Did yuh try usin' arsenic spread on the bodies o' daid young calves."

Blackman felt very much relieved.

"I tried everythin' so far," he said, raisin' his voice so that the crowd would hear. "But it don't work. That lobo has got more brains than a human bein'. It's terrible. Yuh can't run the critter down with relay hosses, an' yuh can't git within rille range o' him. He even carries off young children ter eat."

"Children!" exclaimed Billy West, becoming interested himself.

"Shore!" spoke up Blackman with emphasis, now the center of the stage. "That lobo won't stop at nothin'. That's why the ranchers in these parts sent fer me. I has got a hun'ed tricks up me sleeve what they ain't used yit. I was jest goin' out o' town when I bumped plumb inter yore frien', Joe Scott."

The red-headed puncher nodded to Billy and Buck.

"Jest bumped inter me," Joe said. "Ain't it the most interestin' story yuh ever heerd?"

"By golly," said Buck Foster, his big brown eyes bulging, "I'd shore like ter make a try ter git that lobo. I has some tricks up me sleeve meself. Back in '99 I caught a wolf like that. Am thar a reward fer this one."

"Big reward," said Blackman. "What do yuh think I'm workin' fer? It's two thousand dollars cold cash."

Joe Scott whistled.

"It's two thousand dollars cold cash!" he echoed. "Gosh, I shore could use that mazuma all right. Yuh don't need no help, does yuh, Blackman?"

The wolfer at this question stepped back in alarm.

"I should say not!" he ejaculated. "I always works alone. Yuh wasn't figurin' on tryin' ter catch the critter, was yuh?"

"Any objections, hombre?" asked Buck Foster, whose mind also was occupied with the amount of the reward. "I think the job was open ter all comers."

Blackman frowned.

"It am open ter all comers," he said, "but thar ain't no use fer amateurs ter try. This job takes a professional like me. The ranchers give me a free hand. They don't want a lot o' hombres ridin' about thar range with pizen in thar saddlebags."

The wolfer started to turn away, hoping to end the conversation. It was plain to all that his ugly nature had come to the fore again over the questions put him by the punchers.

"I guess I'll git ter work," Blackman said. "I wouldn't try if I was yuh."

He was much relieved to end the difficult situation between him and the redhead, which almost cost him his life by underestimating the drawing ability of the puncher. He felt that the crowd had been fooled.

Blackman believed he had recovered his dignity and reputation. He wanted to get away before anything else happened, for down in his bones he felt that these three waddies were not men to be trifled with.

But Blackman's exit was not so quick. As he stepped down from the plank sidewalk with the three waddies looking after him, the crowd fell away to let him through faster than he reckoned. Simultaneously a shout echoed from the rear of the throng, and then a wilder cry of surprise, along with the jarring thud of a galloping horse's hoofs.

"Blackman!" yelled an excited voice. "The lobo's loose! Blackman! Where's Blackman!"

CHAPTER II.

MYSTERY.

A HARD-RIDDEN horse almost plowed into the rear of the scampering crowd as it skidded to a halt, causing another chorus of shouts from the citizens who had seen it coming in the nick of time. Blackman, starting back in fear of being mobbed by enemies, spied the owner swinging down from the saddle.

It was a puncher from the neighboring cattle ranch, one which had put up some of the reward money for the capture of the lobo wolf which he was just talking about.

"What's that?" yelled the wolfer, somewhat relieved at the news.

The hard-bitten little cowhand pushed his way through the excited crowd.

"The boss just sent me in to tell you that the lobo attacked our south herd early this morning," the rider called. "Git right out to the spread. Hurry up!"

Blackman apparently forgot about everything else. He started off on the run across the street to the hitch rail before the saloon where his horse was tied up.

"Right away!" he shouted.

As the babbling crowd watched him swing into the saddle, the three punchers and Chinaman with whom the wolfer had just been talking, stepped down to the gutter. The newsbearer was preparing to climb aboard his panting cayuse and follow Blackman, but the trio caught his arm.

"Say!" asked the young, broad-shouldered puncher known as Billy, "is this wolt as serious as all that?"

"Serious!" ejaculated the hard-bitten horseman. "Yuh must never o' heard of it. The lobo jest slaughtered five head o' beef an' stampeded a hull herd. We might never find the stock ag'in."

The rider swung up to the saddle, and turned to the crowd.

"Any o' yuh hombres want to come

out, hurry up!" he called to the citizens. "The boss wants ter form a drag. We think we got the lobo cornered in the hills!"

The crowd fell to shouting among themselves. They were excited and several started to run off for horses. There was much talk of the two thousand dollars' reward money, which looked big to these none-too-rich people. They might never have tackled the proposition alone, but a big drag hunt promised a good amount of fun and adventure, a relief from the monotony of their existence.

There were others who sized the situation up in just such a manner—the three punchers and the small Chinese member of their outfit. The quartet, who were from Montana, were never able to keep out of any kind of excitement, and now their thoughts immediately turned to their horses.

They really were looking for something to kill the afternoon over, for they were being held up in Barnblaze on a trip to Texas and Arizona to buy winter cattle to ship back north for spring feeding.

The run-in with Blackman, the wolfer, had been the only diverting amusement during the day, and that was the reason that the red-headed Joe Scott made the most of it.

The story of a lobo wolf pepped up veteran Buck Foster, who thought he knew more ways than one to skin a cat.

"I'll be a horned toad if I ain't goin' after the skunk!" he exclaimed. "Come on, Billy. What do yuh say?"

"Plenty blig reward," spoke up the little Chinaman, his eyes growing big. He was the hashlinger for the trio.

"Mebbe we kin pick up tracks," said Joe Scott. "How 'bout it, Billy?"

"Shore!" cried the young puncher, Billy West, who was the leader of the outfit by virtue of being owner of the Circle J Ranch in Montana for which the other three worked. "Hurry up," he called, starting across the street.

The four found themselves in the center of a group of citizens riding out of town. Blackman had left them far behind, but the puncher who had brought the news of the wolf's late raid, was still in sight. All four Montanans set about catching up with him, which was not a very hard task.

The Montanans outdistanced the other horsemen shortly. They were accustomed to the saddle, and had good mounts. Billy West was riding a chestnut stallion of race horse and mustang mixture which could have caught Blackman but he would have outrun his friends in doing so.

Buck Foster and Joe Scott rode wiry range cayuses of exceptional quality, and even the chink was on a tough little piebald, riding something after the fashion of a jockey.

There were shouts from the citizen riders as they drew away, but they paid no attention. In a few miles of hard riding through the level sagebrush country, they bore down upon the puncher's weary cayuse which was trying without success to catch Blackman. Drawing up on the rider, Billy shouted questions.

"How many miles is it, hombre?"

"Jest five more!" called the lone puncher, who had brought the news. "Yuh kin see the ranch house down through the draw!" He pointed in the distance. "Is yuh goin' ter help?"

"Shore!" shouted Buck. "How long has yuh been huntin' the lobo?"

"More'n a year," yelled the puncher above the thudding of his horse's hoofs. "No one kin catch him, not even Blackman, an' he's an expert. This last raid was one o' the worst!"

Another three miles were clipped off at a steady lope, and then the puncher swung out to the left across range, avoiding the ranch house.

"It's down in the hills!" he shouted. "All the boys has gone a'ready what ain't roundin' up the stampede."

Billy West looked behind and saw that the citizens were miles behind on

their horses. In the distance Blackman could be seen topping a rise in the plain, and not far ahead of him was the dark stretch of timber line which seemed to mount to a long hog-back ridge.

The country apparently was inclined to be rugged beyond. The Montanan could not understand how the men expected to catch the lobo if once it got into that territory, but he said nothing and kept riding.

Once he shot a glance at the strange puncher's cayuse, and spotted the man's brand for a Circle X. This was something of a coincidence, for Billy's outfit in Montana was the Circle J. He called the attention of Buck and Joe to the similarity and they grinned.

"We is almost thar!" shouted the Circle X puncher. "See the crowd!"

A small knot of men stood out upon a hilltop near the timber line to which Blackman, the wolfer, was drawing close. Soon the Montanans saw the wolfer come to a halt and throw himself from the saddle. He began talking with the group. In another two minutes, Billy and his pards were within calling distance.

"Hurry up!" shouted a gray-haired fellow standing out from the others. "We is waitin'."

The Montanans came to skidding halts before the half dozen men, with whom Blackman was talking wildly. Billy, Buck, and Joe ran forward to hear what was being said. The gray-haired fellow, who evidently was the owner of the Circle X spread, had something to say.

"The lobo must o' raided jest afore dawn when the night herders had ridden ter headquarters fer breakfast," were his words. "The herd stampeded, an' overtook the boys ridin' in. They couldn't do nothin' but try an' mill the stock. Then they come right back here an' found the daid bodies."

There were several carcasses strewn about the earth, all evidently killed by a powerful wolf.

"Yuh kin see where the lobo ate his

fill," Blackman interrupted. "The wolf must o' slunk inter the hills an' is now sleepin' off his full belly. We kin throw out a drag an' scare him out of his hole. He couldn't o' gone far, 'cause he ate so much. Shoot him right down."

Blackman was trying to run everything.

"The lobo shore went up in them rocks to the west!" he called, pointing off at a section of the ridge. "We ought ter head in that direction, hombres. I'll lead the way."

The group of men started for their horses, ready to obey him without question. As they went by, the gray-haired Circle X owner noticed the three Montanans and the chink.

"Is yuh joinin' the chase?" he asked. "There's two thousand dollars' reward fer the hombre what shoots the killer. Everybody is welcome."

"Shore we is j'inin'!" exclaimed Buck Foster.

"Come on!" called the Circle X owner. "Follow Blackman. He knows his business an' is gettin' paid fer it."

At this news the red-headed Joe Scott, who still remembered his run-in with the wolfer, caught hold of Buck's shirt sleeve.

"Hey, just a minute!" he called to his pard. "This ain't the way we does business. Let's have a look at the daid steers first, boys. I kin read signs as well as Blackman, an' we kin foller our own clews."

Billy West, who had all the confidence in the world in the redhead's tracking ability, hung back immediately. He wasn't particularly anxious to follow Blackman's directions, himself, for he felt that there might be bad feeling between him and Joe Scott.

Besides, it was true that these Montanans usually went about things in their own way. They led instead of followed. Already they were warming to the chase, and wanted to take it up in their own way.

Blackman's deductions that the lobo

had sought out a lair in the rocky ridge stood open to doubt. There was no sign that the wolf had gone in that direction to sleep off a meal. The animal might have slipped southwest through the timber, and now be miles and miles away. Nobody had made any attempt to read the signs which it left about the scene of slaughter.

"Hop to it, Joe," Billy sang out. "We'll take our time to nail that reward."

Joe Scott needed no second word of encouragement. Already he was at the body of the first dead steer. Falling to his knees, he began examining the wounds. Before his pards reached him, the redhead jumped up and went to a second.

"Golly be," he muttered.

"What am wrong?" asked Buck. "Ain't they daid?"

"Plumb daid," Joe replied, crawling on his hands and knees about the ground. "Too plumb daid, Buck."

The veteran scowled deeply as he preened the ends of his drooping mustache. He was accustomed to arguing about most anything with Joe Scott, but now he decided to be careful. The redhead looked too businesslike.

Billy West, who believed from Joe's actions that something important had been discovered, stood off to the side with the small Chinaman, trying to determine what was wrong. He could discover nothing. As Joe Scott went to a third steer, and then a fourth, he followed obediently.

"Joe, what in tarnation is wrong with yuh?" demanded Buck, unable to contain himself any longer. "Don't yuh think we ought ter be movin'?"

The redhead looked up with a grin.

"Pards," said he, "I was thinkin' on the ride out hyar that somethin' was kind o' phony 'bout this job, an' that's why I wanted ter see these critters."

He got to his feet, addressing Billy. "Did it ever occur to yuh that thar ain't no sense in one lobo killin' five steers fer one meal? It ain't natural."

Buck snorted with disgust.

"Didn't Blackman, the wolfer, tell yuh that lobo was a regular killin' fiend, yuh carrot top? He jest kills ter kill. Ain't that sense?"

"Shore," Joe Scott replied, turning to point at the dead steers. "But if the lobo did thirst ter kill, how come he kilt all them steers so close tergether, hombre? Cattle runs at the first sight of a big killin' wolf. I saw right away that it was phony fer all them steers ter be daid so close tergether.

"Now, by the time that lobo could o' killed one o' them, the other steers would o' been at least fifteen yards away. Then if he nailed another, the herd would o' gone another fifteen yards, an' so on down the line. But here them bodies is all around tergether like the steers had been waitin' thar turn ter kick the bucket. That ain't natural, yuh walrus," he said, laughing at Buck.

CHAPTER III.

VANISHED TRACKS.

FOR a moment Billy West, Buck Foster, and the chink cook, Sing Lo, were silent. What Joe had said stood as truth, and as such it meant a mystery. An attacking lobo certainly would have stampeded the cattle at once, and proof was the mad rush of the cattle away from this scene that morning. But the bovines would have started the moment that the wolf killed one of their number.

And here five steers were dead, lying very close to each other. It would have been impossible for the lobo to have slaughtered all five so quickly before the herd rushed off. If that were the case, what had really happened? Joe Scott was on his knees on the ground again as if trying to determine.

"Joe, do you think a pack of wolves pulled this trick?" asked Billy West.

The redhead looked up.

"No, wolves don't travel in packs when there's lots of game to be had at this time of the year," Joe replied. "Be-

sides nobody in this section mentioned other wolves. There is supposed to be just one."

"Then how was it done?" demanded Buck.

"So be?" added the Chinaman.

Joe removed his big hat and scratched his red head.

"My idear is that them steers was socked over the head with a sledge hammer first by some hombres," he drawled, "an' then the lobo come along an' ripped the bodies."

"You mean, the Circle X punchers did it themselves?" cried Billy West.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" exclaimed Buck. "Why did they do that?"

Joe got to his feet again.

"Look hyar," he called, pointing at the head of a dead steer. "Yuh kin see if yuh look close where that critter got a wallop what knocked him cuckoo." He went to another. "The same thing fer that critter. An' all the rest. This Circle X outfit didn't pay no attention. Yuh kin see where the wolf tore the steers with his fangs."

Joe was right. On the head of each dead steer was the mark of a blow which took little examining to discover. Also the bodies of the steers had been torn, but not eaten much, though Blackman had said so a short time past. Further investigation by the Montanans proved that some of these teeth marks were not in vital spots on the cattle, which appeared to have been killed outright by the wolf.

"Joe, this is serious," Billy West spoke up. "Do you think the Circle X outfit is collecting insurance on these dead critters. If that's the case, we've got to report them, because that's the rule of the Cattle Association."

"Yuh don't mean the Circle X outfit would kill off jest five head o' stock fer insurance, do yuh?" mocked Joe Scott. "They might kill a hull herd, but not five head. Besides, I'm thinkin' that gray-haired owner o' this spread looks too honest fer tricks."

"Joe, yuh is full o' nothin' so much as sarcasm," remarked Buck Foster, growing jealous. "Why don't yuh tell us yoreself what is behind all this hyar deal?"

The redhead walked about the ground for a moment.

"My opinion, hombres," he said, "is that rustling is behind this deal. If yuh study the ground, yuh kin see where some hosses has moved round hyar with padded hoofs."

"Padded hoofs?" echoed Billy, gazing where Joe was pointing.

There were some open spots about the ground, some trampled by the steers which had torn the sod in rushing off on the stampede. And in these places Joe Scott pointed out soft impressions made by horse hocks which had been wrapped up in pads of burlap.

There were several of these signs, impossible to track on solid ground, but to be seen here and there in the sodded sections. The redhead was an expert tracker, accustomed to the methods employed by rustlers.

He often was called for aid by the local sheriff of the town near the Montana Circle J Ranch. Joe loved nothing more than to get to work on a case, and here he was in his element.

"Joe, you're right!" cried Billy West. "We've stumbled onto something this time for sure. We ought to tell the Circle X owner at once."

"Oh, no," interrupted the redhead. "Yuh ain't forgettin' thar is a two-thousand-dollar reward in this deal. We already got the jump on all them other jaspers, who ain't ever goin' ter find no lobo wolf. We'll track this job down by ourselves, an' collect the mazona. I'm thinkin' thar ain't no wolf in on this deal."

"Oh, yuh don't, eh?" questioned Buck Foster. "Then I reckon that the rustlers jest stuck thar teeth into them steers."

"Not rustlers, Buck," replied Joe. "But a good-sized trained dog could have chawed up them critters. Put that

under yore solid ivory, an' think 'bout it."

It looked like the customary argument, which meant a loss of time. Billy West stepped in to mend things.

"Joe, you win the blue ribbons," he said. "I'm thinkin' you're right every way, but we've got to do something. We can't stay here and think it over. Isn't there some trail around here for us to follow? Those rustlers couldn't have got so far away."

"Thar ain't no trail left by them hosses with padded hoofs," said the redhead. "But we could track some of the steers what headed off into the timber. I'm thinkin' them rustlers first swiped a bunch o' steers, an' then did thar killin' o' the others, an' staged a stampede. It would look natural fer steers ter head inter the timber."

"Dang natural," mused Billy, as Joe walked about the ground, trying to pick up tracks of a stray steer.

No rancher would have thought of such a ruse as this one evidently employed by the rustlers. Punchers would have concluded that the steer tracks leading off into the timber had been made by animals fleeing the lobo wolf, and wouldn't have suspected that thieves had led the cattle away before the stampede even started. All around it was a clever piece of work, even to the end of employing some wild animal to mangle the dead cattle and frighten the others away.

It was no wonder that the lobo had seldom been seen, and never caught. Blackman had said it had human brains. Human brains were behind its ravaging.

"Here's the first!" cried Joe Scott. "Bring the hosses. Two steers trailin' each other."

Billy, Buck, and Sing Lo led the mounts to where the redhead was following steer tracks toward the brush. Before they caught up with him, he went into a thicket, where the trail became very plain. The big animals had been forced to thrash their way

through, leaving broken twigs, trampled bushes, and fallen leaves.

"Let me have me hoss," called the redhead. "We kin go faster. Do yuh see the trail? It looks like it was made by steers runnin' away, but it wasn't. It's ten ter one that them rustlers was drivin' the critters."

They rode on through the first stretch of brush at a trot. The cattle, which had gone before them, left an easy route. But when the tracks entered the timber, the trail was more difficult. Under the tall pines, there was no brush.

The pine needles on the ground were a soft carpet. Only here and there were left the prints of sharp, cloven hoofs. But still Joe went on, his eagle eye trained to the earth. Now and then he found sign.

The Montanans mounted up and up through the timbered hills, veering slightly to the southwest.

"Blackman said the lobo must be straight west," called Joe. "Yuh see how far wrong he was. We has got a clear field by ourselves."

Three miles the punchers trailed through the timber, sometimes descending into gorges, at other times climbing steep hills. Joe Scott got down from his saddle at intervals. He found new signs of interest.

There were more hoofprints than made by two steers, mute evidence that a full dozen or more had been trooped together from different directions. But still there were no signs of horseshoes. Evidently the outlaws had kept the pads on their cayuses' hocks.

For a while the trail became much plainer. The punchers were reaching up into the rugged ridge and soon they struck rocky territory. At once Joe Scott was out of the saddle and on his knees on the ground. He continued walking, searching here and there. But now the tracks were gone. The earth was covered with shale, slide rock, and flat stretches of solid granite.

Here and there he found rock scratches which told him in which direction the animals had been driven. He knew that they were being taken to some pass through the ridge, but that was all. There were so many of them ahead, that the right one would be hard to find.

Then quite suddenly all tracks vanished.

"If that ain't the limit!" cried the redhead. "Them rustlers must o' bound the feet o' the stock they stole. They must o' done it right hyar. We is lost!"

"I knowed it all along!" sang out Buck Foster with disgust.

The four walked about the rocky territory, hunting in vain. They were high up now and could see behind them over the tops of the trees to the plain in the east. But the ridge loomed ahead of them with its secret gullies, canyons, and passes. It was a maze of hiding places. Into any one of them the stolen cattle could have been taken for rebranding.

"We ought ter go on anyway," said Joe. "Thar ain't no harm in huntin'. We might stumble onto somethin'."

"O. K.," Billy said.

CHAPTER IV.

SUSPICIONS.

THE four Montanans rode on through the timber, Joe leading with hopes of again picking up the trail. But it was useless. There were a hundred by-paths which the steers could have used. Once the waddies were not on the right trail, they were lost.

Huge boulders which could not be seen over, were scattered about, pointed crags rose, and the country was so rugged that the four thought they might have to dismount. They came to the edge of a deep gorge where they halted to discover a way down. There apparently were no ledges, and a descent proved only possible by rope.

"That country on the other side yon-

der," said Joe Scott, pointing, "looks like it——"

The redhead caught his breath. His hand dropped to a gun butt.

"Look!" he cried. And then quite quickly, he ducked, shouting: "Look out!"

Wham! A sharp report sounded from across the gorge. *Ka-zung-g-g!* A bullet whistled so close to Joe's head that he felt the very heat of it against his cheek.

Billy West and Buck Foster fell to the ground for protection so quickly that it seemed they were struck. But they weren't. In a trice they had their revolvers out and pointed across the gorge at the turreted cliffs from which was rising a puff of black powder smoke. They did not spy even the hat of the bushwhacker as they opened up with lead.

Crash! Crash! Crash-sh-sh! The gorge thundered with the roar of their weapons. The lead, buzzing across the hollow like angry bees, chopped out big handfuls of stone from the opposite cliff. Joe now was firing, too, but his as well as his pard's bullets brought no answer from their hidden enemy.

"He had a rifle!" shouted Billy. "I could tell by the sound. He's running away."

"He's a rustler!" shouted Buck Foster in a frenzy. "Don't let the polecat get away."

"We've got to go round the gorge!" yelled Joe Scott. "We can't git across hyar."

Like frightened rabbits the Montanans scurried back to their mounts. In a moment they were in the saddle and hightailing it as fast as they could go northward down the rim of the gorge. But travel was difficult. The horses threatened to fall, and several times the four men almost collided with each other.

Twice they turned back to the gorge looking for some ledge to get down and found none. There were no more shots from the hidden enemy. On they went

for almost a quarter of a mile before they found a place where the cliff was not so steep. Then one after another they dismounted and started skidding down into the gully with their mounts having a time to keep on their feet behind them.

Once below, the task of climbing the opposite cliff was more difficult. They had to ride farther north, and then found an old rain trough which gave them some sort of footing. Driving their mounts on before them, the four climbed to the highland again. One after another they mounted the panting cayuses, and turned back to the south to race along the top of the cliff.

"We'll never find the skunk!" shouted Joe. "He's got away fer shore!"

"Look out for another bullet!" yelled Billy West, riding with gun in hand.

They were a long time getting to the spot where they figured the man had fired from, and even then they were not quite sure that they had found it until they discovered the cliff chipped by their bullets.

"He was hidin' right behind this rim rock," said Joe. "He must o' crawled up on us ter shoot, an' then beat it."

"Go on an' find his hoss tracks an' cut out the ceremony," snorted Buck. "That hombre was one o' the rustlers fer shore."

Joe went all over the near-by territory to no avail. He was not in the mood to argue with Buck. His life had almost been lost, and he was anxious to catch sight of the cowardly man who had shot at him.

"There ain't no tracks," the redhead finally declared. "The skunk must o' had one o' the hosses with padded hocks."

"Let's ride up to the top of the ridge," suggested Billy. "He might have gone in that direction. From a high place there's a chance we'll spot him again."

The four rode off in the specified direction. There was not much more

climbing to be done, for they were almost at the peak of the ridge already. In a moment they reached the point, and Billy halted his chestnut stallion to sweep the surrounding low country with his eyes.

Joe, Buck, and Sing Lo took a hand. They could see timber, gulches, and boulders for miles and miles on all sides, but most of this territory was too well screened for them to see a horseman riding through.

Joe's eyes were perhaps better than the others'. It was he who first gave vent to an exclamation.

"Look!" he cried. "There's an hombre down thar ridin' through the brush. See his hat!"

His finger indicated a thicket in a small untimbered section a half mile below them, which they had evidently missed passing on the way up. The ten-gallon hat of a horseman could just be seen. The rider seemed to be headed in their direction, but he gave no indication of noticing them.

"After him!" yelled Billy West. "Spread out an' swoop down on him."

The four sprang into action, separating into a far-flung line, and so they rode down grade at breakneck speed. The half mile of riding was very difficult, and they lost sight of each other. Billy was pursuing a course far to the right, hoping to cut off the strange rider's retreat toward the gorge across which the shot had been fired.

He figured that the horseman had fled from that direction to conceal himself in the timber as the Montanans went by him, and now was trying to get back to the gorge for some purpose.

Billy rode with gun ready for instant use. His horse carried him into a section of pine trees, whose limbs he had to dodge this way and that to keep from being knocked from the saddle.

Then he broke from the timber onto a section of sloping shale. Across this slide rock, almost at once, Billy spied the strange rider. The fellow had halted his bronc, and was scanning the

landscape as if hunting for somebody. He was not twenty yards away, and simultaneously spied Billy West bearing down upon him.

"Halt!" the young Montanan shouted, gun poised. "I'll shoot at the——"

Billy caught his words as the rider held up his hand and shouted.

It was Blackman, the wolfer!

"What's wrong?" shouted the ugly fellow as the Montanan came up with a rush. "I heerd some shootin'."

Billy drew his panting stallion to a stop directly in front of the fellow. He was decidedly puzzled, and still gripped his gun in hand.

"Where did you come from, Blackman?" the Montanan asked.

"Yuh look all het up," said the wolfer, with a grin, settling into his saddle with ease. "I said I heerd some shootin' down in this section, an' I thunk yuh all spotted the lobo. Why didn't yuh jine the boys in the drag up nawth?"

Billy shot the fellow a keen glance. He couldn't understand Blackman's presence. There was something very odd in it. That shot across the gorge had been directed at Joe Scott, and the Montanan felt sure that there was bad feeling between Joe and the wolfer. Had Blackman attempted to——

"How come you are down in this section?" Billy demanded.

Blackman grinned again.

"I figured that lobo wasn't up nawth," he said, "jest as yuh hombres did. I started down hyar on me own, an' then I heerd the shootin'. Has yuh seen the——" He stopped to look off across the shale. "Here comes yore pards."

Billy turned to find Buck and Joe entering the section of slide rock from different directions. They were racing their mounts forward, evidently thinking that their friend had caught the bushwhacker. Sing Lo appeared from the timber.

"It's Blackman, the wolfer!" Billy called.

The two waddies came up on steaming horses, guns ready. They were so astonished that they could say nothing, and eyed Blackman with incredulity.

"It looks like yuh hombres is chasin' somebody," spoke up the wolfer. "Ain't yuh goin' ter tell me."

"Shore!" exclaimed Joe Scott, his face reddening. "Some skunk tried ter murder me with a rifle."

"Yuh ain't thinkin' I did it, is yuh?" asked Blackman, on the defensive. "I ain't got a rifle with me. From the way yuh hombres is actin', it ain't healthy."

The Montanans did not answer that. They were with their own thoughts. Of course, there was nothing of which they could accuse Blackman. A glance at his saddle scabbard showed there was no rifle in it. The shot across the gorge had come from a long-barreled weapon.

"It's all pretty dang funny, ain't it, Joe?" Billy West murmured.

The redhead nodded. He apparently didn't want to say anything more.

"Waal, I guess the skunk got away," spoke up Buck Foster. "What does we do now?"

"Is yuh goin' ter continue lookin'?" said Blackman. "I'll help yuh."

"No, thanks," Billy decided quickly. "The trail is lost. We'll be heading back to the plains."

"Ain't yuh goin' ter hunt fer the lobo?" asked the wolfer.

"I reckon he got away with that bushwhacker," remarked Joe Scott, turning his horse. His remark was full of meaning.

"What's that!" exclaimed Blackman.

"Nothin' a-tall," snorted Buck Foster. "We'll see yuh some other time."

"Where is yuh goin'?" persisted the wolfer. "Is yuh through?"

"For the present," Billy called as he and his pards rode off. "We're gettin' hungry."

"I think yuh'd never catch the lobo," taunted, turning his horse in a new direction.

The four Montanans crossed the shale silently, apparently in deep thought over the problem of Blackman's appearance, and the sudden disappearance of the bushwhacker. His story of having lost interest in the drag hunt five or six miles north didn't sound plausible, as he had organized that hunt.

Of course, he could have done it in order to throw all the other men off the trail in order to have a free field for himself in the south where he might have suspected the lobo to have gone.

But still, all of his actions were open to question, he being the evil-faced hombre that he was. The moment that the riders entered the timber, Billy West spoke his mind without explanation. He didn't have to explain.

"I'm tracking Blackman," he said.

"I'll be a horned toad!" exclaimed Buck. "I was thinkin' o' doin' the same thing. I'll go with yuh."

"No," replied Billy, "it's better that I go alone."

Joe Scott nodded at this. "I think the buzzard shot at me, Billy," he snapped. "I remember he had a rifle when he left town."

"So do I," the young rancher said. "He sprung that alibi too quick for me to be taken in." He touched Danger on the flanks. "Well, I'm off. You hombres wait for me down by the dead steers."

He reined the chestnut stallion to the left, and horse and rider disappeared into the bushes.

CHAPTER V.

FANGS.

AS much as possible Billy West guided Danger behind trees and boulders and through the underbrush to keep hidden from Blackman. He took a circuitous route, traveling fast for fear that the wolfer would get away from him in the rough territory.

Coming to a section of shale, he saw the man's hat bobbing up in the distance. Undoubtedly Blackman had

waited a few moments to determine that the punchers really rode off in the direction of the plains and were not coming back.

The young Montanan hurried after the fellow, keeping Danger under cover whenever he could, and racing the stallion across the open spaces. If Blackman had looked back, he would have seen Billy.

Once he lost sight of the man, and then picked him up again. The wolfer could not go fast with his mount, for he was entering rougher territory, proceeding right to the edge of the gorge across which the shot had been fired.

Billy noticed him swing down from his mount. Getting out of the saddle, the Montanan crept forward and saw Blackman go to a heap of rocks. He watched the fellow reach down into a crevice and bring out a rifle.

"I thought so," Billy growled under his breath. "The dirty skunk tried to kill Joe Scott."

Now the Montanan was forced to dodge into some brush and lie on his stomach. Blackman was riding back from the gorge. He didn't pass Billy, before he turned west toward the high ridge, but he came near enough for the young puncher to notice that he was chuckling and slapping his thighs.

"He's certainly up to something," Billy said, clenching his fists.

Something told him to keep trailing Blackman, so he went back to where he had picketed Danger, and rode after the man. All the way up the ridge the wolfer went. Now and then he stopped to look behind.

He was very suspicious, but not once did he see the cowboy. Continuing on, the wolfer turned to the south and went along an old deer trail just below the top of the highland. This brought him around the gorge again at its end.

Blackman proceeded farther south, and then quite suddenly dropped down into a gully. Billy was at a difficulty here, for he had to wait for the fellow to vanish around a bend in the defile,

which seemed to be a pass through the ridge.

When the man disappeared, the Montanan urged his mount forward again. He was looking for the wolfer and was not keeping a watch on the ground. On turning a corner in a section where soft sand had filtered into the gulch with rain water, Billy happened to glance down.

It was with astonishment that he noticed the sand showed the prints of cattle.

"Great guns!" he exclaimed. "The stolen steers. Blackman's on their trail!"

He didn't suspect the wolfer, but rather thought that Blackman might have chanced on the same discovery as the punchers. Possibly that was the reason he fired the shot, in order to frighten them away from the trail. That would account for his presence in this territory.

"By golly, he ain't going to beat my pards to that reward after the trick he pulled!" Billy exclaimed, starting through the defile.

He did not catch sight of the wolfer until he reached the farther end of the gorge, where it issued on the western side of the ridge. Then he saw the wolfer descending the boulder-strewn territory on his horse.

Blackman turned farther south, and struck the timber. The trees made it possible for Billy to bring Danger nearer the man now. Although the fellow halted occasionally to look behind, the Montanan was always concealed.

The two went down another gulch and climbed out of it. For the next three miles Billy shadowed Blackman, but seldom saw him. It was easy, though, for him to follow the sign.

Then he spied Blackman entering another gulch and turned to follow its course. It was a deep and narrow defile. Billy guided the stallion along the tree-lined rim, keeping on with the fellow below.

The fugitive was riding along at a trot below. Ahead of him, it began to look as if the gulch widened into a bowl, and in that direction Blackman was headed. The Montanan was puzzled. He couldn't understand where the wolfer was going, nor why, for he seemed to know the trail well.

But soon Billy received his answer.

As Blackman reached the wide hollow of the gorge, pushing his mount through the brush, Billy suddenly saw two tough-looking hombres with rifles jump out in front of him on the trail.

For a moment the Montanan thought that the wolfer was going to be shot. Then he heard the tough strangers below cry out with recognition, let go of the horse, and help Blackman to dismount.

"Leaping lizards!" Billy exclaimed, his heart almost choking him. "The rustlers! Blackman's in with them."

The Montanan was half petrified. He could hardly believe that Blackman and the two toughs were shaking hands below. They slapped his back, and led the wolfer off into the bowl, vanishing around a corner of the cliff.

"If Buck and Joe could only see that!" the young puncher gasped. "It's ten to one those skunks have the stolen Circle X steers down there."

This was no sooner out of his mouth than he decided to investigate. With plenty of brush to hide his approach, he descended to the bottom of the gorge.

He doubted that there would be guards posted, for this hollow was as cleverly hidden as a needle in a haystack. No one ever would have thought of tracing the stolen steers here. It took a good woodsman to find the place even after several trips to this vicinity.

Drawing Danger to a halt in a clump of cedars, Billy peered through the interlacings of boughs and saw the men. There were four of them, including Blackman. The quartet was gathered in a small clearing in the brush just ahead. Some trees on their far side hid

a small lean-to in which they undoubtedly lived.

A small fire near them was sending up a thin column of smoke.

Billy could not discover much more. If stolen steers were there, he wanted to see them. The fire in the open gave him a hint, a hunch that some of the animals might be hog tied on the ground, waiting the rebranding iron. Certainly these outlaws had been working at something, for their sleeves were rolled up and their hats discarded.

Cautiously the Montanan sent the stallion forward a few more steps. He could almost hear what they were saying, and thought that he could draw even closer. He was about to dismount when a cold shiver of fear ran up his back as he heard thrashing about in the thicket just ahead of him the body of an animal.

For a moment he thought it might be a skunk or rabbit. Then he knew for sure what it was.

There came a growl from the underbrush and a moment later the animal crashed through the underbrush, snarling at the young rancher.

As the Montanan saw the beast, he could not stifle a cry of terror. It was part wolf, part dog. Fully four feet it stood, and it must have weighed a hundred and thirty pounds.

Dirty gray in color, its eyes were bloodshot with hate. Two fangs were bared as the animal slunk his belly close to the earth in preparation to spring upon its man victim.

This was the lobo! Billy knew it the moment that he decided that his life was in peril.

Snorting in fear, his eyes wild with terror, Danger plunged away, then reared on its hind legs.

Billy grabbed for his six-gun. Snarling its brute rage, the big gray wolf launched itself in a great leap, its fangs bared and its jaws parted to clamp down on the young rancher's jugular.

Bang! The shot went ringing off through the trees. The plunging of

the stallion and the lightninglike movement of the lobo, flashing through space, caused Billy to miss his aim.

The great gray body brushed against the waddy, knocking the six-gun from his hand. Billy swayed back, sliding out of the saddle to the ground. He escaped the snapping jaws of the brute by an inch!

CHAPTER VI.

BRUTALITY.

THE wolf-dog whirled around. It squatted on its haunches a moment, and then sprang into the air, its gaping, dripping jaws aimed for Billy's throat.

The waddy did not have time to pick up his .45. In a half crouch he saw that avalanche of gray fury descending upon him, and he dodged and side-stepped just in time to save himself once more from a horrible death.

Hardly knowing that he did so, Billy swooped his right arm down in a powerful swing, and drove a smashing blow against the animal's left ear. It was an instinctive act of self-preservation. All his weight was behind that driving fist, and added strength born of anger and desperation.

That he connected with the dog was not remarkable, for he could not have missed. In doing so he hoisted his own frame to the side, and hooked the animal in a sprawling, tumbling motion in the other direction.

Terror-stricken, the chestnut stallion dashed off through the underbrush, and then stopped, looking back at its master and the maddened lobo.

With a yelp that echoed over the entire basin, the dog went rolling over and over in the brush. It was partially stunned, but it twisted around as quick as a flash and started back toward the young Montanan, snarling with rage. Now it was attacking with the fury of lobo wolf, regardless of its own life.

But Billy West was on his feet and had jumped back into the brush for protection. He tried to side-step out of the way, but the animal was too fast

for him. It came floundering toward him, its fangs slashing into the puncher's bat-wing chaps.

It was lucky those chaps were so large, for the dog took them for a leg, ripping them almost off and upsetting their owner in a heap in the bushes.

Billy had a faint knowledge of men's shouts as he fell, and knew that the rustlers were rushing toward him. But that was all. His real thoughts were upon saving his own life from the ferocious dog-wolf.

Now the animal had leaped through the air, and was pouncing down full upon him with all four legs. It was the picture of savagery and hate. Billy, on his back, looking up, appeared a pitiful and weak victim.

But he wasn't. The dog had miscalculated its distance, so that its front legs landed almost in Billy's eyes instead of on his chest. The puncher threw his head forward between the animal's paws.

As he felt the hot breath of the dog as its jaws missed the top of his skull, the Montanan lifted his head up right into the under part of the animal's frame. At the same time he delivered a terrific uppercut into the beast's belly.

"Oo-oo-oo!" howled the animal in pain as all wind left its body.

It went rolling over and over in the brush again, robbed of all fighting power, trying to get back its breath for another attack.

In that space of time, Billy twisted about to his feet, reaching for his six-gun. It was gone, jerked loose in the fight. His hand flashed for a big jack-knife which he carried in his rear pocket.

He got it out, and sprung the blade open before the lobo was recovered enough to crouch for a new attack. Then Billy was ready for the animal, gleaming blade held forward. It was his life against the dog's, and though he didn't want to kill the animal, he knew it would have to be done.

He crouched! That was all. He wasn't thinking of the rustlers who had heard the noise of the battle. The sharp wallop of a six-gun butt, which hit him on the rear of the head, took him completely by surprise. He did not retain consciousness long enough to whirl and see the man who had struck him. Everything went black, and down Billy collapsed in a senseless heap.

When Billy West recovered consciousness, the first thing which came to his mind was the picture of the ferocious dog about to spring upon him again. Then he remembered. As he lay trying to gather his aching senses and penetrate the black cloud before his eyes, he tried to flex his muscles to discover some pain.

He found himself bound hand and foot, unable to move. But it did not feel as though his body had been torn by fangs. He seemed whole, and uninjured, except for his throbbing head.

Then he recalled the sharp blow on the back of the skull which downed him. At once he thought of the rustlers, knowing full well that it was one of them who crept up behind him and struck.

The blur before his eyes faded, and he realized that it was still daylight. Blinking more, he made out the clear blue sky above, and he realized that he was lying on the ground. He tried to roll over. It was difficult, but the puncher managed.

"Huh," came a grunt by his side as he moved. "So yuh woke up!" a voice said.

Billy saw the speaker. It was Blackman, sprawled lazily on the ground near a small fire into which were poked branding irons. A sneer was drawing his tobacco-stained lips down, and his beady eyes were filled with wicked amusement. There was no doubt but that he had been waiting for just this moment, attending to the heating of the branding irons while he did so.

Not far behind the wolfer, Billy spied two more ragged fellows bending over the hog-tied body of a large steer. They were not watching him, but were changing the animal's brand.

At once Billy knew that all his suspicions had been correct. Those men were rustlers, who had stolen the steers and brought them to this hollow to change the signs on the flanks.

Blackman was in league with them as they worked with their big wolf-dog.

This animal, Billy saw, was securely chained to a big rock near by the rustler pair. It sat upon its haunches, tongue hanging out between its gleaming fangs, its eyes directed upon the bound puncher.

Evidently it was waiting for another opportunity to attack. That animal had nothing but hate in its heart for Billy. As Billy moved, the dog snarled.

Why it had not again jumped upon him while he lay unconscious on the ground from the outlaw's blow, Billy did not know. The rustlers must have caught it in the act and dragged it off, saving the Montanan's life.

Why they had done that, the puncher didn't have the power at present to figure out. All he could do was gape at Blackman, who began to talk.

"Waal," drawled the wolfer lazily, "I reckon yuh ain't so smart after all, hombre. Yuh shore got yoreself into a bad pickle."

Blackman chuckled, and Billy said nothing.

"Yeah," the wolfer continued, as if talking to himself, "yuh thunk yuh was goin' ter turn the tables on me. Yuh tracked me hyar. It was yore own fault. I tol' yuh not to monkey with the lobo, or yuh would be sorry. Now yuh is goin' ter be dang sorry fer snoopin' inter this little business proposition o' mine."

Billy knew that Blackman was toying with him, trying to amuse himself for a few moments while his men re-branded the cattle. The Montanan

tried to turn, but it was hard work. His head throbbed. There was nothing that he could say or do, so he lay quiet while Blackman laughed at him.

"Don't think that wise red-headed guy is goin' ter pop in on yuh," said the wolfer, referring to Joe Scott. "He ain't. Yuh made the mistake o' takin' this job alone. I got a man planted on a lookout ter spy that redhead an' his walrus-faced friend if they come along, an' they'll get bored proper with rifle lead."

Billy could not resist the temptation.

"Your murdering friend will have to be a better shot than you were across the gulch, Blackman," the Montanan snapped. "And if you think you can get away with bushwhacking in this section, you've got a surprise coming. This rustling deal of yours isn't going to last forever. I warn you to leave my pards alone."

Billy was sitting up, his eyes blazing. The thought of shooting Joe down from hiding was too much for him. But Blackman merely roared with laughter.

"Oh, that ain't exactly the way I does things," he said, getting to his feet. "I wouldn't o' thought o' trainin' that dawg ter help me out in me work if I had no more sense than that. I ain't exactly goin' ter kill yore pards outright. Yuh see, that might make the ranchers here suspect somethin'."

"Naw! I'll only shoot if I has ter do it. I'll capture 'em. Then we'll knock 'em over the head an' let the wolf chaw 'em up like the steers. That will scare them ranchers so that they won't even come up inter these hills alone."

The sheer brutality of this plan sent a chill up Billy's spine. His eyes grew wide with horror. He had never thought any man so fiendish as to attempt to do such a thing as that. What was worse, Blackman stood a good chance to carry it out.

Here Billy was tied so securely that he could not hope to escape. It would not be hard to knock him out again

with a club, and then turn the savage dog upon him. The animal was ready to attack him any moment.

If Buck, Joe, and Sing Lo walked heedlessly into an ambush, they might be caught. Surely they would die if they fought, for the outlaws knew the country so well that they could hide in the thickets and shoot them down.

The dog's fangs would remove all traces of bullet holes in their dead bodies. And when the ranchers discovered the Montanans, surely there would be no doubt but that the lobo had attacked them all and killed them.

"You——" Billy rose up in temper.

"Hey!" exclaimed Blackman angrily. "Don't go callin' me no names, or I'll turn that dawg loose on yuh right away. The critter is plumb anxious ter sink his teeth inter yuh. That dawg am more wolf than anythin' else, an' he's plumb bad medicine. Yuh better hold your lip till me an' me boys corral yore pards. Then yuh kin do all yore talkin'."

Billy West caught his words. It was a struggle to keep from replying, but he managed it by biting his lips, grinding his teeth, clenching the fists of his bound wrists. With a groan, he sank back to earth. The world swam before his eyes, and the heat of anger was hot in his temples.

While he lay there, the sun in the sky above burned down upon him to add to his misery. He could not help but notice that it was afternoon. He had been gone from his pards all morning. Now Billy realized that surely they would be on his trail, but how would they ever find him? All tracks had been lost to him and his pards before. The situation looked hopeless for him if Joe and Buck didn't find him, and it was worse if they did.

While he lay there trying desperately to think, there were sounds from near by which only further drove home his misfortune. He could hear the struggle of the steers under the branding iron applied by the rustlers. The cattle

were snorting and groaning with pain, but they were not bellowing.

A cattelman, Billy could not help but realize that the outlaws had gagged the bovines to prevent them from crying out and being heard at a distance. That in itself was another act of brutality. It was bad enough to apply red-hot irons, but to stifle the steers made their suffering horrible.

The grunting and groaning made him writhe. He turned over on his side to yell out at the outlaws. Blackman had moved away, and was standing supervising the brand burning. Billy saw the other men at work with their irons. And then beyond them he saw something else.

A fourth tough-looking hombre was just entering the hollow through the bushes. He came on the run, waving his arm and calling the wolfer's name in not too loud a voice.

"Hey! Blackman! Them hombres is on the trail!" the newcomer excitedly yelled.

The wolfer and his outlaw henchmen dropped their work immediately.

"Where is they?" shouted Blackman in alarm.

The tough, unshaven newsbearer crashed through the last stretch of bushes. He was almost out of breath, having run a good distance. And he tried to recover himself for a moment. Blackman went into a rage.

"Speak up, yuh fool!" he shouted. "Where is they?"

"About a mile nawth," the newcomer managed to sputter. Billy could hear every word. "They is comin' through a gulch followin' tracks. I seen 'em with me field glasses from the top o' the tree yuh tol' me ter climb."

"They can't track over rock!" yelled Blackman indignantly. "Yuh ain't tellin' the truth!"

"I is," protested the outlaw who had just arrived. "One o' them's a red-head, an' the other hombre's got a mustache. They is sometimes crawlin' on thar hands an' knees. They must be

lookin' at the scratches o' yore hoss' shoes on the rock."

"Howlin' coyotes!" exclaimed Blackman furiously. "I forgot ter put pads on the hocks o' me horse after leavin' them fools this mawnin'. That's what that redhead is follerin' now. We got ter nail 'em right pronto afore they gits up hyar."

He turned and grabbed a rifle from the ground.

"Hurry up!" he shouted to the outlaws. "Get shotguns so's yuh can't miss."

CHAPTER VII.

BLACKMAN LAUGHS.

AT this moment Joe Scott was on his hands and knees on the floor of a gulch some distance north of the hidden hollow. His eyes were glued to the ground, his fingers smoothing the stony floor, looking for something which he had been tracking for the past several hours. The signs were small scratches made by the iron shoes of Blackman's cayuse.

After waiting for Billy West to show up all morning at the appointed place on the plains, Joe and Buck could restrain themselves no longer. They were positive that something had happened to him, and they decided that the wolfer had a hand in the deal. The redhead held nothing but suspicions for that fellow.

He and Buck returned to the stretch of shale where Blackman had last been seen when Billy set off to shadow him. They found the scratches of iron shoes. Joe, a wizard at trailing, got to work immediately.

Whereas before he had been unable to follow the rustler's trail because the outlaws had padded the hoofs of their mounts, and the steers had soft, cloven feet, now he was in a different situation.

He proceeded southward through the pass in the ridge, and farther southward, until now he was almost a mile from the end of the trail. He sur-

mised as much, and looked up at the veteran cow-puncher who was preening his mustache.

"Here's them scratches again, Buck," said Joe with more kindness than he usually displayed. "The skunk went right through this gulch. I thinks we must be gettin' close."

"I don't think so," replied the elderly waddy. "There ain't no evidence. I'm of the opinion that Blackman rode fer miles, an' Billy is still after him."

Joe Scott, not wishing to argue, got to his feet and started on. He led the way through the gulch without stopping. Several times he spied small scratches as he walked. This gulch he believed Blackman had used as a trail to the end, for he could not have climbed up the steep cliffs on a horse. So the redhead went on at a rapid pace.

When he reached the end, he found what he was looking for—the telltale scratches of horseshoes on shale. They led up a stretch of slide rock and vanished into a section of brush. Following was easy for Joe. He merely kept an eye on the trampled bushes and tall grass, leading Buck on for almost a half mile.

Into another gulch and out, the pair climbed.

"We must be gettin' close," said Joe again. "It seems ter me that I smell burnin' wood from somewhere."

Buck Foster took a couple of big whiffs.

"I don't smell nothin'," he growled, "an' I don't see no smoke."

"Yore nose ain't as sharp as mine," replied the redhead. "We could smell that smoke almost as far as we could see it. Mebbe them rustlers put the fire out."

"Mebbe they ain't no fire," snorted back.

"Yuh better keep a close watch that we don't get bushwhacked," advised the redhead, starting on again.

"They ain't no chance," snapped Buck. "But sein' that yuh is so suspicious, I'll keep the smoke pole ready."

Joe led the way into another defile, this time one very narrow and with low straight walls. The floor was all rock and he was forced to get to his hands and knees several times. Buck followed with jaw stuck savagely forward, six-gun cocked. He had no suspicion of an ambushade or attack, so he was quite surprised when the unexpected happened.

Without Buck even seeing it, a lariat noose shot through the air from the cliff above. It settled over his head with perfection, dropped over his shoulders, and drew his arms to his sides in a loop of steel. He did hear the swish in the air, and half turned to see if it were a snake hiding in the rocks. Then he felt the rope about him.

Rage overwhelmed him as if it were exploding inside his chest.

"Ooops!" he roared, jumping back. "Sneaks!"

At the same time he bulged his arms with panicky strength as if trying to break the rope, which was impossible. He succeeded only in upsetting himself in a ridiculous manner, his legs coupling under him, his head jerking to the side, and down he crashed to the ground as if he were a floundering steer roped by the front legs. His six-gun went flying to the side without exploding.

Before the veteran could roll over, a figure came shooting down on the leap from a cliff above. The fellow landed feet first on the ground near Buck, and the next instant had pounced on top of him, knees sinking deep into the veteran's midriff. Buck grunted painfully. All wind left him, so that he could utter no other sound, nor fight for the moment.

Joe Scott, on his hands and knees on the rocky floor of the defile when Buck Foster sounded his first shout of warning, whirled around to see what was wrong. The redhead was caught in a bad position. His gun was in his holster.

As he saw his pard fall with the

lariat about his shoulders, and as he spied the outlaw come hurtling down on top of him from a cliff above, Joe attempted to dive to the side to the shelter of a small niche in the cliff for protection. At the same time he made a stab to get his six-gun.

Boom! A shotgun thundered in the gulch. Joe's hat was carried away by a swarm of buckshot.

It was the roar of that weapon which told him that he was done for. He saw the fellow instantly who had fired at him and missed on purpose. The man was standing on the opposite cliff above with the weapon in hand, ready to pull the trigger of the second barrel and blow the redhead to bits.

Joe Scott, though no coward, used his wits. He tried to come to a halt. His own six-gun was half raised to shoot at some one, but he knew that before he could cock the hammer and bring the barrel the rest of the way into aim at the rustler above, his foe would have fired at him. There would be no second missing with the shotgun. Joe didn't stand a chance.

"Drop that gun!" shouted down the outlaw from the cliff. "I'll slaughter yuh if yuh don't!"

The redhead staggered back to the wall of the gulch, unable to let go of his six-gun, yet fearing to shoot it.

"Drop it, yuh fool!" yelled the outlaw with the shotgun.

Gritting his teeth with desperation, Joe Scott let go of his weapon, and it fell to the ground with a thud.

"Get yore hands up!" shouted his foe.

The redhead raised his arms slowly. He figured that if the fellow meant to climb down the cliff, he would have a moment to snatch up his weapon and shoot him. But these hopes were doomed to disappointment, for another man appeared on the cliff above.

This newcomer was Blackman, the wolfer. With a howl of derision, the ugly fellow jumped down into the gulch.

"I got the redhead!" yelled Blackman. "I got him square. What I ain't goin' ter do ter him!"

The fellow with the shotgun had Joe covered, and he could do nothing as Blackman came charging forward and rammed a six-gun into his chest.

"Oh, what I ain't goin' ter do ter yuh!" howled Blackman. "Jest wait an' see. Yuh'll pay fer that trick gun slingin' in Barnblaze!"

For a moment Joe Scott thought of his pard, Buck Foster. Casting a quick glance to the side, he saw the veteran enmeshed in a lariat rope with two outlaws now on top of him, pounding their fists into his face and solar plexus. Buck Foster was trying to struggle, but he was making a mighty poor job of it. In a moment he would be knocked completely out and hog tied.

The hopelessness of the situation made Joe lose his head. Blackman stood before him with a weapon cocked and pushed into his chest, but that didn't matter. The wolfer was not expecting that the redhead would put up a fight. As fast as Joe had been on the draw in Barnblaze, now he lashed his hand down and knocked Blackman's gun exploding to the side.

At the same time with his other arm, the redhead struck the wolfer a solid blow on the ear, staggering him back. Like a plummet Joe dropped to the ground for his weapon, believing that the outlaw who had been on the cliff above and was now climbing down, would not be able to shoot him for fear of hitting the wolfer. But Joe didn't even get his hand on his gun on the ground before Blackman kicked it ten feet away.

The next instant the wolfer fell on top of him, using his own six-gun as a club. He struck Joe dizzily three times on the head, and then the redhead twisted around and caught Blackman's arm. He tried to grapple with the fellow, but the blows on the head had already robbed him of his strength and clarity of mind.

Blackman drove an uppercut with his left fist into Joe's jaw.

"Ugh!" grunted the redhead, and he lost consciousness entirely.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE YELLOW STREAK.

WHEN Billy West, lying hog tied on the ground, saw the outlaws rush off into the underbrush to intercept Buck and Joe, his first thought was of an opportunity for escape.

For a moment he feared that Blackman might rush back and strike him a blow over the head to knock him out again, but the wolfer was too anxious to nail the red-headed Joe Scott. The rustlers evidently believed their captive bound too securely to move.

Billy was not the only one who looked after the outlaws. The big lobo let out a howl of dismay, and set to jerking and leaping against the chain which held it to the big boulder. It wanted to follow the rustlers, and its struggles became twice as frantic as they had been before to get at the young Montanan.

The dog made such a racket that Billy was in hopes of its being heard by his pards, but suddenly the animal stopped its noise and set to struggling to break the chain with all its brute strength.

The young Montanan, too, was writhing about on the earth with much the same idea in mind. But he didn't even stand as good a chance as the dog. In regarding it, he noticed that the chain about the boulder was loosening, giving out slack. Horror overcame him, for if the lobo got loose, it might attack him. That meant a terrible death.

In his panic Billy struggled about on his knees, straining like a fiend. He beat his hands on the earth to no avail. He tugged and twisted, but the strong lariat ropes held like iron bands. A feeling of helplessness overcame him, and he wanted to shout out.

Inch by inch he could see the dog's

chain moving up the rock, promising within a few minutes to slide over the top and give the lobo its freedom. In jumping about, the dog's attention was once more attracted to the puncher, and the animal snarled with rage.

Suddenly it seemed to forget about the outlaws and it no longer looked in the direction which they had gone. Now it fastened its eyes upon Billy, leaping out at him and being held back by the chain. It was mad with fury, crazy with a desire to kill.

Billy himself was the picture of a madman. He rolled about, twisting and turning, tugging, straining, pulling. But the ropes held. He got to his knees. He fell down again. He threw himself forward, trying to loosen a rope, and failing.

His contortions carried him near to the fire, and he almost sprawled into it, just falling away in time to keep his clothes from catching on fire.

But in doing that he suddenly made a discovery—Blackman had left some branding irons in the flames, the handles of which were protruding far out. Billy's eyes bulged. Why had he not thought of those instruments before? A cry of triumph broke from his throat, and he lunged forward.

With his bound hands, he pulled one of the white-hot irons from the flames. And as it lay on the earth, he pressed against it one of the ropes which held his wrist. A film of smoke curled over his shirt, and the hemp sizzled with fire.

The heat was tremendous, scorching his wrists, and he felt that he would not be able to bear it. But he held his wrists down as the fire devoured the rope almost to the bare flesh.

With a groan of agony, Billy fell back, waving his bound hands to put out the flame. He strained against the weakened hemp to break it. While doing so, he noticed the huge lobo jumping against its chain, snarling furiously in his direction. That chain was creeping up. In a moment or two it would

be over the top of the boulder and the dog would be on top of the puncher.

In desperation Billy brought another rope circling his wrists down upon the branding iron which was now turning a dull red. But the instrument still held enough heat to burn into the hemp, and to heat his skin to the cracking point at the same time. He clenched his teeth to hold back a groan, enduring the terrific agony.

Then he jerked away and pulled his arms apart with insane strength.

Twang! The ropes broke with such a shock of delivery that the young puncher was thrown over on his back.

"Free!" was his only exclamation.

Then as quick as a flash he rolled over and grabbed up the handle of the iron with one of his free hands and applied it to one of the ropes binding his ankles.

Here the pain was not so great, for the leather of his cow boots acted as an insulator. But now the branding iron was not so hot, and the hemp smoldered with agonizing slowness.

Billy cast an eye toward the lobo, which was in the act of a terrific leap against its chain. The dog threw its entire body into the air. It was a miracle that the leash did not break. It slipped up almost to the top of the stone.

One more jump and the animal would be free. It seemed to realize this fact, and its snarls were louder and more ferocious as it sank its body close to the earth for another spring.

"He's coming!" the puncher could not help crying out.

Jerking the iron away from his ankle, Billy kicked out with both legs. He pulled in, straining desperately. He kicked again, and the burned rope broke.

He was loose! But not a moment too soon. Too excited to shout, he twisted about to see the lobo. The animal was already in the middle of its last leap, hurtling through the air in his direction. Billy just had time to get to his feet as

the dog's chain snapped taut, almost jerking the lobo's tongue from his mouth.

The animal was thrown far to the side by the impact, but as it fell floundering in the bushes, the loop of the chain slid over the top of the boulder and it was free.

In a trice the lobo was on its feet, a savage cry in its throat. Like a streak of lightning, it sprang toward the young Montanan again, this time with nothing to hold it back. Once its four feet touched the earth, driving it into the air again for a last long leap which would carry its fangs into Billy's throat.

But the young puncher was now on his feet waiting, the warm branding iron in his hand. As the lobo came on for him, Billy sidestepped. For the second time that day he struck at the savage brute. And for the second time that day an astonished animal took a terrific blow alongside of the ear.

Here were tactics that the lobo did not understand. As it went howling to the side, the young puncher stepped quickly forward. The instant that the wolf-dog had whirled and started to leap again, Billy delivered a crack on the head that drove the animal's fangs deep into the ground at his feet. He jumped back, but still the lobo had not had enough.

It leaped again and again. And the puncher beat it. He had to in order to save his own life. He had often heard of big dog trainers entering the cages of wild huskies in the Yukon and beating submission into the animals with a club, and he didn't approve of such bullying tactics.

Kindness was his way with animals, but there was no chance to show kindness here. The animal was more wolf than dog.

The lobo kept up its attack, and several times it almost won. Billy's chaps were in tatters. One of his boots was almost torn from his ankle. His forearm was red with a tooth scratch.

But he kept applying his iron. He could have blinded the beast, but he would not bring himself to do that. He could have crushed the lobo's skull, but he resorted only to knocking it down. Time after time the animal was bowled to the side, and it struggled to its feet. Each time it was weaker, and still it came on. The tenacity of a wild dog was in its veins, but this was a light mixture, and soon the wolf strain proved dominant.

In one last weakened jump the animal came, and Billy sidestepped. This time instead of striking it with the iron, which the beast was even averting its head to avoid, the puncher caught it by the scruff of the neck with his bare hands.

One hundred and thirty pounds that lobo weighed. Billy grabbed it like a sack of grain, swung it yelping on high and threw it far into the bushes. As it landed, he started running forward as if to catch it again. The astonished animal was struggling to its feet. With terror it regarded the furious waddy racing for it.

The dog turned with a howl of terror, and raced for its life through the thickets. Billy pursued for fifty yards, and the dog went on, howling again and again. It was not headed toward the gulch into which the outlaws had gone.

In its excitement to get away, the animal fled in the first direction, which was far toward the other end of the hollow. It vanished in the brush, and the puncher halted.

He was panting with excitement, shaking from his experience. But a smile creased his lips.

"I reckon you won't be attacking men any more," he said. With another thought immediately, he turned and looked back at the camp fire. "Now for those other yellow polecats," he said.

The instant that these words were out of his mouth, a sense of helplessness overcame him. He had no weapons with which to fight! His revolver

had been taken from him, and his very jackknife was gone. What would he be able to do with his bare fists against four armed outlaws, each of whom would be only too anxious to shoot him down?

Billy ran back to the opening where the steer and fire were. He searched about, and found no firearms. The rustlers had taken all. Turning his attention to the lean-to near the woods, he raced in that direction.

Within the small lodge, he discovered cots covered with bedclothes, a stove, pots and pans, and some camp stools. But there was no sign of a weapon. He turned over a chest, hunted into knapsacks. It seemed that the outlaws had left nothing for him to get, as if expecting that he might free himself.

Billy came into the open again, brows wrinkled with a frown. The situation was just as bad as before. What could he do? If he ran away to obtain help, the outlaws might murder Buck, Joe, and Sing Lo on discovering that he had escaped.

"Sing Lo!" the Circle J owner muttered the Chinaman's name. He thought he remembered something. He did. "Sing Lo," he muttered. "That rustler from the lookout said that only Buck and Joe were trailing me. What happened to Sing Lo? Where is he?"

He decided that the Chinaman must have been left with the horses. But where? Would it be too far to go to him for a weapon? Sing Lo always carried a small derringer, with which he was very dexterous. But such a small gun would not be of much use against the four .45s of the outlaws. Besides, it might take two hours to reach Sing Lo, and in that time Billy's escape would be discovered.

Even now the outlaws might be on their way—

Billy caught his breath as from the distance he heard the echo of a shotgun. The roar of that weapon, much louder than a shot, a dog's howl, or a man's cry, carries far in the high, clear

atmosphere of the Wyoming mountains.

It told the young puncher two things—first that the outlaws were far up the trail and just nabbing Buck and Joe, and second that there was a fight. In the explosion of that gun, Billy thought he heard the death knell of his two pards.

CHAPTER IX.

A ROPE FOR A WEAPON.

HE lost his head completely, throwing all thoughts of safety to the winds. If Buck and Joe were killed, Billy did not want to save his own hide. He had fought through many battles with these pards, and he wanted to die with them. It was an unwritten and unvoiced agreement with the three—to fight back to back until they all fell.

With a cry of anger, the young puncher started running across the open space. He reached the branding fire, stopped once to snatch up the iron instrument with which he had attacked the wolf. If he had done the trick with that once, he resolved to do it again upon the rustlers.

But in pausing, his eyes fell upon one other weapon—a lariat! To a cowboy a rope is as much a part of his garb as a hat. Rope, saddle, horse, and gun—then he is a rich man. Billy snatched up the lariat, and made off on the run again.

Through the bushes and into the gorge he ran, ears to the wind to hear another shotgun explosion. As he went on down the defile, there sounded no more noise of shooting. He began to have new hopes. Reaching the end of the gulch, he struck into the timber. There was no trail, but he had come this way before, and he felt that he knew the direction.

Joe and Buck had been following Blackman's tracks. They would be on the route which Billy had traversed before. This trail led down through another long section of brush, and then into another hollow. Out of it and over

long stretches of shale, Billy ran crazily on and on.

A half mile passed behind him, and then another. He was fagged, out of breath, desperate, but he didn't stop. Any moment now he believed he might run into the rustlers. His ears were tense again for some sound.

As he plunged down into a deep gorge again, suddenly he heard a shout from not far ahead. It seemed to come from behind a turn in the defile. He went on, running on tiptoe. And reaching the corner of the cliff, he halted so quickly he almost sprawled head first.

Branding iron in one hand, rope in the other, Billy peered about the turn. What he saw gave him his first real hope. His pards and the rustlers were not fifteen yards beyond him. The young Montanan saw everything plainly.

Blackman stood out in distinct relief, giving orders in an angry tone. It must have been he who shouted, exclaiming over a mistake which one of his three henchmen made. For they were trying to hoist Buck Foster to his feet.

The walrus-mustached veteran was staggering. He seemed dizzy, as if trying to recover from a beating, and every now and then threatened to collapse. The rustlers were trying to get him to walk, evidently planning to march him back to camp. His arms were bound at his sides, which made it very difficult.

Joe Scott stood off to the side, hands tied behind him. He apparently was in full possession of his senses, although now and then he swayed.

"Prod the fools along!" Billy heard Blackman order. "If they can't walk, drag 'em. We ain't got all day!"

The young Montanan fell back to hiding. In a minute the outlaws would be coming around the turn with their prisoners. Billy would have to do something quickly. Here was practically the only place where he might stand some kind of a chance to turn

the tables. He cast his eyes about for a niche, a big boulder, any place to hide himself.

But there was nothing. The defile was narrow and bare, with low, flat walls. The rim of the cliff above afforded the only protection and the sole possibility of aiding him in the plan which was rapidly forming in his mind.

He grabbed hold of a crag with his hands and started climbing. As he went he heard Blackman and the other rustlers talking loudly around the turn in the defile. They had already started on their way back to the hidden hollow.

Billy almost slipped and fell in his excitement to get out of their way. He scrambled over the parapet of the cliff in the nick of time, and rolled out of sight from the gorge below.

Now he could hear Blackman leading the way at the turn.

"Hurry up, yuh saps," the wolfer was saying. "Did yuh git all them things what was left?"

Billy fell back still farther from the rim. Crawling over the rocks, he rounded the turn of the defile so that he could see below where the outlaws were coming along following Blackman. Showing just the barest part of his head, Billy peeked over.

At once he saw that Blackman was turning the corner of the cliff. Now Buck Foster was being shoved around the bend by a rustler, and Joe Scott was following him. A lone outlaw came last, carrying lariats, a shotgun, and the six-guns taken from the prisoners. This last fellow offered Billy West his only opportunity.

The young Montanan tore the rope which he had brought along loose from his belt just as Buck and Joe were prodded around the turn in the defile and lost to sight. Billy threw out a small noose and got to his knees.

Luckily, the last outlaw following the prisoners did not look up or he would have seen the young Montanan. But the rustler was too occupied with the

lariats and guns he was carrying, having a difficult time to keep from slipping out of his hands.

Billy leaned over the cliff. He would have jumped upon the lone rustler below, only he was afraid to take the risk of breaking a leg in the fall, missing his man, and alarming the other outlaws who were lost to sight.

A better plan was to snake the fellow about the neck in such a manner as to choke him immediately and prevent him from crying out. Billy's noose had to be small for the trick, and if the rustler saw it coming, the day was lost.

The young Montanan threw the lariat.

There were years of training behind that cast, years spent since the time Billy was knee-high to a grasshopper, when he roped posts in the ranch yard, until he grew old enough to learn to snake the front hocks of rambunctious steers.

He made his throw with a prayer on his lips, and the rope fell as true as an Indian's arrow to the heart of a deer. It fitted quickly over the outlaw's head below with but an inch of freedom about the brim of his hat.

Then the young Montanan yanked on the loose end which he held, and the hemp twanged taut so lightning quick that it caught the astonished victim below before he got his mouth open to yell.

He was gagged instantly, garroted, and jerked sprawling from his feet. The ropes and guns which he held flew in all directions.

Billy West was over the cliff like a flash. He dropped beside the outlaw who was clawing at the noose to get freedom to yell, and at the same time struggling to get on his knees.

Again that day the Montanan was forced to forget about mercy. He dealt the rustler a resounding uppercut on the chin which flattened the man to the ground as lifeless as an old log.

Working like chain lightning, Billy

bent and loosened the lariat noose about the fellow's neck so that he would not choke to death during his unconscious sleep. With the rope, he bound the man's feet as he would a calf's fore or hind legs. Billy turned him over, and repeated the performance with the fellow's wrists.

"One down!" the Montanan exclaimed, bounding to the side and picking up a pair of six-guns.

CHAPTER X.

A BEATING.

WITH two six-guns in his hands, Billy West ran around the turn in the defile. The outlaws were not far off, traveling slowly because of the lagging gait of the prisoners.

The Montanan could see that Blackman was still leading, although view of the wolfer was almost shut out because of the rustlers behind him. They were not glancing behind, believing that their rear was protected by their henchman whom Billy had knocked out and hog tied.

With the weapons, the young Montanan now had no fear. He kept on running, ready for anything. A fury against Blackman possessed him. All the brutal tricks of this wolfer were deserving of vengeance.

Billy kept on moving, now rising to his tiptoes as he went. He was closing in on the last outlaw who was prodding Joe Scott along, and the outlaw still did not look behind.

Nor did the next fellow with Buck Foster ahead, nor did Blackman. The defile was on the up grade now, with narrowing cliffs, and the troop was forced to pick its way carefully over shale.

The young Montanan was within striking distance of the last rustler, but he did not hit him. Billy came closer, ramming his guns into the outlaw's back. At the same time he hissed out a command.

"Don't open your trap, hombre," he

said, "or you'll be sorry. Keep walking. Drop your gun, and cut the ropes of your prisoner."

"Wha-a-a——" the outlaw started to stutter.

"Shut up!" snapped Billy, fearing that already the rustler in front might have heard. "Cut the ropes on that prisoner. Sabe?"

The young Montanan's guns were pressing dangerously into the small of the outlaw's back, letting him know exactly what was up. The rustler knew that he was trapped, that he could do nothing.

Yellow to the core, he feared for his life. He started to cry out, but caught his words in fear. Then he hesitated, but Billy's gun barrels pushed him on. The outlaw dropped his weapon, and his hand went for a knife.

Still the rustlers in front had not looked behind. Nor did they, during the time that Billy's first prisoner slashed through the ropes binding Joe Scott's wrists. His action made Joe turn his head about. And the moment that the redhead saw Billy, his eyes bulged and he almost yelled in triumph.

"Sh-h-h!" Billy cautioned Joe. Then he said to his outlaw prisoner, "Get down on your face on the ground."

The outlaw obeyed. Joe came to a halt, and Billy stepped up and gave the redhead a gun.

"Guard the skunk," Billy said, indicating the first prisoner. "I'll get Buck loose."

Without another word, Billy ran forward. It was a big piece of luck for him that the outlaw ahead with Buck Foster had not heard what went on. The fellow was having a difficult time to keep the veteran, mustached Montanan moving, for Buck was all in, ready to fall in a heap on the trail.

Billy drew close to Buck's captor. As he had done with the other rustler, he did with this fellow, jabbing the outlaw in the back with a six-gun. His command brought the crook to a dead halt, an exclamation of surprise on his

lips which he was afraid to voice. Like the other outlaw, this second rustler obeyed every instruction.

In a moment Buck Foster was free. And as his arms were released, he staggered about to see what was happening. Seeing Billy West, the injured veteran's face beamed.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" he exclaimed. "Billy!"

Buck's voice was loud enough to reach Blackman, the wolfer, who was marching in front. Billy West saw Blackman whirl about suspiciously. The wolfer did not have a gun in hand, but the moment that he saw what had happened, the rustler chief's hand flashed for a gun butt.

"Howlin' coyotes!" exclaimed Blackman furiously. "The fools has tricked me!"

Billy West rushed forward without another thought for Buck and the outlaw captor. His gun was still in his hand, ready for use.

"Stop that draw, Blackman!" he shouted. "Do you want to die?"

The wolfer already had the butt of his weapon lifted from its holster, but he got no farther. Like his henchmen, he realized he was a goner. And like them, he was too yellow to face odds in a game with death.

Blackman froze with fear. His mouth dropped open again, but he could not speak in his terror. He went staggering back, his hand moving away from his weapon.

Billy kept running for him until he had forced his gun into the man's midriff. He carried Blackman up against the stone cliff of the gorge, and then plucked the wolfer's weapon from its holster.

"Don't kill me—don't kill me!" Blackman began to wail.

"I won't kill you, you skunk!" Billy snapped. "I've got some better medicine for you first."

Still keeping his weapon into the wolfer's midriff, Billy jerked his head about and shouted for Buck. He saw

that the veteran had picked up his former captor's six-gun and was now covering that fellow with it.

"Keep that hombre out of this, Buck," Billy shouted. "I've got some business here for a moment. You might come up and collect these guns when I get going."

"What yuh goin' ter do?" called Buck.

Billy did not reply to him. He faced Blackman.

"You scum!" he said to the wolfer. "You didn't play fair with me or my pard, but I'm going to give you a chance. Move down the gulch. We're going to fight it out with bare knuckles."

"What?" exclaimed Blackman. "Yuh got a gun."

"Move on, Blackman," Billy snapped. "I'm dropping this gun for Buck to pick up. You're going to fight it out with me with bare knuckles, and I'm going to lick you as you've never been licked before."

Blackman was speechless for a moment, trying to understand those words. His beady eyes were wide with fear, but suddenly a ray of hope shot into them. A fist fight? That was different.

Maybe he'd have a chance to escape. This young puncher was no bigger than he. The waddy did not look like a battler, and Blackman thought he was one himself.

"Shore I'll fight yuh!" the wolfer cried with pretended bravado. "I ain't yalla, if yuh is on the square."

Blackman moved away from the cliff, backing down the defile with Billy following with blazing eyes. The young Montanan knew his foe for what he was. He knew that the wolfer was going to try and get away, but the puncher decided that Blackman never would. He kept the wolfer moving for ten yards, then Billy lowered his six-gun and threw it far behind him where Buck could pick it up.

"All right, you skunk!" Billy sang out, doubling his fists. "Come on!"

The moment the puncher threw his six-gun away, hope beamed in the wolfer's face. He needed no invitation. With a shout of triumph, Blackman rushed forward, working his huge fists around in a windmill motion which he believed would knock Billy to the earth.

But he was mistaken. The young puncher waded right into him, punching straight from the shoulder. Once, twice, three times Billy drove into Blackman's ugly face. And once, twice, three, and four times the wolfer clouted the puncher. They halted in a hail of blows, slamming each other mercilessly.

Blackman was fighting for his life. Billy was driving home a lesson. He was weakened from the day's ordeal. Two good blows caught him on the temple, and his head, which had been injured once that day by a revolver butt, began to whirl. He became dizzy, and suddenly his knees went wobbly.

Blackman roared with renewed triumph and pounded him harder, trying to knock him to the ground. But he couldn't do so. Billy was on the retreat, being forced back by the terrific wallops he took. He was scoring on the wolfer time and again, but it seemed that Blackman could take the blows.

Farther back Billy went staggering, and then he gritted his teeth and held his ground, swinging with all his strength into the face of his foe. He stopped Blackman's advance. One of the puncher's swipes caught the wolfer on the mouth with a lip-splitting smash that bowled the rustler to the ground.

Howling with pain, Blackman struggled to get to his feet, desperate. He had not counted on this. As he came up, wild eyed, he found Billy standing off waiting for him. The young puncher was a sight, with blackened eyes, a crimson-stained nose, and swelling jaw.

"Come on and take some more, you skunk!" Billy shouted.

Blackman rushed again, yelling his hate to the world. He was waving his arms in a windmill motion again, and

Billy tried to side-step, thinking that the wolfer would rush by him. But something happened which he had not counted on. Billy had forgotten that Blackman was part Mexican. The fellow was as treacherous as a snake, and all his tricks came to the fore when he was nearing defeat.

Quite suddenly Blackman halted as Billy side-stepped. Instead of trying to punch the young waddy, the wolfer lifted up the toe of his boot and drove it into the Montanan's midriff. It was a foul, unsuspected trick.

Billy doubled over with a groan of agony.

Then Blackman stepped into him and landed a smash behind the ear.

As Billy sprawled drunkenly on the ground, the fiendish wolfer pounced on him. They rolled over and over, locked in each other's arms, Blackman trying to kill him by brutal blows in the face. With most of his wind knocked from his body, weakened by the terrific beating he was getting, Billy hung onto his foe. The puncher could do nothing—could not fight back—just hang on.

Somehow Billy had a faint idea that Buck and Joe had run up near him and were shouting at the tops of their lungs. He was sick, so sick that Blackman's poundings did not hurt him any more. His head was numb.

His pard's yells to fight were becoming fainter and fainter. Billy could not let those two boys down. He couldn't lose consciousness. He had to win. He had started this fight, and he had to finish it.

With a great effort, he struck at Blackman. But the blow did not stop the wolfer, who now was trying to sit astride his chest. Billy gritted his teeth and shot out another fist. The wolfer was now fully on top of him.

"I've got to nail him!" Billy cried to himself.

The puncher twisted like a wild cat, jerked over, and threw Blackman to the side. How he did it, he couldn't say. He just made the sudden motion, and

the wolfer was sprawled on the ground at his side. Billy did not stop his writhing.

The next instant he was upon his knees. Blackman was up, too, directly in front of him. They were face to face when they started swinging at each other.

Each one of Blackman's drives landed around Billy's face and shoulders. But now the young puncher was fighting like a wild animal—in the same manner which the wolfer was fighting. The Montanan drove with all his force and weight. He could feel his knuckles doubling up on him, as if they were striking a stone wall. The hard substance was Blackman's forehead.

Pound! pound! pound!

Billy hit again and again. He was dimly conscious of Blackman howling with pain, but now he could not see the fellow. He merely kept on swinging at his foe and strangely striking him each time.

Suddenly, quite suddenly, the Montanan realized that the wolfer was not hitting him any more. Billy swung with all of his remaining strength. His

fist struck something with an ugly, breaking sound.

Blackman had taken the blow flush on the point of the jaw. He slumped forward, his head missing another of the young Montanan's blows. Blackman's ugly face dug into the gravel right at Billy's knees. The wolfer was beaten. He could not roll over, he could not move. He tried once to raise up by using his hands for leverage, but he slumped to earth.

"Enough!" he managed to gasp. "I got enough!"

Blackman said no more. He lost his senses.

Blackman, the wolfer, an' his gang o' rustlers hit upon a plumb smart trick when they used Lobo the Terrible ter fool the cattlemen. But thar was jest one thing wrong 'bout it—them jaspers didn't figure on havin' visitors from Montanee. An' thet was dang tough fer them. Once Billy West an' his Circle J pards gits on the trail o' bad men, thar ain't no git-tin' off it till the skunks am rounded up an' herded inter the hoosegow. Watch fer an all-fired, bang-up good story of Billy West in next week's WILD WEST WEEKLY.



FIRST AMERICAN TO CROSS THE PLAINS

THE first American adventurer to cross the plains for the purpose of trading with Mexicans was a French Creole named La Lande. He acted as agent for a merchant of Kaskaskia, Illinois, and set out on his perilous journey across the vast wilderness with no companions but a few Indians, whose attitude toward the white man was not always to be depended upon, and whose friendliness might change to enmity at almost any moment.

He arrived safely at his destination, and was so delighted with the country that he had traveled so far to reach that he decided not to make the return journey.

He forgot all about the merchant who had gone to the expense of sending him

there, and he also forgot to render an account of his transactions and his disposal of the goods that the worthy merchant had confidently intrusted to his care.

He saw big opportunities in the country which he decided to make his own, and used the money that he realized on the merchant's goods to enter into business on his own account.

Contrary to what is generally believed in regard to ill-gotten gains, La Lande prospered on his employer's money, and became a wealthy and important merchant. He built up a big trade, and his caravans became well known to all the traders and to all the adventurers who followed the trail he had blazed across the unknown plains.



The Bar U Twins Scotch A Viper

By Charles E. Barnes

Author of "The Bar U Twins at X Bar X," etc.

AT the rifle report, the Bar U Twins, Tom and Jerry Carter, stopped their horses with a sharp jerk on the reins. As the two cowboys sat motionless, listening intently, they were so alike to the last detail of feature, form and posture, either one could believe the other was himself reflected in a mirror.

Crack! Crack! Two more reports followed the first. The sound came from over the ridge just ahead.

As if a spring had been released under them, the twins put spurs to their horses. In an instant they were racing side by side up the slope.

"The crossroads an' that blind man's store is jest over the ridge," remarked Tom, raising his voice to be heard over the pounding of the horses' hoofs.

Jerry nodded. This Southern desert country was still strange to the Bar U Twins, who were visiting their uncle, "Tiger" Lane of the X Bar X. But they had heard much of "Blind Tom" of

the crossroads, and only the day before had stopped at his little store, curious to see the blind man who, with only his wife for company, dared to live alone in the center of a wilderness infested with outlaws.

They had wondered then that these defenseless old people had escaped being robbed or worse, but concluded it was their very weakness that protected them against even the most cruel of border ruffians.

In answer to questions, Blind Tom and his wife had assured them that they were in no danger from any of the bad men of the country. Often the roving bands passed there. Frequently they stopped at the little store, but never to do any harm.

The twins had been satisfied, but the sound of rifle shots coming from the crossroads seemed to be telling them that the blind man had been overconfident. It might, of course, be a battle which did not concern the keeper of the

little store. But until they reached the crest of the hill, the twins rode as if life or death depended on their speed.

At the top they reined in. From there they overlooked a wide, arid plain. Less than half a mile away, the north and south road crossed the one on which they were riding, and at the crossing the little adobe building stood out plainly against the dead gray surface of the desert.

The twins drew a long breath of relief. Mrs. Allan, the blind man's wife, was standing in front of the store. It was she who had been shooting, for she held a rifle in her hands. She was no longer firing, but was looking steadily down the south road, watching a lone horseman who was riding as if he hoped to outspeed her rifle balls.

"Bully for the old lady!" Tom chuckled. "Some jasper's been gittin' fresh, an' I reckon he learned some-thin'."

The twins rode down off the ridge at a leisurely walk. Mrs. Allan had gone into the store, and the lone rider was fast disappearing toward the southern horizon. Apparently there was nothing for them to do, but Tom pulled up when they reached the store door, thinking to hear an amusing account of the desert bully's defeat.

As he reined in and looked through the open door, his body for an instant became rigid. Then, springing from his saddle, he made one leap to the door, Jerry following at his elbow.

Inside, not far from the door, Blind Tom lay stretched on the floor, his white hair stained with a big patch of red. One glance was enough to tell the twins that he was dead.

His wife knelt beside his body. The rifle she had been using lay on the floor where she had dropped it. The twins could not see her face, for her back was toward the door, but her whole attitude spoke of an uncontrollable grief.

"Mrs. Allan! Who done this?" Tom cried in a voice that was strangely hard.

She turned her head and Tom felt a

lump rise in his throat at sight of her haggard face. Her old eyes were dry but in them was a look of utter despair.

"I didn't know him," she said in a toneless voice. "He was a stranger. He was hungry and we gave him something to eat. Then he killed Tom because he couldn't find our money. He shut me in the back room, but I got out through the window. I was too late," she moaned, "and I couldn't shoot straight."

"You don't need to worry 'bout that, ma'am," said Tom. "Somebody else'll do the shootin' for you. What kind of a lookin' feller was he?"

Before she could answer, there came from out in front the rapid clatter of a running horse, then the grinding of hoofs as it was pulled up short. In an instant a man of burly form stood in the doorway. The twins knew him at once for Sheriff Jenks of Mesquite.

The sheriff stood a moment without speaking. His gloomy gaze was fixed on the dead blind man and he did not seem so much surprised as discouraged. At last he uttered a sound like a suppressed groan.

"I done my best," he said heavily, "but he had too much start."

"Do you know the cuss that done this?" Tom fairly snapped out the question.

"Yes. It was 'Harelip' Smith," the sheriff replied. "I was after him for a killin' he done up in the north end of the county. When I seen he was headed this way I was feared there'd be trouble, 'cause he's the meanest skunk that ever forked a saddle. I done my best to ketch up with him, but his horse was too fast for me."

"Well—what're we standin' here for?" said Tom. "He rode south, an' we kin ketch him!"

The sheriff shook his head despondently.

"It's only five miles to the border," he said. "By this time he's in Juzbado."

"What if he is? Are you meanin' "

to let him git away with that?" demanded Tom, pointing to the dead storekeeper.

"What kin I do?" retorted the sheriff. "I ain't got no right to go across the line, an' there ain't nobody over there that'll touch him for what he done here. I just got to wait till I kin ketch him on this side."

Tom stared at the sheriff as if he were studying some curious object. If Jenks had known him better he would have seen profound disgust in his clear blue eyes.

"How far is this Juzbado?" he asked after a time.

"Mebbe ten miles from here."

"Come on, Jerry, we'll do some ridin'," Tom said curtly, and turned toward the door.

"Hold on there, you young fool!" shouted the sheriff. "Where you goin'?"

"We're goin' to Juzbado."

"Look here!" the sheriff spoke very soberly. "You kids are strangers in this country and you don't know what you're sayin'. That town ain't nothin' but a nest o' vipers. If you ride in there, you'll never ride out. If I was goin' there to git this hombre, I'd have to take a regiment, an' then mos' likely I wouldn't git him!"

"Mebbe we won't be able to bring him out," said Tom, "but if we don't, he'll stay there for good!"

"You'll stay there yourselves, you young idiots!"

"Mebbe," Tom admitted, "but there'll be some rumpus 'mong them vipers!"

II.

Juzbado in midafternoon looked as if the blazing sun had drained every bit of life out of it. Not a living thing moved on the dusty streets. Even the dingy adobe buildings seemed sleeping, patiently enduring the scorching glare until the shade of the western mountains creeping over the town brought them back to life.

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The Bar U Twins had left the road a few miles back, and following a mule track on the side of a low mountain, had gained a point where they could look down on the sleeping town. For a while they studied the crooked, deserted-looking streets, then Tom pointed to a long, low building before which a number of small tables stood in a narrow strip of shade.

"Reckon that'll be whatever the greasers call a saloon," he said. "That's where we're sure goin' to find Harelip Smith. It's a mighty handy habit they've got of everybody goin' to sleep in the afternoon."

"Yeah, but I ain't admirin' it much," Jerry replied. "That saloon's right in the middle, an' I got a notion one pop of a six-gun'll bring 'em swarmin' out o' them shacks like a bunch o' hornets. We ain't goin' to git that jasper 'thout makin' a noise, an' I don't see no chance o' gittin' away."

"It's a cinch we can't jest go in there an' grab him an' fight our way out," Tom admitted. "We got to fool 'em somehow."

For some minutes he stared steadily at the long building, the slight pucker between his brows showing that his brain was working hard to find a way. Jerry waited patiently.

He had supreme confidence in his brother's shrewdness. If there was a possible way of getting their man, Tom would find it, and any stratagem he proposed was sure to work.

Gradually Tom's face smoothed out and his lips twitched in the beginning of a grin. His eyes turned to Jerry and examined him from head to foot. In every detail his garb was identical with Tom's. Hat, handkerchief, shirt, and chaps were the same. Even their horses were enough alike to be twins. Tom's eyes began to dance.

"Them greasers are a superstitious bunch," he said. "We'll make 'em see double, an' before we git through they'll figure they been havin' a visit from the devil himself!"

He took the handkerchief from around his neck and, pulling up his chaps, rubbed it on his boot-tops. The boots had been recently greased, and in a moment he had a dark patch on the red bandanna.

Taking off his hat, he bound the handkerchief about his head so that it came down to but did not cover his eyes. The darkish patch of oil stain was directly over one temple, and it would take a close examination to see that it was not caused by a wound.

When the bandage was arranged to his satisfaction, he took Jerry's handkerchief and repeated the performance, wrapping his brother's head in exactly the same manner. The effect was startling.

They had been as alike as two peas before, but the bandage exaggerated the likeness and made it uncanny. Even the soberest man must have doubted the evidence of his own eyes, and believed he was seeing double.

"Reckon that'll puzzle 'em," said Tom when he had finished. "If you have to shoot, use your left hand till things git too lively, an' I'll do the same. That'll make 'em dead certain they've gone loco."

"Yeah—that's all right, but what's the idee?" Jerry demanded.

"Well, I'm goin' to ride down this ridge," Tom explained. "I'll swing round the end an' come into the main street. I'll be ridin' slow, like my hoss was tired an' I was 'bout all in. Reckon there'll be plenty o' hombres peekin' out when they hear my hoss, but I figure nobody'll come out.

"I'm goin' straight to that saloon. While I'm doin' that, you'll be swingin' round to the right an' come in at the other end. There'll be plenty o' people see you, but there ain't nobody goin' to see us both. When you git down by the saloon, dodge round behind it.

"'Pears like there's plenty o' places to hide behind there, an' mebbe you kin find a winder to look in. After that we got to take our chances. Mebbe I kin

git hold of Harelip an' fool him into comin' out o' town, but I ain't bankin' on it.

"Most likely there'll be trouble, an' when it starts we got to work fast. When I'm shootin' you lay low. When you begin, I'll dodge for cover. If they don't never see us both at the same time, we'll git 'em woozy. Shoot fast an' let 'em see you, but don't give 'em time to shoot back."

Jerry nodded.

"The first feller I plug," he said, "is goin' to be that Harelip hombre!"

"Not unless you can't help it." Tom replied quickly. "Wing him if you have to, but don't kill him. I've got a cravin' to see that feller hung."

III.

The twins separated and slowly worked their way down off the hill, careful to keep between the ridges until they struck the road on opposite sides of the little town.

Riding in between the adobe houses, Tom had the appearance of a wounded man barely able to keep in the saddle. He had ridden hard from the crossroads and his horse, drenched with sweat, was quite content to shuffle through the dust with hanging head.

As he moved up the narrow street, Tom saw no signs of life, but he had a feeling that he was being watched. He had no doubt that behind the windows, shuttered to keep out the sun, suspicious eyes were following his every movement.

But no one came out on the street and this was the only thing that concerned him. His one anxiety was a fear that some one might see that there were two men riding into town with bandaged heads.

The long building with the little tables in front was as deserted looking as all the rest, but when Tom rode up and, dismounting, dropped the reins in the narrow strip of shade, he heard a faint murmur of voices coming through the open

door. He entered with the staggering gait of one who was either too drunk or too weak to walk.

Coming from the glare of the sunlight into the gloom of the room, at first glance he could only see that the place was large, and that what men were there were grouped at some distance from the door. A step brought him to the nearest table and he dropped on the bench behind it as if he could go no farther.

In a moment his eyes became accustomed to the half light, and he discovered that there were more men in the room than he had thought. All about the room they were lying stretched out on the benches, and so far as he could tell, these were all Mexicans. At a table directly opposite where he was seated, three men, renegade Americans, were drinking and talking in low tones.

With elbows on the table and chin cupped in his hands, Tom had the appearance of being oblivious to everything about him, but he was keenly studying the men opposite.

It was quite evident that they were also watching him, and he had the notion that he was the subject of their low-toned conversation. He was not greatly surprised when, after a few minutes, one of the men rose and strolled over to his table and was immediately followed by the other two.

Tom forced himself to sit motionless, though his heart was beating fast. The first man wore a heavy mustache and beard, which at the other side of the room had concealed his lips.

Now, as he came nearer, Tom detected the harelip which twisted his mouth into a perpetual sneer. It was the man he was after, and the sight of him brought back the picture of Blind Tom lying dead on the floor of his store and the grief-stricken face of his wife. Tom's whole body trembled with a longing to draw his gun and revenge the blind man then and there.

Harelip Smith was very near to death during the next few seconds, but there was nothing in the still figure at the

table to show it. With a great effort Tom got control of his anger, and when Harelip sat down at the opposite side of the table, he looked up with perfect indifference.

"Been ridin' far, pardner?" asked Harelip.

Tom's only answer was a grunt which could mean anything.

"'Pears like somebody's been creasin' you."

"The feller that creased me ain't livin'," Tom replied in a growl as fierce as he could make it.

"Did you come 'cross the line?"

"Yeah," Tom paused and looked keenly at Harelip and the two men who had seated themselves on either side of him. "Say—happen there's anybody here the sheriff's lookin' for?"

"Huh! Reckon he'd like to see most of us," one of the other men answered. "Is he after you?"

"Not that one ain't—not yet," said Tom, "but he's after some feller hard. I come by the X Bar X Ranch, meanin' to stop there if it was safe, an' come near runnin' into a jack pot. Them hombres was some mad.

"'Pears some feller killed a blind man that was keepin' a little store, an' that bunch swears they're goin' to foller him to Mexico City. Some of 'em was beginnin' to look kind o' queer at me, an' I figured I'd hit the trail before they got started. Mebbe you ain't interested, but I figured I'd tell you."

Tom dropped his head again, but peering through his fingers, he saw the consternation that swept over their faces. One of the men, who looked as if he might have committed every crime on the calendar, spoke with decision.

"If them X Bar X cowboys are on the trail, I know plenty places where it's healthier'n it is right here! Them fellers don't care no more about the border'n if it wa'n't there! An' if 'Tiger' Lane's with 'em they won't go back till they done what they come fer. I don't know what you fellers is goin' to do, but I'm hightailin' it south!"

"'Slippy' is gittin' cold feet," sneered Harelip.

"I'd sooner have cold feet than be cold all over," Slippy retorted.

"What you gittin' scared about?" Harelip snorted. "If the cow nurses want to come here, let 'em come. Pedro'll trap 'em like he's trapped jest as good men as they be. Let 'em come, I say. I ain't afraid of 'em!"

"You don't know that bunch," said Slippy with a doubtful shake of his head. "It's an outfit I ain't cravin' to git up agin', an' I'm movin' out!"

"Well — nobody's stoppin' you." Harelip turned his back on Slippy of the cold feet and addressed the other man:

"Bill, you'd better tell Pedro what's doin'. He'd orter git his men out pronto."

Bill got up at once, strode across the room, and disappeared through a door at the other end. In a few minutes he reappeared, following a man of enormous frame whose face was almost entirely covered with a black beard. The big man gave a shout at which every sleeping Mexican sprang to his feet as if he had received an electric shock.

Then followed a series of rapid-fire orders delivered in Spanish, of which Tom could not understand a word. Whatever they were, they put springs into every man's heels. There was a rush for the door and in a moment the room was empty save for Pedro and Bill at the one end, and Tom, Harelip, and Slippy seated at the table near the entrance.

The big Mexican turned back through the door by which he had entered, and Bill followed. Slippy got to his feet as if he had no time to lose.

"I'm ridin'," he said, "an' I ain't stoppin' till the border's a long way behind me. If you fellers got the brains of a grasshopper you'll do the same."

"Chicken liver!" sneered Harelip.

"When you're stretchin' rope you'll figure a live chicken's better'n a dead buzzard," Slippy retorted, as he started for the door.

IV.

During all the confusion, Tom had maintained the attitude of a man too weary to take any interest in what was going on, but he woke up as Slippy was passing out and called after him:

"Hombre, there's a hoss out there that don't belong to you. Happen you was to make a mistake, my lead kin travel fast!"

Slippy shrugged his shoulders and went out without making any reply. Tom got to his feet heavily, as if every muscle ached.

"Reckon I'd better watch a hombre that's so set on runnin'," he muttered.

Harelip nodded approval, and Tom went out. He was back in less than a minute, and paused in the doorway. He had made the bluff about the X Bar X cowboys without any idea of what the effect would be. It was not all bluff.

He figured that Sheriff Jenks would not fail to stop at the ranch on his way to town, and when Tiger Lane and his men learned of the murder of the blind storekeeper it would not be long before they were moving. But it would be a long time before they could reach Jumbado. In the meantime he had hoped merely to distract attention from himself.

The result had been beyond anything he had dared to dream. For the moment Harelip Smith was alone, still seated at the table, idly rolling a cigarette. Pedro was somewhere beyond that other door, and how many others might be with him, Tom could not guess.

All the population of the town would still be within hearing, and a single gunshot would bring them around him in a swarm. At any instant Pedro might appear. It was a terrible risk if anything went wrong, but Tom was determined not to lose this chance of securing the murderer.

Going outside to watch Slippy had been an excuse to enable him to get the lass' rope from his saddle. He held it now behind his back as he stepped in-

side. He slouched in with dragging feet and drooping shoulders, but his next movement was as swift and silent as the leap of a mountain cat.

Harelip Smith had both hands occupied and his eyes were on the cigarette he was rolling. At the same instant that a noose dropped over his two wrists and was yanked tight, he felt something hard pressed against his spine.

"If you let out a peep as loud as a stutterin' sparrow," Tom whispered in his ear, "I'll blow your backbone through your stomach!"

Surprise and deadly fear kept Harelip silent. Even while speaking, Tom was busy with the rope. Two half hitches on the wrists, then a turn around the throat with the hands drawn up close under the chin.

If Harelip struggled he would choke himself. Tom was working now with frantic speed, his ears strained to catch the slightest sound. One minute more and he would be safe.

During that minute he trussed Harelip like a mummy and gagged him with his own handkerchief. Along that side of the room ran a low counter—evidently an extra bar used only on special occasions. Tom dragged his prisoner around the end and rolled him under a shelf, where he was wedged so tightly he could not move; then, for the first time breathing freely, resumed his seat at the table.

Another second and he would have been too late. Barely had he touched the seat when Pedro came in through the rear door, followed by the man, Bill, and a number of Mexicans, all armed with rifles.

At first they paid no attention to the man with a bandaged head sitting alone in the room. They were making for the street door, and Tom, inwardly chuckling, was thinking that all he had to do was to wait until they were far enough away, then take his prisoner and steal out of town.

Pedro was leading the way, his huge figure looming large. Suddenly the man

next to him seized his arm and, pointing to Tom, began to chatter excitedly in Spanish.

What he said was all Greek to Tom, with the exception of one word—"Ramos"—but that was enough to tell him that all the rest meant danger. It was scarcely a week since the capture of Leon Ramos, the most notorious outlaw on the border, and it was the Bar U Twins who had put him behind the bars.

Most of his gang had been wiped out, but some had escaped, and Tom felt he had made a sad mistake in forgetting this fact. He should have known that he would almost certainly run into the remnants of that gang in Juzbado.

But there was no time for idle regret. Pedro evidently was a man who believed in swift action. While his man was still speaking, his hand flashed to his six-gun. Tom knew that if he wanted to live he must shoot faster than he had ever done before.

When his hand began to move, both Mexicans were drawing. Their guns came out, but only to clatter on the floor as two spurts of flame came from over the table.

Both men went down. The one who had recognized Tom began to crawl to the door, but Pedro did not move. Before the others could realize that their chief had been killed, Tom had upended the table to form a shield.

He expected a storm of bullets to come tearing through the thin planks. This time they would be rifle balls and the wood would give him little protection. As he dropped behind his shelter he had a swift vision of rifles being hastily leveled, but when the roaring explosion came, nothing hit the table. Tom peered around the edge. At one of the windows Jerry stood in full view, shooting with his left hand.

Amazement held the Mexicans dumfounded. One, who had been about to pull the trigger, dropped his rifle and clutched his shoulder. Another spun around and sank to the floor.

It was an incredible thing, but the

man with the boyish face and head bound with a red-stained handkerchief, who had an instant before dodged behind a table, was now at that window pouring lead into them!

Their consternation lasted but a minute, then rifles were leveled at the window, but before the crashing report filled the room Jerry had dropped out of sight.

The moment Tom saw Jerry at the window and that every eye was turned toward him, he darted from behind the table and, rounding the end of the long bar, crouched low and ran to the other end.

The firing had ceased and he could hear a jabber of excited voices. Peering out, he saw that the Mexicans had rushed to his overturned table and, finding nothing there, were making for the street. He stepped out into the room and fired twice, wounding the two who were nearest the door.

The men turned and this time were swift to return the fire. Half a dozen rifle balls screamed over the spot where Tom had been standing, but he had already leaped through the door into the adjoining room. With a wild yell the Mexicans leaped after him. Apparently they knew that he would have difficulty in getting out of that room.

They were halfway down the long room when from behind them came the roar of Jerry's guns. Two men were wounded. With the exception of Tom's first desperate shot at Pedro, the twins were not shooting to kill.

The others stopped in their rush and turned. For an instant they saw Jerry in the full glare of the sunlight outside the door, then he vanished.

Grouped in the center of the room, the Mexicans for a moment seemed too dazed to move. Then, at a shout from one of their number, they ran toward the end of the bar to take cover behind it. Tom saw the move, and stepping out into the big room, shooting with both guns, he sent a perfect hail of bullets over their heads.

It was too much for their addled brains. They stopped and looked back, but not to fight. Some one screamed "El Diablo!" Then began a wild scramble to get out in the sunlight. When Tom reached the door, they were all running down the street as if, indeed, the devil himself was on their heels!

Jerry, coming from around the corner of the building, saw Tom gazing fixedly after the running Mexicans. His own face was solemn, as it always was, but he missed the grin that should have been stretching Tom's lips, and knew at once that something was wrong.

"What's the trouble?" he asked. "Did Harelip git away?"

"That hombre's safe enough," replied Tom, "but I'm thinkin' I made a had blunder. That first bunch that went out o' here must 'a' gone some ways, or they'd 'a' heard the shootin' an' been hikin' back. They'll be makin' an ambush for Tiger, an' if he's comin', like enough he'll ride right into the trap. We got to locate them fellers, an' we got to move!"

Tom's horse was still standing where he left it. Jerry ran to get his, and when he came back, Tom was surprised to see him leading a powerful-looking bay.

"Where'd you git that hoss?"

"He was tied back o' the buildin'," Jerry replied. "From the size of him, I reckon he belonged to that big brute you perforated. Anyhow, he'll do to pack Harelip."

There was no time to lose and the twins worked swiftly. In a very few minutes the outlaw murderer was roped in the saddle of the big bay, and they rode out of Juzbado without seeing any one but women and children.

V.

Avoiding the road, Tom led the way straight up on the foothills, urging his horse to all the speed possible on the steep grade. With every passing min-

ute, his anxiety grew. He felt that he could never forgive himself if his foolish bluff should cause the death of any of the X Bar X outfit.

He recalled Harelip's confident statement that they would be trapped, as many others had been, and it added to his nervousness. Tiger Lane would not be easily beaten.

He would put up a fight that would tear holes in the gang of Mexican bandits, but if he were taken by surprise, he could not do it without heavy loss.

Tom spurred his horse again, and did not pause until he was high enough on the mountain to overlook the wide plain and the low hills through which the road came from the north. More than halfway from the town to the hills a lone horseman was going north, riding furiously. No other moving object could be seen, but far beyond the low hills, Tom detected a faint haze hardly visible against the blue of the horizon.

"The ambush'll be in them hills," he said to Jerry. "That feller down there is ridin' to tell 'em 'bout the devil that killed Pedro an' busted up the town. Mebbe it'll take the fight out of 'em, but we can't take no chances.

"Tiger is comin'—that dust in the north can't be nobody but him—an' we got to git to them hills first. We kin do it if we ride hard. We'll draw the skunks out if we kin, but anyhow we'll make a noise that'll warn Tiger."

In an instant they were off, going diagonally down the mountain toward the distant hills. Tom, riding ahead, held the big bay by a leading rope, while Jerry from behind saw that the horse did not lag. Whatever happened, they were determined not to lose their prisoner.

Down the long slope they rode at a breakneck pace. Soon they lost sight of everything north of the hills, and then the lone rider disappeared in one of the many hollows. The twins spurred the horses to an even faster gait. They knew they must get well on the way

through the cluster of hills before Tiger, coming from the other side, could hear shooting.

The hills were round knolls of no great height forming a maze of hollows, in which an army could lie hidden and surround any body of men following the road. Tom did not underestimate the danger he would be in the moment that he rode in among them.

The Mexicans, he knew, were armed with rifles and if they saw him first there would be little chance of getting out alive. His one hope was that they would be so intent on watching Tiger Lane that they would keep no lookout to the rear.

The man they had seen riding from town had kept to the road. Tom swerved to the left before reaching the hills and aimed for a hollow some half mile from the main valley.

There was the bare chance that they could ride around the ambush in time to meet Tiger and his cowboys; but, recalling the distances as he had fixed them in his mind, he had little hope of this. Tiger would be in the hills before he could get to the other side.

Believing that they were well clear of the lurking bandits, the twins rode without a pause, following the curving hollows, but working always toward the north. At last Tom felt that he could wait no longer.

Tiger and his cowboys must be very near. He drew his gun and motioned to Jerry to do the same. He meant, without slackening pace, to raise a racket that Tiger could not fail to hear.

The crash of gunfire sounded startling in the absolute stillness. Twice Tom pulled the trigger, then caught his breath with a gasp. Rounding a curve in the hollow, he saw that the way ahead was blocked by a band of mounted men who were looking toward him with rifles already leveled.

Had he been alone, the catlike turn of his cow horse might have carried him out of danger, but the led horse was slow. There was a crash that

echoed through the hills. Bullets swept by them like a storm of hail. Tom heard a grunt of pain behind him and looked back anxiously, fearing Jerry had been hit. But it was Harelip who, no longer gagged, was swearing like a trooper.

Desperately the twins raced back the way they had come. They had accomplished their purpose. After that blast of gunfire there would be no danger of Tiger Lane being surprised in the least.

They had now to look after their own safety. It seemed like an easy thing to evade the bandits in the maze of shallow valleys and work round to join their uncle.

Each minute they had expected to hear another volley from the men behind them, but the curves of the narrow valley protected them. They were eagerly looking for an opening ahead where they could turn off, when from a side valley on the left more mounted men came with a rush and thunder of hoofs.

The twins pulled up short. Caught between two fires, they knew their case was hopeless, but neither of them thought of giving up without a fight. Riding some way up on the hillside, they dismounted, and with both guns out, waited to fire from behind their horses.

Harelip screamed oaths at being exposed to the fire, and tried to urge the bay out of such a dangerous neighborhood, but, bound as he was, he could do but little, and the horse refused to leave the others. The twins paid no attention to him. If they had to die, they had, at least, the satisfaction of knowing that he would die with them, and the murder of the blind man would be avenged.

VI.

The Mexicans were still coming at a run with their rifles ready. The twins braced themselves for their last fight. Tom's face had never looked so grim,

and his eyes had the hardness of steel, but the always-sober Jerry was smiling.

Their guns were leveled over their saddles, their fingers beginning to tense on the triggers, but to their astonishment the Mexicans pulled up short at the base of the hill, and appeared to be greatly excited, staring up at the twins and gesturing wildly.

The bandits were still beyond the reach of six-guns, but it was an easy range for rifles, yet they did not fire. The twins watched them, wondering. Suddenly Tom chuckled.

"It's the bay hoss," he explained to Jerry. "Harelip's pretty much the same size as Pedro, an' them black whiskers are good as a mask. I reckon this bunch ain't seen the feller that rode out from town. They figure we got Pedro tied up here, an' they don't dare shoot for fear o' hittin' him."

He turned to Harelip, who was slouching down in the saddle, nervously watching the Mexicans.

"Hombre, you jest keep your head down that a way," he said. "The only chance you got o' livin' is to keep them fellers thinkin' you're Pedro. If they begin to shoot, you'll be the first one hit."

The next instant Tom was in the saddle. Jerry looked puzzled, but asked no questions until he was also mounted. Then he demanded:

"What's the game?"

"With any kind o' luck, we're goin' to git out o' here," said Tom. "You ride on the uphill side."

Placing himself alongside of Harelip, with the bay horse between him and the Mexicans, Tom put his gun against the outlaw's back and began to move around the hill toward the side valley.

There was an immediate stir among the Mexicans, who moved as if to head them off. Tom waved his gun at them and, though he was doubtful if they would understand him, shouted:

"Git back there, or this feller'll be a dead greaser!"

He checked the horses and put the

gun to Harelip's head. The men stopped and began to talk excitedly. Tom moved on, spurring his horse to a lope.

He had been in mortal fear that the other band of Mexicans would appear around the hill, and if they should have heard of Pedro's death it would be the end of his bluff. But whether they knew the way was blocked, or were perhaps too keen on trapping the approaching band of X Bar X cowboys, they did not appear. The twins turned the hill, and the moment they were hidden from the Mexicans they put their horses to a run.

It was a wild race through the maze of hills. Twice they saw mounted men in the distance, but were able to avoid them. Suddenly they broke out on the desert plain and saw Tiger Lane and his cowboys, not half a mile away, coming with the rush of a cyclone.

On seeing the twins, the band slowed up. Then two riders swerved aside and rode to meet them. As they came nearer, they proved to be Tiger Lane and Sheriff Jenks.

Tiger greeted his nephews with a cheerful roar, but the sheriff had eyes only for Harelip. His expression, as he looked at the cowardly murderer, was that of a cougar about to seize his prey. At last he turned to the twins.

"I ain't much on prayin'," he said, "but I been prayin' for a miracle that'd let us git this snake alive, an' you done

the miracle! I don't know how you done it, but I reckon Providence meant that a thing as pizen as him has got to be hung. An' I'm hopin' to do the hangin'," he added.

"What was all the shootin'?" demanded Tiger Lane.

"Nothin' but some greasers that got in our way," Tom answered carelessly. He knew that if his uncle suspected the real state of affairs, nothing could keep him out of the hills, and he saw no reason for risking more lives to fight a bunch of greasers. "How come you ain't wearin' your star, sheriff?" he asked.

"I ain't no sheriff on this trip," Jenks replied, "not on this side the border. I'm jest an ornery gun fighter out ter git a man. If anythin' went wrong, I was meanin' to chuck the office, but I was goin' to git the man that killed Blind Tom! You beat me to it, but that star is in my pocket right now, an' when we cross the border, it'll be on my vest, an' the handcuffs'll be on that pizen viper!"

Juzbado was an easy place ter ride inter, but a dang tough burg ter git out of. An' fer a couple o' younkens ter go inter a nest o' vipers like they is in Juzbado is somethin' thet don't often happen. But the Bar U Twins figure they kin match wits with any one, an' 'specially with a bunch o' greasers. Tom an' Jerry Carter are goin' ter be back with us ag'in soon in **WILD WEST WEEKLY**. Be on hand ter meet 'em.





That Fool Purp

By Rex McKay

Author of "Thet Thar New Deputy," etc.

BILL ZINNER, trudging along the dusty road to Conifer, with a pack over his shoulders, stopped, cocked his head to one side, like an expectant robin, and listened. Yes, there it was again, whatever it was!

A whimper, almost human, had reached his ears. He slid out of his trappings and made for the marshy pond that shimmered, green and stagnant, to his left.

"Waal!" he exploded, as he pushed aside the luxuriant cat-tails and peered into the pond, "ef it ain't a fool pooch—jus' a little feller—jus' a purp—an' all wet an' miserable. Here, Fido—here, Rover—Hector—Shep!"

The puppy, stuck in the mud, let out a pitiful whine.

"Waal, yuh pore little cuss!" exclaimed Bill sympathetically. "Ef yuh ain't a sorry sight! Come on out of thar now—yuh, Trixie—yuh, Tray—yuh, Prince, or whatever yore name is!"

But the order was lost on the puppy. It made no effort to stir from the gumbo, probably wearied of the effort. It simply turned limpid eyes on Bill and cried as if its heart would break.

"Waal, yuh little fool!" yelled Bill, in disgust, "ef yuh'd try to git out o' thar yuh could. Yuh ain't got no nerve. I oughter go right on an' leave yuh thar, ef yuh ain't got no more sense than that! However, seein' it's yuh, why—waal—wait a minute!"

Bill stepped back onto the road. The puppy, thinking itself deserted, set up an immediate wail. Bill called a reassuring word to it as he took out his pocket knife and cast an appraising eye around at the adjacent willows.

He saw what he needed. He cut a long, green branch, stripped it of leaves, and bent the slender, pliable tip around into a noose, which he made permanent with a couple of strips of bark. Then he went back.

He had to wade into the mud to arrive within reach of the dog. Quickly he dropped the noose over the little neck.

The puppy whimpered, but Bill, in danger of losing his balance and toppling headfirst into the green water, yanked—and the pup was saved.

"Now," said Bill, as he held the muddy beast in his arms and patted its little head, "how in thunder did yuh git out thar, anyway—an' whar do yuh belong? Did yuh chase a rabbit inter that swamp, or—I wonder—by golly—ef—ef——"

Bill looked into the piteous eyes.

"I wonder ef some murderin', stone-hearted feller tried to drown yuh in that marsh, purp? Is that it? Ef it is—say, it's a good thing I wasn't around when he tried it! I'd 'a' murdered him, the dirty wretch. Ef I laid hands on him, I'd—I'd——"

The puppy snuggled—and Bill realized then that he was quite muddy and that some of the slime—in fact, a lot of it—had already been transferred from the pup to himself. He grunted.

"Waal, yuh fool pooch, yuh need a bath an' so do I now, so we'll both go over to the creek an' get it!"

They did. Bill scoured the protesting puppy and when he got it presentable he saw the little animal was a tawny yellow.

"I reckon yo're part Airedale, mebbe, an' some collie in yuh, too—ef not a strain o' mountain lion. Waal, I'll jus' anchor yuh here, brother, while I kind of clean up a bit!"

He tied the puppy to a willow trunk with a piece of twine he had in his pocket. Then Bill undressed quickly and took a brief but cold bath. He laundered part of his clothing, too, and finally, half dressed, he turned for his shoes.

Gone! So, too, was the pup. After that, for almost an hour, Bill played a game with the dog.

Hector—or Rover—or whatever his name was, had hidden one shoe, ap-

parently, and was trying to tear the other into bits when Bill found him behind a bush. It took a lot of sweating and a lot of mad racing, before Bill recovered that shoe.

Then he searched long and diligently for the other. Finally he found it—and was ready for the road again.

"Yuh fool pooch!" he scolded the puppy. "Yuh ain't got the sense yuh was born with! I don't blame a feller fer tryin' to drown yuh, ef he did! A nice way to pay me back fer my trouble in rescuin' yuh! However, I reckon that is all yuh is, anyhow—a fool pooch. I cain't expect nothin' else o' yuh! I should leave yuh right here to teach yuh a good lesson, but—I won't!"

II.

He didn't. He lifted the sighing puppy and started along the road. The puppy wasn't heavy. And he was company. Bill talked to it, sang for it, soothed it to sleep as he trudged along.

He took his time. There was no call for hurry. If there were a job open somewhere ahead for Bill a few minutes, or a few hours, wouldn't make much difference.

At lunch time, when he got out his slender stock of grub, the puppy managed to steal the only two slices of dried beef Bill possessed. It seized them and ran off with them, leaving Bill dancing and fuming!

"Come on here, yuh fool pooch!" whooped Bill.

But the pup didn't—until he had finished the beef. Then he returned, crawling in for the punishment he seemed to expect. There was no punishment, but relations were a bit strained, however, when the march was resumed.

The pup walked now. Bill went on ahead, trying to make up his mind to "ditch" the little animal. But Bill was too much of a lover of animals for that. At the end of the first mile he was carrying the dog.

He was still holding it when he

reached the Q B Rancho on Deer Creek. There seemed to be a lot of excitement at the ranch. Half a dozen saddled horses fretted at the tie rail. A small group of men crowded the narrow ranch-house porch.

Bill, putting his hat over his left eye at a rakish angle, ambled up to the men. He bowed slightly as his eyes tried to seek out the boss.

"I'm lookin' fer work, gents," he began. "I wonder ef——"

"I got work fer yuh, brother!" snapped a tall man in a black slouch hat, turning around to face Bill so that Bill saw that a silver star glittered on his vest. "I'm the sheriff. I'm callin' every able-bodied man around here fer an emergency an' yo're nominated. We're jus' leavin'. Jim, git this feller a hoss!"

"But——" began Bill, in surprise.

"Tom, reach in that bag o' guns the hardware store loaned yuh an' git this man a rod—give it to him!"

"Say——" suggested Bill, warily, as the man called Tom handed him a brand-new six-gun, "I don't jus' git all this!"

The sheriff, busy shouting at some of the others, made no reply. Tom, however, volunteered some information.

"A blamed brazen galoot jus' held up the Rocky Ford stage, back in the pass, an' made off with the strong box," explained Tom. "Thar's a five-hundred-dollar reward fer him, an' we're after him. This is a posse from Conifer—that is, the sheriff an' me is. The other boys belong here to the Q B Rancho. Men is scarce out this way. With yuh along we got seven!"

Bill held the puppy closer. He tried to appear pleased.

"Good—an' whar are we goin'?"

"Goin' after that thar stage robber; o' course," said Tom peevishly. "Whar did yuh think we was goin', brother? On a picnic? Or to gather acorns? An' what's the idear o' luggin' that half-starved hound along with yuh? Yuh better leave it here!"

"This pooch," said Bill, with dignity,

"goes whar I go. We're ol' pals. But I never hunted robbers afore——"

"Waal, let's go, fellers!" barked the sheriff. "Jim Watson here has a bum laig an' cain't go. That leaves jus' six o' us. Jim will have grub ready fer us when we git back! Everybody ready? Yuh, stranger, whar's yore hoss? An' drap that dawg!"

"Yes, sir!" said Bill, but he didn't mean it.

The sheriff had turned away. Some one led a horse up and Bill, with the pup still in arms, climbed into the saddle. Why hadn't he thought about having a bum leg or something, instead of Watson?

This wasn't the kind of work he was hunting. Judging from the appearance of his new companions, this was no lark, every man was loaded down with fire-arms. There would be shooting, no doubt, and Bill alone knew his deficiency when it came to that.

He was no shot. When the little cavalcade wheeled and galloped out of the Q B yard and struck the road, however, Bill was along—in the rear.

The posse made for the pass. There the riders halted long enough for some sharp-eyed fellow to locate the robber's trail. Then they were off again, in full cry.

The puppy, not liking the bumpity-bump-bump, began to whine again. Bill sought to smother its cry in one capable hand, but he failed. The sheriff, looking back, frowned. At the next stop, to give the weary horses a brief breathing spell, the sheriff rode back to Bill.

"Throw that danged pup overboard!" he ordered. "Yuh'll have yore hands full when we close in on the robber. Ef it's the bird I think it is, he's like to ambush us!"

"Yes, sir!" agreed Bill, dismounting.

But when the posse started again, Bill snatched up the perplexed pup and jammed it inside his shirt. The pup protested weakly in smothered whines.

"Yuh fool pooch," grunted Bill, "shet up now!"

Bumpity-bump-bump! Up long, steep grades, around sharp curves, through swift creeks went the posse. The riders appeared to be aware of their destination, decided Bill, but his decision was premature.

At length the sheriff pulled up and the others clustered around. There was a brief council of war, in which Bill, for one good, squirming reason, did not join. He sat his horse at some distance—waiting.

"All right thar, slow-poke!" cried the sheriff, sighting him. "Yo're goin' with me—with me an' Tom Baird here——"

The sheriff waved to the other three men.

"Jerry—Fred—Oscar, yuh boys haid around the Squaw Mountain cut-off jus' on a chance. He's gone one way or the other, sure!

"He either took the cut-off, hopin' fer speed an' a haid start to git him over the divide afore we kin overtake him, or he's gone down inter Beaver Valley to hole up. Breeze!"

The Squaw Mountain party clamped spurs to their horses. They were off in a whirl of dust—Jerry, Fred, and Oscar. At the same second the sheriff swung his big black horse around and plunged recklessly down through the timber. Tom Baird followed suit.

Bill, with the pup whining and squirming around inside his shirt, trailed after Baird. It seemed to Bill, at first, that both the sheriff and Baird were contemplating suicide, judging from the reckless manner in which they slid, skidded, and thrashed down through the timber.

Soon, however, Bill saw that they were really following a dim, almost indistinct trail. Bill gave his horse his head.

"Yuh, purp!" hissed Bill, slapping the lump in his shirt that he knew was the pup's head. "cain't yuh keep yore trap closed? I'm doin' the best I kin fer yuh! I know yuh don't like all this thumpin' an' bumpin', but neither do I!

"Ef yuh keep on yowlin', an' that he-fury on the black hoss hears yuh ag'in,

yo're done. I'll have to drap yuh. Now shet up—shet up, I say!"

Bill's voice was louder than he thought. Tom Baird swung in his saddle and glanced back.

"What?" cried Baird.

"I'm tellin' this ol' hoss to giddap!" said Bill, with an inspiration. "Giddap, dang yuh—giddap—giddap!"

The horse seemed more than willing. It did "get up," and it passed Baird quickly. The sheriff, however, held the lead. An hour passed, it seemed to Bill, and ten million tree branches had slapped him in the face, before the sheriff pulled up. Tom closed in almost instantly. Bill, saying a prayer that the pup would be discreet and remain quiet, halted. The sheriff spoke crisply.

"Thar's Beaver Valley ahaid an' that ol' cabin. Don't look like any signs o' life around thar, does it?"

"Nope!" agreed Baird, staring.

"Waal, we best see, now that we're here!" decided the sheriff grimly. "We ain't got no time to waste. We best spread out an' ride at it an' ef he's inside, we'll rush it! He cain't git all three o' us, eh, Tom? Yuh, feller, are yuh game?"

Bill, having trouble with his nervous horse prancing around, was trying to get up sufficient courage to suggest that some other plan be used—but at that second, the pup let out a squeal and the worried sheriff failed to recognize the voice.

"Waal, don't cry about it, anyway!" snapped the sheriff. "I'll take the center—yuh, Tom, take the left—yuh, feller, the right. Ready? Have yore guns handy. Let's go!"

III.

They did. There was a puff of smoke from one window of the shack, however, and the three riders wheeled and were back in the timber before Bill could say "Jack Robinson." His canny horse had brought him back. The sheriff sought cover.

"Waal, he's thar!" he said.

"So it seems!" said Baird, nodding.

"We'd better dismount an' edge up behind that ledge o' granite in front o' the shack. We kin pepper 'im from thar," said the sheriff. "I don't know whether thar's a back door or windy to that place or not—do yuh, Tom?"

"I don't," said Tom, "but I tell yuh what! I'll skirt around thar to one side an' cover it ef thar is! See?"

"Good idcar—go ahead!"

The sheriff crawled for the ledge as Tom rode off. Bill knew he was supposed to follow the sheriff, but he couldn't crawl with that pup in his shirt front. The little dog seemed to be asleep now, too, and crawling might awaken him. So, rather than risk that, Bill walked toward the ledge.

Wham! A bullet from the cabin shattered the bark from a tree to Bill's right. The sheriff, twisting his head over his shoulder, stared—then hissed a warning.

"Drap down—crawl—yuh idjut!"

"Waal," began Bill, but before he could say more, there was a crazed shout from Tom Baird, off to the left. The sheriff rose up on his elbows. A mighty crash had sounded from the cabin. The cause of it was immediately apparent.

The robber had simply ridden his horse out through a rear window, taking part of the rotting old sash with him. Tom was beckoning and firing at the fleeing bandit. The sheriff let go a volley, too, but the bandit went on.

"Come on—come on—yore hoss!" screamed the sheriff, racing to the rear.

When the sheriff mounted and rushed off, Bill was still beyond grabbing distance for his mount, and the mount, anxious to be in on the excitement, didn't wait for Bill.

Snorting, the horse plunged off. Bill watched it go with mingled feelings of chagrin and relief. After all, he wasn't cut out to be a bandit chaser. He reached in his shirt and dragged out the drowsy pup.

"Now, yuh fool, stretch—while yuh got the chance!"

The robber, Bill saw, was streaking up the knoll in the rear of the cabin. He was riding a good horse. Tom Baird and the sheriff were in pursuit, shooting at him. The robber was firing back.

The sounds of the shots seemed to bewilder the puppy. He whined. Bill, his patience about gone, slapped him lightly.

"Shet up, yuh fool pooch!" he ordered. "Git some rest! I don't figure any o' them fellers will be back here. We'll go on—in some other direction. Mebbe thar is a job open somewhar—a reasonable job, mindin' cows an' calves 'stead o' shaggin' after robbers an' murderers. Here, whar yuh goin'?"

The pup was going. He didn't stop to answer.

"Come on back here now!" cried Bill, scrambling up.

The pup increased his speed. He raced out to the granite ledge, sprawled over it, and started running out across the valley.

"The little fool!" grunted Bill, but he took after it. The pup, he saw, was heading straight for the old cabin. Bill paused. Then he laughed.

Why, the bandit was gone from there, of course! And he'd have to grab that pup before it got lost. He ran on eagerly. The pup vanished into the cabin. In a minute or so Bill was there, too. The pup had dived under an old bunk, but Bill, blinking and sweating, stood on the threshold—staring.

"Waal, I'll be dinged!" muttered Bill, aghast. There, in the center of the floor, was an iron-bound wooden box. The lid had been pried open. And revealed to view was a small fortune in gold and silver coins and neat packages of crisp currency.

"The loot!" exclaimed Bill, rubbing his eyes. He stepped into the cabin gingerly. No one was there but the pup. He stooped over the treasure box and ran his fingers down among the money.

"Waal, I declare! Now I suppose I got to lug this to Conifer——"

The sound of thudding hoofs aroused him. At first thought, Bill figured it was a posseman arriving. He glanced up, to see the bandit tearing across the clearing.

The fellow had evidently given his pursuers the slip. Why, of course! The fellow was riding a bay horse now. He had departed on a pinto!

IV.

"Good grief!" exclaimed Bill. He edged toward a side window, and as the bandit bounded in the front door, Bill stepped out the window into a mass of wild-currant bushes.

The bandit had returned for the coin. Bill, an eye to a chink hole, watched him grab up a sack from the floor and start to scoop the coin into it. As the sack moved, however, so did a shadow under the bunk—and the next second the fool pup flared forth, growling!

"Good gosh!" muttered Bill.

The bandit nearly jumped out of his skin at the growl.

"Whar in thunder did yuh come from?" he cried, with an oath, as he stared at the bristling puppy. "Yuh liked to scared me to death. Git the heck out o' here now. Beat it——"

But the pup stood his ground, growling. The bandit, leaping up, swung back a booted foot, aimed for the puppy. It was then that a blur seemed to come before Bill's eyes. He forgot himself, the surroundings, the circumstances.

He was up—like a jack-in-the-box—and through the window like an avenging thunderbolt. The pup gave a joyful yip, warning the bandit. But the bandit was off balance at that moment.

He went for his gun just as Bill landed on him. The gun went off but the bullet went through the roof. Then the two men clinched. The bandit was husky but so was Bill—and Bill was angry.

He'd show this hombre a thing or two, teach him to kick innocent puppies around. The two men fell in a sprawled heap. Bill's one free fist flew, as did the robber's gun. Then, remembering his own gun, Bill-jerked it and leaped back.

"Hands up now—yuh scum!"

The bandit obeyed reluctantly.

"Yuh low-down skunk!" cried Bill savagely. "So yuh was goin' to kick that purp, was yuh? Yuh was, was yuh? Huh, not while Bill Zimmer is around, yuh ain't! I'll teach yuh to kick poor pooches around—I will, I will. Now stand up!"

The bandit did. There was a good-sized bump on his head, Bill saw, where the man's head had hit the floor in the fall. Bill poked his gun closer to the fellow.

"Pick up that sack an' put it in the box an' then pick up the box," ordered Bill hoarsely. "We're goin' to leave here—an' we're goin' to walk it, too—with yuh carryin' that box!"

The bandit, starting to lift the box, hesitated.

"Say, you, this is heavy!"

"Yuh brung it here, after yuh took it offn the stage," said Bill, "an' now yo're goin' to lug it inter Conifer. No, take yore eyes off that gun o' yores. Yuh reach fer it over thar an' I'll make a lead mine out o' yuh! Now, up with the box!"

The bandit straightened up with the box.

"Now, pooch!" ordered Bill, with dignity—and for the first time in its history the dog promptly obeyed. It came to Bill and he lifted it up. Then he waved his gun at the bandit.

"March!" he commanded.

But the strange cavalcade was only a mile or so across the valley, traveling slowly, when the sheriff and Tom Baird came galloping back. They had found where the wily bandit had switched horses in his flight and sent the riderless animal thundering on down the trail, to mislead them.

Their eyes popped at sight of the bandit, carrying the strong box, and Bill, holding a gun in one hand and the pup under the other arm. They raced over, breathlessly. Bill and his captive stopped and waited.

"Waal, stranger, bully fer yuh!" cried the old sheriff, drawing rein. "Whar did yuh find him an' how did yuh do it? He gave us the slip. We saw yore hoss had got away from yuh an' we come back fer yuh! An' yuh got the loot thar, too, an' makin' him carry it in! Fair enough! But how in tar-nation——"

"That fool——" began Bill, meaning to add "purp" and to explain how the pup had really caused it all, but he caught himself in time. "That fool robber," he added quickly, "he had to come back pesterin' around me while I was jus' waitin' fer him to fall inter my trap. He did—the fool!"

The sheriff squinted, adjusting his eyeglasses.

"Yo're right, son, I'll say he's a fool!" agreed the sheriff. "Yuh ain't got no slugs in that gat o' yores. has yuh, brother? Yuh ain't even got a loaded gun, an' yit yuh capture one o' the most notorious outlaws in Colorado! Waal, I swanny—an' yo're still carryin' that purp with yuh, too!"

Bill flushed but he threw his shoulders back.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah to both yore questions. Me, I never use no loaded gun fer my purposes, fust place. Second place, I'm still carryin' the purp an' I aim to continue to do so until I collects the reward fer this bandit an' then—I'll hire a guy to carry the pooch around. What do yuh think o' that, eh?"

The sheriff was too smart to argue with a hero, however.



FIRST STEAMSHIP PIONEERS

WHEN the first steamship, the *California*, of the Pacific Mail Steamship Co. of New York, brought its load of pioneers to San Francisco in 1849, the news ran quickly through the town that a ship, propelled by steam, had entered the Golden Gate.

The people ran out in joyful excitement to Clark's Point, the landing place, to greet the travelers from the East.

It was a bright, warm day, and great joy prevailed that San Francisco was joined to the Atlantic coast by steamship transportation.

A hilarious procession escorted the new arrivals to the accompaniment of gunfire from Clark's Point to the Plaza, pausing at times to dispense free champagne by the crate.

Almost every passenger had at least two San Franciscans eagerly lugging his baggage in exchange for news from home. But this service was strictly

voluntary and without price, as one passenger of a rather patronizing manner discovered.

He threw his small cavalry valise down upon the rocks and, handing a half dollar to a young man who had the appearance of a porter, he said somewhat haughtily: "Here, my boy, carry that valise up to the hotel."

The young fellow drew back from the extended coin, and with the air of a ruling monarch, drew from his own pocket two half dollars, threw them on the ground and retorted as he strode off with magnificent disgust: "Carry it yourself!"

This incident introduced the First Steamship Pioneers to the low value of money in young San Francisco. Before the day was over they found the price of an ordinary meal to be five dollars, and one egg one dollar.



The Whistlin' Kid

By Emery Jackson

Tails On

Author of "The Whistlin' Kid on Devil's Trail," etc.

UP the long sage-dotted slope beyond which lay Palomillo, the "Whistlin' Kid" let his buckskin take its own agile gait. There was as usual a problem ahead of him, lacking in many details he had yet to discover and consider.

As he rode, he indulged in his regular, almost unconscious habit that had gained for him his nickname. His favorite air was a melancholy one known as "The Cowboy's Lament," and now this sounded on the still air in emulation of the twittering birds, the singing larks and wrens of the range, all rejoicing in the fresh coolness of the early morning.

He was far from old. His beard was not yet wiry, though it was black, like his hair. His eyes were dark and hold something of the questing aloofness of the falcon in their gaze.

His features had a hawkish, eager cast—the look of one who adventures, who loves the danger trail. His nose

was thin, high-bridged; his cheek bones stood out almost like those of an Indian; and his mouth and chin were well shaped and firm. There was something about him that offset the idea of youth and replaced it with efficiency.

Speed, the buckskin, was feeling spirited. He had rested well and found good herbage the previous night in the camp they had made before they came down from the mesa and started across the levels. Now and then he bent a snaky neck and tried to nip playfully at the foot of the man who was not merely his master but his friend.

The Kid stopped his whistling long enough to admonish the horse:

"I know you're feelin' fit an' fine. Speed. Me likewise. But thet ain't no excuse fer you to act like my boot leather was a measure of oats, or a chunk of apple pie. You've hed breakfast."

He broke off his speech abruptly. Ahead of him, dust was rising like a

cloud from a wide draw which split the rise. With it there came a low thunder of hoofs.

"Cows on the run, Speed," he said. "Let's take a look-see."

The buckskin went up the slope in great leaps, on springy pasterns. The Kid sensed no reason for a stampede, such as was evidently occurring. There was no thunder in the air. Coyotes were not out at that hour, timber wolves or pumas not to be thought of. But he knew that cattle were easily scared critters when they took a notion.

Then his eyebrows joined in one line as he saw, spurring away, two riders, one on a calico horse, the other on a sorrel. They drove before them a small band of stock.

It might be legitimate enough, but it was clumsy work to send into a headlong rush the rest of the herd from which they had cut out steers. Stock got killed that way. It never did them any good. Those two riders ought to know that. Unless—

The Kid kept straight on up the rise. He did not bother for the moment about the two buckaroos. They had come out of the far end of the draw, and it lay between them and him.

It might be none of his affair. Neither might be the cattle that were furiously charging down the draw. Those two riders with their steers were leaving sign, anyway. If there was something wrong, it could be attended to later.

He reached the brink of the draw, the buckskin braking its hoofs to prevent a slide down the sudden, harsh declivity. Here was a matter that needed instant action.

The sides of the steep gully were rugged with outthrusts of rock, thick-grown with mesquite, chaparral, and cactus. This was no arroyo—the dry bed of an inconstant creek—but a ravine with a floor down which surged a mixed herd—cows, steers, yearlings, in a wild charge.

They were in the full frenzy of flight. They jostled one another in the narrow

way, horns clicking, eyes rolling, a flood of living flesh hurtling along and down as the draw deepened and widened.

The Kid glimpsed its lower opening where the draw changed to a little valley that also was well overgrown with brush and mesquite trees. They would scatter there to a certain extent, but already some had fallen, and there was more imminent danger ahead.

A little in advance of the frantic cattle rode a boy on a flea-bitten roan. The pony was doing its best, but it was weakening. The lad's quirt was flailing it.

He sat well forward on its withers, doing his utmost. He was calling to his mount, spurring it. But the little roan, though game, was clearly tired. Its nostrils flared crimson. The Kid could see the heave of its ribs in its distress.

It was tricky going, and the horse had no time to choose its footing before that living avalanche which was gaining with every lurching stride. Nothing could stay the flight of that stampede in the V-shaped gulch. It would trample everything in the maddened onrush. If the pony stumbled, if it was overtaken, there would be nothing left but pulp.

The Kid swung the buckskin and raced along the rim of the draw, calculating, watching, knowing that if he figured wrong, he himself might go down under the hoofs and hanging horns. The bellow of the cattle came up through the dust they raised, through which they showed vaguely, with the boy still ahead by a few feet.

Then he set Speed to the descent, freeing the flap of his holster, drawing his six-gun. There was one chance—to head them off where the draw opened, if the boy and his staggering, desperate pony were still ahead.

The buckskin did not hesitate. Under that rider, he obeyed. He slid down on his tail, he cat-jumped, sure-footed, tendons of rubber and sinews of steel reacting, great muscles coming in to play.

The boy did not look up, plying quirt and spur, still barely in advance, riding

like a jockey, urging the failing pony on with skill and will.

The Kid swerved the buckskin before they reached the floor of the draw. Speed whirled on springy pasterns, leaping ahead, racing with the wild herd.

Then as the draw widened a little, the good horse answered the neck rein unhesitatingly. The weary little roan was stumbling, its lungs weakened, unable to gather sufficient oxygen to offset exhaustion.

Four grade cattle were in the lead, shouldering one another. Two were cows. The Kid knew, as matadors know, that a cow on the prod is far more agile, more dangerous than any arena bull.

He swept in. There was a narrow margin that he diminished by his side-long ride at full gallop.

The little roan, done up, struck a hump of tough grass and earth with its hoof. The boy, conscious now of help, tried to hold it up.

The Kid pricked Speed with steel, and the buckskin made one prodigious leap. In that moment the Kid yelled to the lad, dragged him from his saddle with his left arm as the roan went down.

The boy clung to him, scrambled behind him, got one leg across the cantle.

A cow, tongue lolling, eyes fiery red, lowered her head with cruel horns to gore and heave away the obstacle. The Kid's gun roared. His bullet went in at the center of a cross that might have been drawn between her horn roots and her eyes. She fell on her knees, and the Kid wheeled Speed, double burdened but inspired.

They reached the widening end, found a path in the mesquite and fled into it, while the stampede piled up for a moment, cattle somersaulting, bellowing, charging on and by them. They reached a crest, and the Kid checked his snorting mount.

They were safe. The little roan was down, mangled, as the stock surged over it, finding wider spaces, scattering, slowing up.

The boy slid off as they came to a halt—a freckled, homely youngster, bow-legged. The Kid liked him, understood the tears that streaked down his dusty face—tears not of cowardice, but rage and sorrow.

II.

"Those skunks! I caught 'em cuttin' out our steers," he said. "I was lookin' fer the herd, ridin' up the draw, wonderin' where they'd strayed, when I run on those sneakin' rustlers. They turned the herd on me. An' Pronto's dead. He ain't yet, but he's done. We got ter shoot him."

The Kid nodded. The boy recognized him as a friend, as his rescuer; but his main thought was for the gallant little roan that lay there, struggling, broken, in the path of the stampede that was now over.

"I ain't got a gun," said the boy. "But you——"

The Kid swung from the saddle, leaving Speed standing there, alert from the adventure, but obedient. He went down to the roan and put it out of its misery.

The boy flung himself down on the ground, shuddering at the report. The Kid took saddle, blanket, and bridle off the dead pony and brought them up the slope. He knew how the lad felt.

"It's all over, buddy," he said. "You'll hev to ride back with me. We'll cache these. You know those hom-bres?"

"I know who they are, all right. Rainey's men. Thet was 'Slim' Withers on the pinto, Whiting on the bay. I could swear to 'em. Ain't Rainey been rustlin' our stock right erlong?"

"Let's talk it over a bit," said the Kid. "Hard to swear to folks in dust. I saw 'em, too. But we want proof. Mebbe we can foller the stock they run off."

"You can't. It's all rim rock up to the mesa. But it's Rainey's men. They shot my dad last winter when he rode over to their place. He hed no use fer Rainey. He didn't come back. We

found him halfway, dead. I reckon they thought he hed somethin' on 'em."

"Nothin' done erbout it?"

"We couldn't prove nothin'. We didn't even know dad was goin' there. He didn't tell us. But he was headed fer there, an' no other reason to go thet way."

"You git up in front of me, son. We'll shack over to yore ranch. You can talk on the way. My name's Prentiss."

The boy swung to the saddle, and the Kid mounted behind him. He was not whistling now. His hawkish face was set and stern. There was an eager look in his dark eyes. The boy talked freely, passionately, but he had nothing definite to show that his charges were true.

There were only three of them on the ranch now—the boy, his sister, and an old cow-puncher, Sam Breck, afflicted with rheumatism. They had seen hard times since the boy's father, Jim Hawley, had been killed. Their stock had been run off; they could afford no help.

Breck refused to leave, wages or no wages. He sounded like a good sort to the Kid.

Rainey was Ed Rainey of the Rafter R. Once he had worked for Hawley, had made unwelcome love to the girl, been fired by the rancher. Rainey still persisted in his attentions, and swore he'd make the girl marry him.

The Hawleys owed the bank. They had hoped to clear the note with prime steers that had been run off that day. According to the boy, Rainey wanted the ranch as much as he wanted the girl. It had good grass and water and could have handled a good herd.

The Kid saw this was true as they rode. The ranch buildings were in fair shape, though there was sign of the lack of necessary help—sign also of hard work done against odds.

He liked the boy, young Jimmy, and he liked the sister when he saw her. She was not pretty but pleasant of face, tired-looking but plainly of sturdy frontier stock.

She was hardly the sort that Rainey was likely to fall in love with, the Kid fancied—a girl who would make a fine mate for the right man. It was the ranch Rainey would be after, plus a desire to master the girl who had refused him. And she was not the kind to marry against her will.

She put her arm round Jimmy's shoulder as he told his tale. Her eyes blazed.

"The cowards!" she said. And to the Kid. "I guess you saved Jimmy's life. I hate to quit, but I reckon mebbe we'll sell out. Hev to now. You'll come in?"

The Kid entered the neatly kept house.

"I jest happened erlong," he said. "Come ercross the divide at sunup."

"You ain't workin' fer any outfit?" asked the boy.

The Kid shook his head. His lips puckered to an unconscious whistle, but it was not audible. His brain was working.

"Wish we could hire you," said the boy. "Most of the outfits is layin' off. It's been a poor year fer range an' the price of beef. But we've got a fine spread. We ain't goin' to be driven off, sis—not by them skunks."

"Not if we can help it, Jimmy," she answered.

"You belong to the Cattlemen's Association?" asked the Kid.

She shook her head. "Dad did, fer ten or twelve years, I reckon. But we couldn't spare the dues, last time they were to be paid. I don't reckon they'd help us any. Jimmy heard they'd written to them for a range detective—I mean the grangers in the local association—but I don't believe any one's come. We don't belong to the local association, either. We don't ermount to much, I reckon."

"It ain't our fault," said the boy hotly. "If Ed Reddick was here——"

"He ain't, Jimmy. He won't be back fer weeks."

"Seems to me the C. A. might do

somethin' fer you, after yore dad payin' all those dues," said the Kid. "Jimmy, suppose you git a hawss. We'll git yore saddle, an' you an' me'll see if we can't hunt up some sign. If the spreads ain't hirin' I can spend a li'l' time."

As the boy deftly swung the rope, to get the horse he picked in the corral, Sam Breck came riding in, old, grizzled, humped in his saddle, a good man once. Some fire showed in his eyes as the Kid told him what had happened.

"It's Rainey," he said. "I should hev shot the skunk last time he come botherin' Milly. He knows well I'm part crippled, an' that was one of my bad days, when the rheumatiz was in my arms. Milly's goin' to git married to Ed Reddick in the fall. He's foreman fer the H J, south of here. They sent him to South America with two of the thoroughbred Hereford bulls they raised. A good man."

III.

The Kid was fully inclined to agree with Breck. The latter was not the sort who would go off half cocked. Rustling, murder, bullying a girl and a boy! The Kid resolved to have a look at Rainey and his men.

Now he had another purpose on hand. As Jimmy had said, sign was scarce. The Kid saw some that the boy did not. He found the imprint of a horse's shoes that looked as if a rider had swerved aside to chase a stubborn steer. They were faint, those tracks, but they told the Kid something that he kept to himself.

He had taken Jimmy along to divert the lad's mind for the time, risking the chance that he might override some sign. Usually the Kid trailed solo for that reason. He was whistling softly now—the "Lament."

That horse had been slightly lame in the nigh front leg. Both front shoes were toe-weighted. There was a black hair—a horsehair—caught in cactus, which he did not remove. It was not the sorrel's, but came from the pinto

that Slim Whiting rode, according to Jimmy.

The prints were recent. The wind had already begun to dust them over. It was one of the few dirt patches where they showed.

Then the sign faded utterly, vanished on a wide draw of shale that divided itself into other draws. They rode to the head of it, looked toward the mesa, with its scores of hiding places, but saw no dust. The rustlers had too much start.

"I told you so," said Jimmy. "But we'll git 'em some day."

"Hope so," said the Kid.

The boy looked up at him, struck by his tone. Already he was a hero in Jimmy's eyes for his rescue. Now he took fresh hope and courage from the resolute face, bronzed and purposeful.

"Jimmy," he said, "suppose you show me where you found yore dad. Do you mind?"

"Not if you're goin' to help us. Are you?"

"I hed a notion thet er way, Jimmy. I've got some time an' a li'l' money to go erlong with."

"We sure need help. I wish——"

He stopped speaking. The Kid was not listening to him. He was whistling as he gazed away from the mesa to the horizon. Somehow Jimmy did not think the whistle purposeless. He was right.

They came to the place where Hawley had been ambushed. He had been following a well-beaten trail. Beside it was an outcrop of rock, set with cactus and brush. Jimmy pointed to it, tears in his eyes.

"They figgered the skunk lay up there," he said. "The bullet——"

"All right, Jimmy. They didn't find anything?"

"Nothing."

"I see. Jimmy, you go back to the ranch. No use yore bein' seen round here. You'll see me again, melbbe not fer a day or so, but you'll see me. Tell yore sister an' Breck not to mention I've been round."

"We won't. We don't see no one. Don't go to town more'n once a fortnight."

"*Bucno.*"

The boy felt again that surge of confidence with which the other inspired him. They had help at last. He loped off. The Kid dismounted and left the buckskin ground-anchored behind the pile of rock, where it could not be seen from the trail.

Nothing had been found. Months had passed. But there was always something. The Kid believed that with time and patience, he might trail those steers.

But if any one was watching, approach to the mesa was too open. And there were other ways. He had taken over the problem. It was not exactly the one he had come to solve, but it might well link up.

The rocks were well weathered, seamed and fissured, with the cactus and brush growing out of many of the clefts. It seemed a hopeless task to look for clues.

The Kid put himself in the place of a man bent on killing, who had seen the man he wanted riding along the trail, far off, and then had crept to the deadly ambush. He would have left his horse back of the rocks. There was an arroyo there. He would have placed himself where he could watch the trail both ways.

Hawley had been shot *there*. The Kid marked the place the boy had pointed out. The man would have been *here*, or close by, with prickly pear to hide him, yet give him clearance for the shot. Much hung on how the killer had acted afterward. The Kid knew something of murderers.

He might have hurried off--most likely had. The trail was fairly well traveled. He would want to get away from it. The killer who gloated over his victim was rarer than the one who got clear promptly. If the latter, he might have left something that would still prove evidence.

The Kid spent two hours combing

the place, clearing out the fissures that were likely, probing them with his fingers, using twigs that he shaped into tiny spades with his knife.

When he straightened up at last, he had two articles, both of which had rolled into deep, sheltering seams, one of them blown there, probably. One was the fag end of a cigarette. If it belonged to the killer, he must have been an inveterate smoker, but the trail stretched plainly for a long way in the direction of Hawley's ranch.

He would have had time for a short smoke to steady his nerves, or from habit that would not be denied. The smoke would not have been seen. Hawley's horse would have been kicking up dust in its lope.

The tough wheat-straw paper still held the unsmoked remnant of tobacco. It was not granular but long-cut, dark.

Time, moisture, and frost had robbed it of flavor, but the Kid put the tobacco in the palm of his hand and smelled it three or four times before he put it away in his wallet. Now he understood why the man had been unable to resist a smoke. There was the faint odor of *marijuana*—the drug made from cactus buttons.

He looked at his other find--a .30-30 shell, ejected from the rifle at discharge. It was a common enough caliber, tarnished, coated with verdigris.

The killer might have sought for it, or ignored it. It had not been easy to find, but here it was--not a barren clue to the Kid. The firing pin had left tell-tale marks, different, he knew, from those of any other pin.

He was on the trail. He swung into the saddle and fox-trotted toward the town. Now his whistle rang out shrill and clear—a dirgelike air. It had often proved prophetic of lament—but not to the Kid.

IV.

Rainey leaned against the bar, sure of himself, with a swagger that was close to insolence. Some might have thought

him good looking. There were dance girls in the café keen enough to be with him, aside from the money he spent so freely.

But his eyes were too close together; his mouth, shaded by his dark mustache, was mean. Indulgence showed on his face.

Slim Withers was beside him, asprawl, partly drunk, weak-chinned but vicious. Next was Whiting, sturdy, brutish, inclined to be sulky.

The Kid was in the group, buying the drinks. He had seen their horses outside—a sorrel and a pinto with a black tail, a bay with black points for Rainey.

The pinto favored one front foot. Its shoes were toe-weighted. So were others on the rack, to even their gaits—a not-infrequent device. It was evidence, but not proof—far from proof.

"Buyin' a herd, are you?" said Rainey. "I might let you hev some, if the price is right."

"It'll hev to be right," replied the Kid, with a smile. "Thet's why I'm buyin', because beef's cheap."

"You look young in the game to be a buyer," put in Whiting. "How do we know you've got the money?"

"You sellin' the steers?" asked the Kid. "I thought Rainey owned 'em. You can call up the bank at Center City an' find out whether I'm good. Meanin' you, Rainey. I'll come out an' see what you've got in a day or so. Got several places to go to. They tell me Hawley is sellin' out. I ain't met him yit."

The three men looked at one another.

"Who told you they was sellin'?" asked Rainey.

"Old feller I met yestiddy. Crippled up some. Said he worked fer the outfit. I told him I was buyin'."

"Hawley's dead," said Rainey. "Died last year. His kids are tryin' to run the ranch. I didn't know they was sellin' out, though. Reckon the bank'll git most of their stock. It don't ermount to much."

The Kid made no comment. He might be young, look young, but he knew rascals when he saw them. And Whiting had made a break, given himself away as overinterested in the sale of Rainey's steers for a hired rider. The three were cronies—three of a kind, three knaves.

Whiting resented the Kid's retort. He did not show his liquor, as Withers did, but his eyes were bloodshot. He finished his drink as the orchestra started, and deliberately trod on the Kid's foot.

The Kid balanced his weight, caught the bar rail from which dirty towels swung at intervals, and jerked his foot upward.

"I reckon you didn't mean thet, cowboy," he said mildly enough, "hut thet's my foot, an' those hoots of mine cost good money."

Whiting, sent backward, clutching the counter, looked at the boots. They were expensive, scrolled with fancy stitching.

"Suppose I *did* mean it," he said. "What of it?" Deliberately he spat on the Kid's right shoe, his hand on his six-gun.

The Kid stepped lightly back. He looked at the grinning Withers. Rainey was scowling, sensing a lost deal.

"I don't shine them boots," said the Kid, "but I aim to keep 'em clean. Take a towel, Whiting, an' wipe it off."

"Like blazes!" said Whiting. The whole room was watching.

"You might land there," said the Kid.

His tone had changed. He no longer smiled. His lips were pursed slightly, as if whistling.

"I'll shoot it off, you dirty tender-foot!" said Whiting.

The room quieted suddenly. Rainey made a move forward, but he was too late. Whiting had started a draw he never finished.

Rainey saw the Kid's empty holster, where there had been a six-gun. Now its muzzle was in the pit of Whiting's

stomach, and Whiting was standing frozen.

"Wipe it off," said the Kid in a voice like a rasp.

He reached forward and grabbed Whiting's gun wrist with his left hand. It clamped like steel.

"Drop thet gun an' grab a towel," he went on. "Take off thet slime."

He set foot on the lower rail, and Whiting knelt and did as he was told, while the crowd looked on.

The Kid sheathed his six-gun.

"If you think I'm a tenderfoot, Whiting," he said, "pick up yore hawg-leg and go to it."

Whiting was still kneeling. He looked up, venomous, and snatched at his weapon.

Suddenly he swore. His knuckles were smashed, crimson, broken with a bullet.

"I'll be out to yore ranch jest the same, Rainey," said the Kid, putting up his gun.

He walked out with his back to them, but he watched them in the mirror as he went. He whistled as he went through the door and swung up to the saddle. He was still whistling as he rode down the dusty street.

"There's one of 'em won't do any fancy shootin' fer a while, Speed," he said to the buckskin, as he rode over the bridge above the half-dry creek.

He went beyond a ridge, heading for the Hawley headquarters.

V.

"It's yore own fault," said Rainey. They were in their own ranch house. Whiting's hand was bandaged. "You can't hold yore liquor. I ain't goin' to lose the chance to sell. Buyers are scarce. But he's no sucker. When he comes out, you'll keep out of the way."

"If my hand heals time he comes to buy the stock," said Whiting, "I'll git him."

"You'll keep yore gun play till we git the cash," said Rainey. "You'll pull

none on this ranch, either. You take my advice, an' you'll leave him erlone. He drew too quick fer me to see it. I shoot as quick as you do, but I'm content to git his money."

Whiting said nothing, but glared evilly. His hand hurt him. There was no doctor in the town, and the flesh had swollen. Twenty-four hours had passed.

"Soak it in hot creolin an' water," said Rainey. "An' leave the whisky erlone. Can you ride?"

"Why?"

"I'm not lettin' the bank git those Hawley steers, what's left of 'em," said Rainey. "I told her she'd be sorry. She will when there ain't enough to pay the note. Cows won't fetch anything. They'll sell the ranch, an' we'll buy it. We can use it. Thet Prentiss won't be ready to buy fer two-three weeks, he says. Goin' to look over the other outfits. Wants a herd."

"Still botherin' over thet plain-faced gel," sneered Whiting.

"I'm gittin' even with her. Their steers'll go toward buyin' the ranch. Thet's all I want. Are you goin' with us? If you don't, you count out on this lot."

"I'm goin'," said Whiting.

But he reached for the whisky bottle and ignored the creolin. His hand burned like fire.

That night, they ran off the balance of the Hawley steers, drove them to their hideout in the mesa, rebranded them and left them with the others they had taken. They doctored the brands through wet blankets with running irons. They should heal in ten days or so, ready to sell to Prentiss.

He arrived the next day, for inspection. Whiting was not in evidence. He was in his bunk with his hand three times the size it should be, soaking it in creolin now, swearing, smoking cigarette after cigarette.

Both Rainey and Withers greeted Prentiss cordially and showed him the steers he was going to buy.

"I've got thirty more or so I ain't been able to fetch in," said Rainey. "You see, Whiting's sort of bunged up. He hed it comin' to him. But I'm short-handed. I'll bring 'em in in a few days."

"Plenty of time," said the Kid. "I won't be ready fer a couple of weeks. Either of you got the makin's? I must hev dropped my sack."

Both proffered him sacks of tobacco. He rolled a cigarette, hiding his disappointment.

"Sorry I hed trouble with Whiting," he said. "He'd been drinkin' heavy, I reckon."

"You sure can shoot," said Rainey, and meant it.

"I'm better with a rifle," said the Kid. "It's a knack, I reckon. They wanted me to join a show once, but I don't care fer that sort of thing. An' it's mostly fake. They use shot fer the glass balls in a rifle ca'tridge. They're hard to hit with a bullet, but I used to be able to hit a rock thrown up, twice out of three."

"I never saw thet done," said Rainey.

"I'm out of practice," said the Kid. "An' I ain't got a rifle, or I'd try it."

He walked over to the fireplace where a rifle was set on antlers, and took it down.

"I'll bet five dollars a shot," he said.

"I'll take you," said Withers. "Rainey can toss the rocks."

"I'm out of practice," said the Kid.

It was an almost unknown feat. Withers winked at Rainey.

"I see she's loaded," said the Kid.

Whiting wondered what was happening. He got clumsily out of his bunk and went to the window. Rainey was tossing up bits of rock. The cattle buyer, rifle in hand, was watching.

"All right," he said.

He barely nicked the first rock, but it scored a hit. He missed the next and shattered the third. Tried a fourth—and missed.

"Thet leaves us even," he said to

Withers. "I ain't as good as I used to be."

It was marvelous shoozing just the same. Withers was content.

They did not notice that the Kid picked up one of the spent shells when they were not looking and slipped it into his pocket.

"Use this rifle fer deer, I reckon," he said to Rainey.

"It ain't mine. It's Whiting's."

The Kid's lips puckered, parted. "Hope he won't be sore at my usin' it," he said.

"It's his hand is sore," said Rainey. "How erbout the price on them steers?"

"We'll fix thet when I come over," said the Kid. "You'll git all thet's comin' to you. 'Bout two weeks from now."

They heard him whistling as he rode away.

"He's a cool hand," said Rainey. "Let's see how Whiting's gettin' on."

The sympathy in his voice was false. There were reasons, aside from the division of money, why he would not worry if Whiting's hand got worse.

Whiting was blazing mad. He had had hard work getting back into his bunk.

"What's the idee, lendin' him my rifle?" he said.

"Jest kiddin' him erlong. Help the price, mebbe."

"Give me them cigarettes. They ease the pain."

Rainey handed him one from a little pile.

"You'll hev to roll me some," said Whiting. "I'm no one-hander. The 'baccy's in the tin."

VI.

Rainey waited anxiously for the coming of the buyer. He had seen him the night before in town. At last he would be able to get the Hawley spread with its good grass and water. The note at the bank, he knew, was due in two days. The banks would force a sale, and he

would bid for it. He had the cash to spare. The cattle he was selling had cost him nothing.

Whiting was better. The creolin had reduced the inflammation, but his arm was useless, as he was. But he was up. He would get his third; he would cheat Rainey and Withers out of getting his share. His vengeance for Prentiss must wait. But gold salves all kinds of wounds.

Prentiss came up with six men, strangers, hired to drive the steers. They were a silent, businesslike outfit. Prentiss the only one cheerful, though the tune he whistled as he looked over the herd was a sad one.

He took quite a time going over the stock, finally separating them, placing them apart in different corrals. Rainey noticed that most of one lot were the Hawley steers, but he did not suspect anything.

"Gradin' 'em," said Prentiss. "They ain't as well fed as the rest. You'll hev to shade the price. Let's go to the house."

It was some distance from the corrals. They rode over there, Whiting and Withers with the herd, Prentiss' drivers staying with them.

Rainey went in first. The Kid turned on the porch and glanced to see dust blowing not far away. Satisfied, he went in whistling, close behind Rainey, to find him staring at three visitors who had arrived while the inspection of the herd went on—Jimmy and Milly Hawley and old Breck, the latter's face tight as a closed trap, hand on his six-gun.

"Git out of here!" said Rainey savagely. "Who said you could come on this ranch?"

"Friends of mine," said the Kid evenly. "I asked 'em to come over. Don't move, Rainey. The sheriff is on the way, with riders from several outfits. I want you fer rustlin', Rainey. I'm Prentiss of the Cattlemen's Association. I thought I wanted you fer murder, but it turned out to be Whiting's gun. Keep still."

Rainey kept still, bewildered. There were two guns covering him—the Kid's and Breck's. It was a warm day, and rheumatism was not troubling the old puncher.

"Likewise, you an' Withers smoke fine-cut tobacco," said Prentiss. "I want to see what brand Whiting smokes. I've got him, anyhow. Hed the marks of the firin' pin magnified. Found a ca't-ridge out where he bushwhacked Hawley. Looks like you did yore killin' by deputy, Rainey."

"You can't pin a thing to me," said Rainey defiantly.

"No? Ever notice the markin's on steers? Some of 'em are right individual. Juries ain't usually interested in 'em, I'll admit, but there was a few of the Hawley steers you left 'em thet I charted."

Rainey stared while the Kid set on the table certain narrow, thin strips of metal, soft and pliable, painted brown on one side.

There came the sound of arriving horsemen, stamping, spurs jingling on the porch. The deputy sheriff of the township entered with owners and riders from representative spreads.

"Jest in time, gents," said Prentiss. "There's certain steers I've got outside thet hev got these strips wrapped round their tail hairs. Hard to notice, but easy to find. They roll up to a'most nothin'. Give 'em a pinch with pliers, an' they stay. We fixed up what steers was left on the Hawley spread. Hed a strong notion Rainey here might run 'em off. He did, and I was there to watch him."

Rainey swore, helpless. He could not keep his eyes off the strips of metal.

"They're stamped C. A. on the clean side," said the Kid. "'Cattlemen's Association.' But to make sure, I added 'H,' so to be sure Rainey would come out the tail end."

The sheriff looked at the strips.

"I'll take his word fer it," he said. "If it ain't so, Rainey, we'll take off the cuffs later."

They led him outside. The Kid followed, whistling.

"You might see what kind of cigarettes Whiting smokes, sheriff," he said, as he caught up with them. "I've got him cinched, but I think you'll find his are doped with *marijuana*. I don't mind makin' a mild bet on it."

He turned to the two Hawleys.

"You'll git back yore stock," he said. "An' when his herd's sold, you may hev

more comin' to you, with the rest. I wouldn't wonder."

It's plumb bad medicine fer any rustler ter think that a certain hombre who goes round whistlin' "The Cowboy's Lament" ain't got no other accomplishment. 'Cause when the tune is heard on the range, it's a warnin' thet Pete Prentiss o' the C. A. is on the job. An' thet means fast action ahead fer all concerned. Watch fer the next Whistlin' Kid story. It'll be in **WILD WEST WEEKLY** soon.

A GENIAL OUTLAW

ONE of the most thrilling man hunts that the West has ever known was the chase for a prisoner named Harry Tracy who, with a companion, had fled from the Oregon penitentiary, after killing three guards, wounding a fourth, and shattering the leg of another prisoner who had tried to seize the rifle with which Tracy was armed.

The adventures of this outlaw during the hunt for him, which lasted two months, would fill volumes. His coolness and boldness excited admiration, even among those who were on his trail, whom he baffled again and again.

Bloodhounds were set after him, but he shot them, and as they were the only things he feared he felt quite at ease once they were killed.

He was going through a thick wood near Renton when he came across two women and a boy picking berries. He stopped them and said with a smile: "I guess you have heard of me. I am Tracy."

The women looked startled and he added quickly: "You needn't be afraid. I never harmed a woman in my life, and I don't intend to begin now."

He chatted easily with them as they walked to their house, and went in uninvited. It was about time to prepare dinner, and the hunted man carried in wood and offered to go to the spring and fetch the water.

Rifle in hand he walked slowly down to the railroad track and filled his pail. As he was doing this, a special train,

bearing the posse that was hunting him, came around the bend.

When he got back to the house he remarked: "I reckon there are some gentlemen on that train looking for me. I saw a reporter there. They are always in the lead, and they're the fellows I'm afraid of."

He laughed heartily at this, and when he joined the family at table he took the lead in the conversation. His sallies were humorous and he kept every one laughing at his jokes.

Toward the end of the meal the deputies began to surround the house. Every one was alarmed except the outlaw, who seemed to enjoy the situation as if it were a huge joke.

As the day wore on, the posse gathered thicker around the house, drawing closer every minute, but showing great cautiousness, for they knew that Tracy was a dead shot.

Finally the convict decided that he had better be going. He bade his hostess good-by, thanking her heartily for her hospitality.

Then he slipped out of the back door, and waved a last farewell.

At this moment the deputies discovered a man tied to a tree. Tracy had fastened him there earlier in the day. One of the posse spied him and gave a shout, and the others rushed forward to see what was the matter.

In the excitement Tracy slipped quietly down to the river and disappeared.



The Fightin' Maverick

By Nelse Anderson

Author of "Gun Smoke and Peaches," etc.

CHAPTER I.

BLOTTED BRANDS.

DAVE DARRELL drew up his pinto pony sharply, and while the wiry little animal was still pawing the ground with its forefeet, he swung himself out of his saddle to the ground.

"Rustlers!" he muttered.

Leaving his pony in the cedar thicket, he crawled cautiously along the red rock ridge to a point where he could look down into the narrow valley below. With the suspicious sounds he had heard—the bawling of cattle in pain—was the unmistakable smell of burning hair.

This could mean only one thing. A branding-iron was being used, and used wholesale!

Dave Darrell, blue eyed and tow-headed, was scarcely more than a boy in years and yet a life spent in the saddle on the New Mexico ranges had left its marks—a certain determined set to the square jaw, and a look of quiet re-

sourcefulness in his sun-tanned features. He wore his gun low, and it was a man's gun—a Colt single-action, heavy-framed .45.

The fingers of his right hand—lithe and quick—were upon the wooden stock of his six-gun as he stared down at the scene spread out below him. Then, with a puzzled exclamation, he took his hand away.

"Why those are dad's own men down there," he said to himself.

He watched the picture being enacted on the floor of the canyon. It was a colorful one. Two riders were cutting out and roping steers from a confused bunch of longhorn cattle.

Two other horsemen kept them milling about in a dark-red circle of swaying bodies and bobbing heads, while in the inclosure circled by the mesquite corral fence three others—and among them Dave recognized his father's foreman, Harve Criswell—were engaged in branding.

Dave's face hardened. He was sure that his father, John Darrell, had au-

thorized no such work. It was a strange season for the use of the hot iron.

After finding out all that was to be learned, and that was little enough, for he could not make out the brands at that distance, he returned to his horse and mounted quickly.

"We're goin' down there," he snapped, touching the pinto with his big-roweled spurs and heading it into the cedar clump.

Circling about, he came to a trail leading at a steep pitch down the side of the canyon. The pony picked its way carefully, sliding at times with forefeet braced.

When he reached the bottom, Dave urged his pony down the canyon toward the newly built corral. He was nearly upon the three men about the branding fire before they saw or heard him. Criswell, the giant foreman of the J Cross, observed him first, and got heavily to his feet.

"What's goin' on?" Dave called out.

There was nothing in his voice that any one should resent, but Criswell seemed to put the question down as impudence, for his beefy face went dark.

The J Cross foreman was a big fellow, powerfully slung together, and not by any means slow on his feet or in the saddle. His face was broad, his nose flattened. The gun belt he wore would have encircled Dave Darrell nearly twice over, but there was little fat on his big-boned frame.

"Who told yuh," he snarled out, "that what's goin' on is any of yore business?"

Dave flushed a little under his sunburn.

"Just remember that yo're workin' for my father. And his business, I hope, is mine!"

The foreman threw back his head in an ugly laugh. The other cow-punchers were watching the scene curiously—resentfully, Dave thought.

"Yore father!" Criswell mocked.

"There's lots of things *you* don't know, yuh little maverick!"

"Well, one of the things I intend to find out," Dave shot back at him, with blazing eyes, "is why yo're usin' the brandin' iron to-day!"

Amused contempt was written over the foreman's ugly face.

"Take a look," he invited sneeringly, "at what we're doin'."

Dave stared in astonishment. The J Cross brands were not being changed. Rather, it was the other way around, and other brands were being cunningly reworked into the J Cross mark!

Before his eyes he saw it done—an I T steer from a neighboring ranch having its brand blotted into a J Cross.

A little crook to the I and a straight line extended from the cross-bar on the T, and it was done. The bawling animal was released to race away bearing the familiar brand of his father's ranch, thus:



"Savvy now?" leered Criswell.

Dave's eyes were troubled. He met the foreman's gaze, and slow anger mounted into his face.

"Yo're stealin' cattle," he accused.

"Yes," said the giant, grinning, "for yore so-called dad!"

Just what Criswell meant by "so-called" Dave did not know. What bothered him was the information he had just stumbled upon. These men were not, as he had at first thought, blotting out J Cross brands, but were actually changing other brands to the J Cross!

He could hardly believe his eyes. What could Criswell and his men gain by changing brands to the J Cross? His father, it seemed, would be the only one to benefit by the process.

And Dave couldn't even imagine his father being a cattle thief! Why, that was *too* impossible. Criswell must be

up to some dark mischief of his own, though just what it was escaped Dave's quick-working mind.

"If yuh say that my dad is a party to this dirty deal——" he began in a dangerous voice.

"That's what I say. Maverick!" the burly foreman interrupted tauntingly. "If yuh don't believe it," he added with a hoarse laugh, "ask him! And here's a bit of advice from me—keep yore nose out o' our doin's, or I'll break yuh over my knee!"

"I'm not so sure," said Dave, his voice steady, "that yuh could do it. Anyway, maybe some day yuh'll get the chance to try. Right now, I'm ridin' back to headquarters for a talk with dad. I aim to find out what's goin' on here, and if yuh've lied—well, I'm comin' back!"

Criswell burst into a contemptuous laugh, in which the other J Cross riders joined.

Whirling his pony about angrily, Dave Darrell headed in at a hot pace up the canyon toward the distant ranch house.

CHAPTER II.

"JUST A MAVERICK!"

DAVE was troubled. He had never liked or trusted the foreman since his arrival on the outfit some months before. What his father could see in the man was beyond Dave, although it was to be admitted that Criswell knew cows. As far as his work was concerned, he seemed capable enough.

But Dave, already, was a good judge of men. Criswell did not strike him as being any too trustworthy.

The men Criswell had hired, too, were of his own cut—sullen-faced roughs who seemed to understand the use of the gun better than the rope. Criswell, when he took the job, had fired the old riders and recruited new ones, and Dave had never understood why his father had permitted it.

What made Dave angriest was Criswell's flat statement accusing his father

of being a rustler, a brand blotter, a crook! He wondered what his father would say to that!

The pinto pony seemed to sense Dave's mood and know that he was in a hurry, for he burned the trail at a furious gallop. In a quarter of an hour, Dave was within sight of the long, low dome ranch buildings.

His father, as was his custom, was home alone. Dave had noted that the J Cross owner had been worrying of late about something or other.

Dave jumped from his horse in front of the ranch house and ran in, calling his father's name as he did so. He was suddenly worried, as all sorts of wild thoughts and imaginings entered his head. What if Criswell and his men had murdered his father and seized the ranch and cattle?

Dave's suspicions, though, were groundless, for the familiar voice of his father answered him from another room and presently John Darrell appeared—a little surprised and nervous. Dave thought.

"What's the matter, son?" he asked quickly. "Anything wrong? I thought yuh were out after antelope."

"I was," snapped Dave, "but I found somethin' I wasn't huntin'. Dad, do yuh know what's goin' on?"

"What do yuh mean, Dave?" John Darrell demanded uneasily.

The older man looked nothing like Dave, for he was dark eyed and heavy of build. His hair, which was now nearly white, had once been dark. Even his features did not resemble Dave's. His face, while honest, seemed weak, and his glance seemed full of timidity and indecision, even now.

"Dad, I happened to see somethin' a week or so ago that sort of made me think—Criswell and the men drove in a bunch of mavericks from up north, and branded 'em. I wondered about those calves, but I didn't say anything. To-day—listen, dad—to-day I saw them burnin' brands into the J Cross."

The elder Darrell averted his face.

"Criswell accused *you* o' bein' a party to it," Dave went on hotly. "Said it was yore orders! What do they mean, dad?"

John Darrell groaned and covered his face with his hands.

"I guess it's true, Dave," he muttered thickly. "I—I've tried to keep these things from yuh as long as I could."

Dave started back as if he had been struck a blow in the face. He was horrified—thunderstruck.

"What! *You* a thief, dad! A rustler!"

The owner of the J Cross choked with emotion. He tried to speak, but failed. He nodded.

"I can't believe it," cried Dave. "Even after hearing yuh tell me, I can't believe! A cattle thief!"

"It's a hard name, Dave," sighed John Darrell, "but I guess it fits."

"Tell me about it, dad. Tell me *why*—yuh have some reason for doin' this, I know."

Darrell's face paled, and when he spoke it was with difficulty. His eyes were on the floor.

"Yuh've heard o' Alacran, haven't yuh?"

"Plenty," said Dave grimly, "he's the worst outlaw and rustler in the territory, and has been so for a good many years. Shore I've heard o' Alacran, and his doin's."

"Yuh know what his name means in English, don't yuh?"

Dave nodded. "It's Spanish for Scorpion."

"Well," groaned the elder Darrell, "that's what he is. Criswell and the bunch o' gunmen that he calls cowboys are workin' for me, but I—I'm workin' for Alacran—The Scorpion o' the Border!"

"Dad!" burst out Dave. "I thought I knew yuh better than that! Why——"

"Wait! Don't judge me too harshly, Dave," begged the old man piteously. "I was forced into it. I couldn't help myself. Maybe I'm weak, but——"

"I knew there was a reason, dad. What's the meaning of this mystery?"

"Years ago I was mixed up in a stolen-cattle deal. I bought quite a big herd—innocently. Alacran held it over my head, threatening to expose me—to turn me over to the law.

"Until lately I thought he'd forgotten, but he suddenly demanded that I go into the rustler game with him. Criswell and the others are men of the Scorpion's own gang. I had to obey, Dave."

"Had to?" repeated Dave sternly.

"They'd have killed me if I'd refused," the old rancher muttered. "Even then, I held out, but they threatened to kill *you*. I'm payin' the price. The J Cross is just a blind, now, fer Alacran's gang. They're doctorin' brands here—and usin' my ranch fer a hidin' place fer stoben cattle."

Dave paced the floor, thinking. That the J Cross should be in the power of the most feared of all border desperadoes was a shock to him. Alacran, or, as his name signified, "The Scorpion" had terrorized the border country for more years than he could remember.

Time after time the law, never overstrong, had tried to get him—and failed. Few had ever looked upon the Scorpion's face, and it was said that those few who had seen him usually met miserable deaths.

"We're in a bad way, I guess, dad," he said at length. "But yuh can't go on—with this. No matter how strong the Scorpion is, yuh can't go on."

"Yuh don't know him—how terrible he can be. Alacran ain't human, Dave. He'll kill us both."

"This county has been reorganized, and is makin' a big drive against rustlers. The penalty for cattle stealin' is death. Looks to me," Dave added, "that we're in bad here, either way. And bein' as we are—well——" He threw his head back proudly. "Let's be honest! Tell Alacran and his gang to go to blazes!"

"What do yuh advise me to do, Dave?"

"First thing—fire Criswell and his punchers off the J Cross!"

"But I can't."

"Well, I can," snapped Dave fiercely. "Leave it to me. Yuh and me are stickin' tight, and we're goin' to see this thing out. I'll ride out to Chimney Canyon and give the men their time, right now."

"And say, dad, Criswell said somethin' to-day that sounded mighty funny—first he called me 'Maverick,' and I didn't think anything much of that, but when he said somethin' about my 'So-called dad,' it set me wonderin'. What did he mean? Or did he mean anything?"

John Darrell turned away his face with a groan and when he looked at Dave again there was agony in his eyes.

"Guess the world's all crashin' down on us at once, son," he said huskily. "What I've got to say now will be harder than the other, but——"

"Tell me, father!" burst out Dave.

"I'm not yore father," came the slow confession. "I should have told yuh years ago, I reckon, but after raisin' yuh and lovin' yuh like my own, why I just couldn't."

The heavens were indeed tumbling down on Dave's little world. John Darrell's words were so amazing that he could do nothing but stare.

"Sixteen years ago," the old man went on in a steadier voice. "a wagon train was raided by Apaches. All the white men were killed. There was one white woman along—a daughter of one of the older men. She died, too, with the rest. The only one who escaped was a little boy baby—that was you, Dave!"

"Was my father killed?" faltered Dave, wide-eyed.

"He was if he was in the wagon train," said John Darrell, positively. "I found yuh right after the massacre—and took up with yuh. Adopted yuh, and learned to love yuh like a son."

But Alacran—the Scorpion—knows yore secret, whatever it is!"

"The Scorpion!" repeated Dave. "What does he know of it?"

"I don't know," snapped the old man grimly, "but I always suspected him of leadin' the redskins against the wagon train. Anyway, there's some mystery about yuh, and the rustler chief knows it. And from what yuh say, it seems that Criswell knows, too!"

"So I'm just a maverick, after all," mused Dave bitterly. His eyes flashed. "Some day," he snapped, "I'm goin' to find out what The Scorpion knows about me!"

He picked his Stetson from the table and jammed it on.

"Where are yuh goin', Dave?" John Darrell demanded.

"I'm goin' to run Criswell and his robbers off the J Cross," jerked the boy.

The old man protested, but Dave remained firm. Come what may, the ranch must be rid of the Scorpion gang—that was Dave's idea, and the ranch owner could not change it.

"Better let me go along," the old man offered.

"No," replied the tow-headed youth. "I'm a man now, and I want to prove it. I play a lone hand to-day. So long—dad!"

Old John Darrell followed him to the door with wondering eyes. He wanted to call him back, but remained silent.

"I'm a coward," he muttered gloomily to himself. "Ain't no use makin' a coward out o' him."

And with fearful eyes he watched Dave ride away in a cloud of dust—bound again for Chimney Canyon.

CHAPTER III.

"BURN THE WIND!"

DAVE'S mind, as he pounded the trail, was in a turmoil. The startling disclosures he had just heard had made a change in him. In the space

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of a few minutes he had grown, it seemed to Dave himself, from a care-free youngster into a man.

"Anyway," he muttered. "I got to play a man's part now!"

Who was he? What was his real name—the secret of his identity? John Darrell had said that The Scorpion knew something! What could he know that would be of any use to him? What kind of a game was Alacran playing?

As he rode along, Dave bothered himself over these questions, but could make nothing of them. There seemed to be no answers.

In the meantime, Dave had made his plans. Criswell and his riders must be driven off the J Cross. They were rustlers and thieves.

If John Darrell was timid and afraid, he, Dave, was not. He knew the risks he was running, but it was no time to be frightened at consequences now. It was time for action!

If Criswell and his men showed fight, and they probably would, Dave would face odds. A Winchester was rigged to his saddle, for he had planned to use it on his antelope hunt. However, the rifle would be of little use in an affair of this kind. He decided to rely on his Colt in case of trouble.

The pinto was plunging into the canyon now, making the loose stones rattle under his drumming hoofs. At any minute Dave might meet up with Criswell and his bunch, for it was late in the afternoon now, and they were probably done with their brand blotting.

Turning a sharp bend a few minutes later, however, Dave saw the men still at the mesquite corral—just finishing up. The branding fire was out and two of the riders were recoiling their lass ropes. Dave put the spurs to his pony.

He headed directly at Criswell, who was engaged in grinning conversation with two of his men. At the sound of the ringing hoofbeats, he whirled to face Dave.

"Oh, ho!" he sneered. "So yo're back, Maverick. Did yuh carry yore little tale o' woe to yore paw?"

Dave's crisp words brought the seven men to attention:

"Yo're fired! All of yuh! Clear out!"

Criswell's leer faded, and his face went dark. He walked up on the right side of Dave's pony and glared up at him.

"What's thet?" he snarled.

"Yuh heard me. Here's yore money, if yuh want it, but get off the J Cross—and stay off!"

"Where's yore authority for thet?" demanded the giant foreman, his eyes smoky and dangerous. "Did John Darrell say thet?"

"He said it, and I'm relayin' it—and backin' it up," Dave flashed hotly. "The J Cross is goin' to be straight and above-board, if I have to run it myself!"

The look of surprise on Criswell's face gave way to one of fury. Leaping in quickly—and for his bulk he was fast as a panther on his feet—he seized Dave's right hand in time to prevent him reaching for his gun.

For a brief two seconds things looked dark, indeed, for Dave. He had made the mistake of allowing Criswell the first move.

The big foreman threw his weight on Dave's arm, nearly tearing him from the saddle.

"Burn him up, boys!" he yelled, "while I hold him!"

But before the other desperadoes could draw and obey the order to shoot to kill, Dave flung his right leg over the saddle horn—giving his body a quick, desperate twist that brought his gun butt within reach of his groping left hand.

His fingers closed on it, dragged it out—and a twist of his wrist righted the clumsily drawn gun like a flash. The .45 spat fire under Dave's left thumb, the bullet winging its way over Criswell's extended arm.

Dave, however, had not fired at Cris-

well. He had chosen as a mark the swiftly moving gun hand of one of the J Cross men, who was attempting a draw.

It was a direct hit! With the heavy, spiteful slam of the explosion and the puff of blue smoke, the outlaw whirled half around on his feet—a bullet through his lower forearm. His gun plopped to the sand.

Before the others had time to act, Dave had them covered, first prodding Criswell sharply in the ribs to make him loosen his hold.

"Hands up!" he barked.

Criswell's right hand started toward the ivory-handled gun that hung at his hip. But after getting one peep into the round black muzzle of Dave's .45, he changed his mind. His big, hairy hands went over his head. The others, too, obeyed the sharp command. Dave had the drop, and his quick shot of a moment before convinced the desperadoes that he could shoot straight.

"That's right, I mean business," said Dave, with a faint smile.

"Yuh'll pay fer this, Maverick!" muttered Criswell, a look of fury on his livid, flattened face. "And we'll get John Darrell, too!"

"Get goin'!" Dave commanded. "Ride with yore hands high and *burn the wind!* Get off the J Cross, and stay off! If yuh show yore faces here again yuh'll be shot for trespassin'—savvy?"

Under the threatening glint of Dave's blue steel six-gun, it seemed that Criswell and his bunch savvied. Swearing under their breaths, they mounted their ponies and struck off to the southwest.

"And give my kind regards to The Scorpion!" Dave shouted after them.

Criswell whirled about in his saddle, arms still above his head. His face was distorted with astonishment.

"What do you know about The Scorpion?" he snarled.

"Too much," said Dave briefly. "Hit the trail—pronto!"

Like whipped dogs trailing their tails, the seven outlaws headed toward the distant mountains. Once out of gunshot, Dave had no doubt that they would turn and come back in a charge, but they dared not risk it now.

They had a healthy respect for Dave's marksmanship. John Darrell had taught him the use of the Colt when he was a mere boy, and Dave could throw six slugs into a three-inch circle a hundred feet away.

Maverick or not, Dave Darrell would not be any too easy to contend with, and Criswell knew it. The last Dave saw of them, they were cutting off over the canyon wall.

They were hardly out of sight among the mesquites that cropped out from the gulch sides, when Dave turned in his saddle—startled by the sound of horses behind him!

"Stick 'em up!" he heard some one cry. "Drop thet gun!"

He whirled in time to face a party of a dozen horsemen! All held drawn six-guns in their hands, and every gun covered him!

Slowly, Dave let his trigger finger relax; his big Colt thudded to the stones under his horse's feet. Then he did as he was told, and raised his empty hands aloft. There was nothing else to do!

CHAPTER IV.

READY FOR THE HANGMAN!

FOR just an instant, Dave thought that these grim riders were more of Criswell's cronies, but a moment later he recognized the party for what it was—a posse.

Riding ahead was a tall, eagle-eyed man of fifty, wearing a silver badge. Dave had seen him once or twice before, and recognized him as Sheriff Hale Coleman, an officer with a flawless reputation as an upholder of law and order. With him among the party were two men wearing deputy stars.

Dave saw that this was a delegation out for business. Every man of them

was heavily armed, some with Winchesters and all with one or more six-guns. It was a war party with law in the saddle!

Dave Darrell's quick relief, however, soon died. The sheriff rode his horse alongside, and ordered his men to surround Dave and take him prisoner.

"Yo're makin' a mistake," Dave protested. "If yo're lookin' for rustlers, I just drove seven of 'em out o' here!"

Some of the posse laughed loudly. "Thet's a good joke," chuckled one, "and the biggest joke is, he expects us to believe it."

"Who is thet kid?" asked another.

"He's a rustler," sneered one of the deputies. "His pals got away, and I reckon he stayed behind to explain!"

"Explain! He'll do the explainin' to a rope!"

"Let's string him up right here and now, sheriff!" several yelled.

"Listen here," Dave cried, as a lariat rope was being tightly knotted about his wrists. "Yo're nabbin' the wrong hombre. I'm not a cattle thief!"

Sheriff Coleman's stern eyes swept the scene. The fire still smoldered; a branding iron lay near it. Cattle with freshly burned hides were milling aimlessly about the mesquite corral. Any one could see at a glance what had been going on—and just how the brands had been changed.

"It looks bad for yuh, son," grunted the sheriff. "If I was you, I think I'd brace up and quit tryin' to explain. Better tell the truth like a man."

"Why, my dad owns this ranch—the J Cross," Dave burst out. "I'm Dave Darrell, and I just caught the men who were runnin' these brands."

"Never mind," said one of the deputies with a laugh, "we're goin' to get yore dad, too. He'll swing, same as you!"

Dave's face paled. Not until now did he realize just how desperate his position was. A war had been declared against cattle thieves and stern measures were being taken. Plainly, these men

did not believe him, and they would never believe him.

"If yuh want rustlers," he pleaded, "chase down those seven I just fired—before they get clear away."

"Never mind," said one of the posse, grinning. "If they're rustlers, we'll get 'em, and in the meantime—we got *you!*"

Sheriff Coleman's keen eyes were giving Dave the once-over. Dave returned his glance, and did not flinch as their eyes met. The sheriff, in spite of his years, was a handsome figure of a man.

His rugged features, while they were as bold as an eagle's, showed that he had lived hard and had known sorrow. Dave liked his face, although there was nothing in it for him but stern reproach.

"The J Cross," the sheriff said slowly, "has been a tradin' ground for stolen cattle for some time. I knew it, and now I've proved it. Yuh hardly look like a rustler, young man, but yuh can't expect us to believe anything else."

"Let's hang him now!" shouted one of the posse.

"Yeah, why wait?" spoke up another. "We can find a tree plenty big enough up in thet scrub timber."

"We're takin' him to Trujillo," said the sheriff quietly. "He will hang, but not here."

"I thought it was agreed," protested one of the possemen, "that any rustlers caught in the act would be hung without trial!"

"It was!" yelled another. "The cattlemen agreed to thet, and Coleman agreed to it, too."

"Wait a minute," said the sheriff grimly. "Not so bloodthirsty, boys. I did agree, as yuh say. But any prisoner taken by me will go back to the county seat for execution—this young man will hang in the jail courtyard at Trujillo."

"That's fair enough," the others agreed. "Now fer 'Old Man' Darrell—we want him, too."

"Yes, we do," snapped Coleman.

"Ride in and get him, if he's at the J Cross ranch house. In the meantime I'll ride to Trujillo with this prisoner. Don't shoot unless necessary, but *get* John Darrell!"

The posse, with a faint cheer, whirled their ponies and headed up the canyon toward the J Cross headquarters. Dave, with his arms tightly bound behind him, started with his captor, Sheriff Coleman, down the trail toward Trujillo.

It was a long, hard twenty miles for Dave. Branded as a cattle thief before the eyes of all, the outlook was far from being a pleasant one.

Before they had gone three miles, the sheriff made Dave an offer.

"I know it's hard to ride like that," he said kindly. "Yore arms will get pretty much cramped. If yuh give me yore word that yuh won't try to escape I'll untie 'em."

"Thanks, sheriff," replied Dave, "but just leave 'em as they are. I won't promise one thing and do another—and if a chance comes, well, I'll shore do my best to make a get-away. I won't hang if I can help it."

Coleman smiled.

"That's honest talk, son," he said, "and I like it. I'm sorry yo're in such a mess, but yuh should have thought of the consequences when yuh got into it."

Dave saw that Coleman was fair minded, and decided to tell him the full truth. Omitting nothing—except the story of his parentage, which seemed to have nothing to do with the case—he told the sheriff what John Darrell had told him but a few hours before.

"We talked it over," he concluded, "and I decided to fire Criswell and his men off the place. I'd just finished doing it, when the posse rode up."

"Well," said the sheriff thoughtfully, "I've only got my duty to do. The outlaw yuh mentioned, Alacran the Scorpion, is the hombre I've been tryin' to get for years. It may be true that yore father got in his power.

"The fact remains, though, that he's

guilty of cattle thievery—he knew what was goin' on, and he's guilty. If the boys get him, I'll have to hang him."

"I'm hopin' they don't get him," said Dave. "Dad might be weak, but he's not dishonest."

"It's a hard land, son," mused the officer. "Rustlers have been rulin' it so long that we've decided to use desperate measures. That's why I'll have to hang *you*—as much as I hate it! Ordinarily, a man's innocent until he's proven guilty, but now—well, we caught yuh there, and I've got my duty to do."

It was sundown when they reached the sleepy little dobe town of Trujillo, and shortly after they arrived, the posse rode in—hot, dusty, and disgusted.

John Darrell, they reported, had given them the slip. He was not at the J Cross ranch house, and was nowhere to be found. Dave's heart gave a leap as he heard the news. His father—or, rather, the man whom he had thought to be his father for so long—had at least managed to elude the rope.

Dave, however, was taken to the jail and placed under guard. In the morning, at sunup, he was told, he would be hanged in the courtyard!

CHAPTER V.

THE DEATH WATCH.

THE jail at Trujillo was a solidly built dobe building with thick walls. There were no windows, and just one door—a heavy affair of iron with a small grating for air.

Inside was a cage of iron bars, large enough to imprison a half dozen men, but which was now empty, save for Dave Darrell. The cage took up most of the space in the jail, but a narrow passage led to the door and it was here that the guard took up his vigil. Escape seemed absolutely impossible.

Dave's wrists were still tied behind his back, but his feet were free and he could pace the narrow confines of the

cage or sit down on the blankets in one corner, as he pleased.

His guard, a sullen-looking cattlemen drafted from the posse, eyed him morosely. He was armed with a .45 tucked into a holster at his hip, and sat on a three-legged chair in the passage, smoking hand-made cigarettes, one after another.

"Yuh'll have company afore long," he leered at his prisoner. "Coleman and the boys are goin' to make a clean-up. All yuh rustlers are goin' to git yores. They just left—headed northwest, and wouldn't surprise me if they brought The Scorpion back, either."

Shortly after nightfall, supper was brought to Dave—a dish of steaming frijoles, tortillas, two green peppers and a little water in a none-too-clean glass. A lantern was lighted.

Dave was not hungry, but he managed to swallow a little food. His arms had been unbound to allow him to eat.

When the guard entered the cage to get the dishes and tie Dave's hands again, Dave let the glass slip out of his hands and it fell to the floor with a tinkling smash.

"Sorry," Dave muttered, "guess I broke it."

"If yuh had been as clumsy with a rope as yuh are with thet," snarled the guard, "yuh wouldn't be here! I don't see why they didn't bring yore water in a tin cup. It's plenty good enough fer yuh. Stand aside while I clear this busted glass out."

The guard picked up the pieces carefully and removed them from the cage. Then he bound Dave's wrists tightly behind his back once more.

"That was yore last meal on earth." Dave's guard grinned as he resumed his seat in the passageway. "Hope yuh enjoyed it."

"Thanks," Dave drawled. "I feel better now."

He *did* feel better. His heart beat quickly with a faint hope. He hadn't dropped that glass accidentally, and with a quick movement of his boot, he

had concealed a large fragment of it in the jail blankets!

Hours dragged by slowly. Stars showed through the tiny grating in the door, and the guard began to drowse. He nodded sleepily in his chair, opening his eyes at intervals to cast a suspicious glance at his prisoner.

Dave pretended to sleep, breathing deeply and regularly on his blankets. Soon the guard, reassured, allowed himself to drift into slumber. He began to snore.

Cautiously, Dave found his piece of glass and rolled over on it. He cut several gashes in his hands before he finally got it in a position enabling him to saw his bonds on its sharp, uneven surface.

It was painfully slow toil, and Dave's face dripped with sweat. Finally, however, one of the strands parted, then another. Dave exerted all his strength and gave the rope a sharp tug. With a snap, the bonds loosened and he wriggled his hands free.

But now it seemed that his struggle for freedom had just begun. He was not yet free, by any means. The hardest part remained, for he was locked in the cage and the guard had the key.

The sleeping man who stood between him and freedom—between life and death—was out of his reach, although he passed an arm through the bars in an effort to seize him. Had the guard's chair been a foot nearer the cage, Dave might have been able to seize him by the throat. However, that was out of the question now.

For a moment Dave racked his brain. Then he picked up the rope that had bound his wrists and made a loop in the end.

"We'll see how clumsy I am," Dave muttered.

With a quick cast, he tossed the loop in the direction of the sleeping guard. It was not aimed for his head, however, but for a much smaller target—the butt of his .45!

Much depended upon the throw, but

it was good. Dave gave his undersized lariat a jerk, the noose tightened over the gun handle and pulled it out of the holster into the air.

At that moment the guard awoke, aware that something was wrong. His eyes snapped wide open—he jumped to his feet with an exclamation, and made a dive for the gun. Too late! Dave had jerked it toward him, and in a flash his right hand had closed on it and he had whirled the long barrel around.

"Put up yore hands—quick!" Dave sang out.

The guard's face was very pale.

"D-don't shoot!" he stammered.

"I won't," drawled Dave, "if yuh behave yoreself and do as I tell yuh. First thing—unlock this cage."

With trembling fingers, the guard drew a key from his pocket and inserted it in the lock. The door swung wide and Dave stepped out into the passageway.

"Now," said Dave, "open that outside door, and that's all I'll ask of yuh."

"Honest," faltered the crestfallen guard, "I can't. It's locked from the outside! I'm locked in here with yuh!"

Dave's heart fell. It looked as though he had reached the limit of his resources. It had done him little good, it seemed, to loosen his bonds and get the guard's revolver. He was still a prisoner.

He searched the guard carefully for another key, and then tried the door. The man was speaking the truth. There was no way out!

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE J. CROSS.

LISTEN," said Dave in a low voice, his mind working swiftly in this desperate situation, "that hombre that brought in my supper—yuh called him Jack—call him now!"

"But he's probably not out there —" the guard began.

"Call him," said Dave grimly. "Stand

at that gratin' and ask for him. Tell him yuh want him to come in. And see that yuh say nothin' else! If yuh try to give me away, well—I might get nervous, and when I'm nervous, my trigger finger sort of jumps around uneasylike."

The guard gulped fearfully. He stepped to the door, put his face to the grating and shouted:

"Jack! Oh, Jack—come here a minute."

There was a long silence and then the guard called again. This time there was a response. Steps sounded outside.

"Be careful," Dave warned the guard in a low whisper.

"What's the matter?" called a gruff voice.

"Open the door, Jack," the guard said, succeeding in making his voice steady. "I want yuh to come in a minute."

"All right," said the voice, and a big key rasped in the rusty lock. The jail door swung open, and a burly man thrust his head and shoulders inside questioningly.

"What do yuh want, Fred?" he demanded.

"Put 'em high!" snapped Dave, stepping into the lantern light.

The newcomer's jaw dropped and his eyes bulged with amazement. But he put up his hands, and held them there, while Dave relieved him of his gun.

"Now both of yuh waltz into that cage," Dave ordered.

Swearing under their breaths, the two disgruntled men obeyed the command, and Dave closed and locked the door on them. Then, with a grin, he holstered one of the pair of guns he had acquired, and tossed the other out into the street through the open door.

"Adios, boys," he said. "I hated to do this, but I wasn't exactly hankerin' to get my neck stretched, so I'll have to leave yuh to yoreselves!"

Walking leisurely out of the jail, he slammed the outer door behind him

and locked it also. Then he stepped cautiously out into the street.

Two horses were there—the ponies of the two guards—stamping at the hitch rack. And Dave's heart gave a little leap when he saw another pony, not tied, standing at a little distance from them. It was his pinto, forgotten by the posse, and waiting patiently outside the jail for his master.

Dave swung himself into the saddle. The town was asleep, and not a light glimmered from the darkly outlined domes. A pale moon rode high overhead among the twinkling stars. Save for the distant yipping of a lonely coyote, not a sound broke the stillness. Dave whirled his pony about and headed it toward the distant J Cross Ranch.

Dave rode at a fast pace, for he knew every foot of the route he took—a shortcut through the hills. It lead across flat-topped rises, and down into arroyos and mesquite-choked canyons, but not once did the pinto falter.

Most men under such circumstances would have headed straight south for the border—and safety. Trujillo County wasn't exactly a healthy place for Dave to remain in. It was to his credit, however, that he did not give his own peril a thought. If possible, he wished to find John Darrell.

Dave loved the J Cross. He had spent his life there and it was dear to him. And now a shadow had fallen over the ranch. It had been charged with being a trading ground for stolen cattle!

"I got to straighten it all out," he muttered between clenched teeth. "I've got to!"

Until now, Alacran—The Scorpion—had been little more than a name. In the space of one short day everything had changed. Dave felt that he hated this man, whoever he was. Who was he? Was he an American or a Mexican. The name suggested the latter. At any rate, Dave knew that whatever his color, his heart was black.

Miles breezed by under the pony's ringing hoofs. Already they were on the J Cross range—once he spotted a small herd of Darrell cattle gathered at the mouth of a grassy ravine.

"Wonder if dad—John Darrell, I mean—slipped back to the ranch house after gettin' away from the posse?" Dave mused to himself. "Could he have headed for the border?"

Climbing a stony hill, he reached a spot where he could look directly down into the valley where the J Cross ranch buildings were huddled. Their roofs made bright oblongs under the moon and their whitewashed dobe walls stood out in sharp relief.

Urging his pony down a familiar beaten trail, Dave approached nearer and nearer, his eyes and ears alert for signs.

At first, the ranch house seemed dark and deserted, but suddenly he saw a light gleam brightly from a curtained window. Then it faded, and reappeared in another part of the house. It was as if a lamp was being carried from room to room.

"Dad must be there," Dave murmured.

Entering the fenced-in yard very quietly by the open gate, he drew up his pinto and dismounted.

As he did so he heard a sudden muffled sound—the dull thunderclap of a heavy revolver being fired in the close confines of a room. For the first time, Dave noticed a pony tied to the fence. It was Criswell's!

CHAPTER VII.

THE MAVERICK FIGHTS.

AT top speed, Dave dashed to the door and flung it wide open. As he did so, powder smoke tingled in his eyes. The room was hazy with blue flames and for a moment he saw nothing but a big shadow looming toward him through the dim light.

Then, in a flash, he saw everything—John Darrell huddled on the floor

half under a paper-littered table; the lamp wick turned high and smoking; and in the foreground, advancing toward him, the giant form of Criswell, holding a smoking .45!

"Oh, ho!" Criswell cried, showing his teeth in a grin of hate, "so it's the Maverick! I've got yore dad, and now I'm gettin' you!"

He jammed the muzzle of his gun almost in Dave's stomach and pulled the trigger!

Dave, however, twisted desperately to one side—he had no time to draw his own gun—and knocked Criswell's exploding Colt aside just in time. The bullet tore its way through the wall behind him.

Before the giant foreman could pull the trigger a second time, Dave's hand closed over the gun barrel—the hammer fell again on Dave's fingers.

"Goin' to fight—are yuh?" Criswell panted through his exposed teeth. With all his massive strength he jerked back his gun arm, trying to free it from Dave's desperate grip.

Dave was torn from his feet, but he held on like a bulldog. His hand was crimson where the sharp gun hammer had struck it, but his fingers had frozen to the revolver barrel.

The Maverick of the J Cross was fighting like a wild cat! The big foreman outweighed him many pounds but although he shook Dave violently, he could not get his gun free in order to shoot.

Then Criswell tried different tactics. He swung his powerful left arm, sending his hard fist swishing at Dave's face. The youth ducked under it, butting his head into Criswell's middle.

As Criswell staggered back, he lashed a jolting left at him—a solid, thudding blow that brought Criswell up like a mad bull, shaking his bullet head and grunting with pain and surprise.

"I'll break every bone in yuh fer that, Maverick!" the giant snarled. His huge left arm encircled Dave—seized him and dragged him off his feet. Dave

struck him again and again with quick jabs that brought red stains to the corners of of Criswell's mouth. But Criswell was too strong!

Up and up he forced Dave until he was suspended over his head in mid-air. Then he brought him down to the floor with a crash!

Even though the breath was knocked from his body, Dave still fought, keeping his hold on the foreman's ivory-banded gun. Criswell began to hammer him against the floor with all his strength, and each time Dave's breath was driven from his lungs.

Smash! Smash! It seemed that his body was being battered to a pulp. And although he struck at Criswell's leering face with his left hand, he could not stop him—things were growing dark. Crazy lights flickered before his eyes in a hundred colors.

Dave had reached his limit. He let go. His body went limp.

With a yell of exultation, the foreman stepped back to put a finishing bullet through Dave's fallen body!

But the Maverick was not through! His own right hand went down—like a streak! It was his last effort. Flat on his back, there was no chance of even drawing his gun.

A smashing explosion roared out in the room, scattering red and yellow sparks through a spurting cloud of powder smoke!

Criswell was hit! Dave had fired through his holster without even drawing his gun. In that brief time, he had snapped the hammer down with a desperately quick thumb!

Br-r-rang, bang! Two other shots rang out deafeningly. Criswell had fired, and Dave had fired again!

The giant cattle rustler swayed on his feet, his jaw sagged. Dave's first deadly shot had spoiled his aim and his bullet had kicked up a handful of splinters near Dave's ear.

"Maverick," he gasped, "I—guess I'm——"

The words died in his throat. Two

dark spots on his flannel shirt widened and blended into one. With a choked cry, he reeled and fell heavily to the floor.

Painfully Dave drew himself to his feet. A thin wisp of smoke was still curling from the bottom of his gun holster.

"Dad!" he cried.

He staggered toward the table and knelt over the motionless body of John Darrell.

"Are yuh had hurt, dad" he faltered, lifting the old man's head.

The eyes fluttered open. Dave's face went white with grief when he saw the gaping wound in his throat. He was dying.

"Is it you, Dave?" gasped the old rancher weakly. "I'm glad. I wanted to see yuh again before I—pass in my chips. Criswell got me, son. Alacran sent him to do it. I—I knew he would."

"Alacran!" repeated Dave angrily. "The Scorpion! Where is he, dad? I'll make him pay for this—bring him to justice!"

"Leave well enough—alone," the rancher pleaded. "I don't know what Alacran knows about yuh—but he knows the secret. Go—ride over the border! First, there's a package in the drawer of the desk. Bring it to me. It will tell yuh—what little I know—about yuh."

"Yuh've always been a father to me," said Dave, tears coming into his eyes. "I don't care if I ever find my father—my real one—or not. Yuh've got to live, dad."

"I'm done for. Go get the package, Dave."

Dave got to his feet, and turned quickly at the sound of a creaking hinge. A visitor had slipped into the room through the door. It was Sheriff Coleman, and he was covering Dave with a leveled six-gun!

"I've got yuh!" he barked. "Both of yuh! Unbuckle yore gun, Dave, and drop it on the floor!"

CHAPTER VIII.

DARRELL'S REVELATION.

DAVE obeyed, his mind working faster than his fingers as he loosened his belt and allowed it to drop at his feet. He hadn't expected this. How had the sheriff learned of his escape, so soon? Or had Coleman found him at the J Cross by sheer accident?

The thought of his plight came to him. He was a maverick—an outlaw maverick—with a death penalty hanging over his head. And he was recaptured!

"Put up your gun, sheriff," said Dave quietly. "I wouldn't promise before, but I'll give yuh my word that I won't try and escape. A man is dyin' in this room, and I don't want him to pass on while lookin' into a .45!"

Coleman's keen eyes traveled from the sprawled and lifeless body of Criswell to John Darrell's clay-white face. Then he put away his gun.

"I thought I left yuh safe in jail, Dave," he drawled.

"I told yuh I'd get away if I could," said Dave grimly, "and I did."

"Yo're goin' back," snapped the sheriff sternly. "What's been happenin' here? Looks like I got here just a little too late for a shootin' party."

Dave told him, in a few words, what had happened. And when he had finished, John Darrell rose painfully to a sitting position and turned his glazing eyes on Coleman.

"Sheriff," he said. "Is a man's dyin' confession—worth anything? If it is, I want yuh to listen. I knew what was goin' on here at the J Bar. Dave didn't. He's innocent!"

Coleman's face was thoughtful for a moment, then his features relaxed.

"I believe yuh, John," he nodded. "And I'm glad—for Dave's sake. Somehow, it was hard for me to believe that he was in on this deal.

"And as far as I'm concerned—well, I guess neither of yuh have anything to

fear from me," the sheriff added. "I admit I came here to arrest yuh, John Darrell. I had a hunch yuh'd come back. That's why I rode this way and let my men go on. But I can see that yuh haven't long to live, and if there's anything I can do for yuh——"

"I want to talk to Dave before I go. Dave, get—the package."

Dave went to the rough table that served the ranchman for a desk and opened the drawer. He brought out a little bundle.

"Open it," begged the dying man.

John Darrell smiled faintly at the sheriff.

"It's the clothes Dave wore when I found him. Yuh see, he ain't my son at all."

"He isn't yore son!" Coleman repeated. "Why, I thought——"

"So did everybody, I guess—except Alacran," the old man's pale lips tightened angrily at the word. "Dave didn't know until to-day. Yuh see, sixteen years ago a wagon train was attacked by Apaches near here——"

Sheriff Coleman's face suddenly went white. He passed his hands before his eyes like a man in a dream. Darrell did not seem to notice, but went on brokenly:

"They were all murdered except a little boy—and that was Dave! I raised him as my own son."

"*That!*" Coleman ejaculated. He leaped forward and seized Dave by the shoulders, looking him attentively in the face—much to Dave's astonishment. Coleman was excited, and so feverish that he was trembling.

"Open—the package," he gasped.

Wonderingly, Dave did so. Wrapped in the yellow paper was a child's clothing—two tiny shoes, and a little garment no bigger than Dave's two hands. Embroidered on the latter was the word "David," worked in blue thread, followed by an initial—the letter "C."

"My son!" the sheriff cried. "My own son!"

Bewildered, Dave could only stare. There *was* a resemblance between him and the sheriff—a marked one. Could it be possible that he had really found his father?

"It's you—I thought yuh were dead," Coleman told him. "Sixteen years ago my young wife started out in a wagon train with her father—bound for a visit with her mother at a place called Tempe, west o' the mountains.

"The whole party was murdered by Apaches—or at least I thought so. I hunted years for yuh, Dave, and at last decided that the Indians had carried yuh off, alive or dead! I remember that shirt, Dave! It was my little son's!"

"The Scorpion planned that wagon-train raid," Darrell gasped.

The sheriff's eyes blazed, and his eaglelike face grew very stern.

"I've been tryin' to get him for years," he snapped. "Now I *will* get him! Where can I find him? Where's the Alacran gang's hiding place?"

"Up on the Mesa Redonda," said the old man, his eyes lighting. "Through the notch and through the cave. But be careful. He's strong. He has a good many men."

"I'm goin' with yuh," Dave told Coleman resolutely.

"A son after my own heart," said the sheriff with a smile, grasping him by the hand.

Darrell was sinking fast, and there was nothing they could do for him. He tried to smile.

"Glad Dave—found a better—father than I was," he said.

These were his final words. He breathed his last while Dave and Coleman bent over him.

Reverently, both men, the sheriff and his new-found son, took off their hats. Weak though he had been, John Darrell had died a man.

"Buckle on yore gun, Dave," Coleman said, after a pause. "We're goin' to bring The Scorpion and his band to justice to-night—or know the reason why!"

CHAPTER IX.

MESA REDONDA.

AWAY to the west of the J Cross, high up among the table-topped mountains, was the lonely desolation known as the Mesa Redonda. It was a plateau, and on all sides red cliffs broke sharply away from it, and this made the ascent a difficult one.

Few tried it, especially in recent years, not only because of the dangerous climb, but because the place was rumored to be the headquarters of the unknown bandit, Alacran.

Thus far, no posse had ventured within half a dozen miles of it. It seemed foolhardy for two men to ride there alone.

Neither man, however, hesitated. Sheriff Coleman now knew the identity of the fiend who had caused the murder of his wife, years before. Nothing could stop him.

Dave, too, was eager for conflict. He felt that he hated The Scorpion, this man whom he had never seen. Alacran had left misery and murder in his wake, and he had wronged the old man who had been so kind to him.

Mingled with his anger was curiosity. Why had Alacran held the secret of Dave's real identity for so many years? What was the rustler chief's object?

Dave found fresh horses for each of them, selecting two of the fastest on the ranch. Then, without loss of time, they headed toward the distant mountains, gloomy and forbidding.

They knew what Darrell had meant by "the notch." It was a pass—the only way through the jagged peaks that guarded the lonely mesa. "The cave," too, was familiar to them, but the direction surprised them. The natural cavern ended, they had thought, after a hundred feet or so into the mountain. Dave had been there once on a hunting trip.

"You lead, Dave," Coleman suggested. "Yuh know this part o' the country better than I do."

"Where's the rest o' the men—the posse?"

"Beatin' off toward the border, lookin' for rustlers. I'm afraid they're on the wrong scent. Somethin' tells me we'll find bad men a-plenty at the Mesa. Anyway, we won't wait to recruit any help. I'm in a poor mood for waitin' to-night."

"So am I," said Dave.

"I've been thinkin'," murmured Coleman, "and the thought makes my blood run cold—how near I come to hangin' my own son."

"Don't let that worry yuh," said Dave laughing. "That's over now. What makes me feel good is that I'm not an outlaw maverick any more. I'm not even a maverick!"

"No, siree," chuckled his newly found father, "yo're a wearin' Hale Coleman's brand now, son—and it's a fightin' one! Let's get at it!"

In the adobe hut at the edge of the Mesa Redonda, Alacran—or, as he was generally known, The Scorpion—was holding a consultation with his band.

The building consisted of one large room, measuring at least twenty paces square. It was furnished with odds and ends of plunder. The table at which Alacran sat was of mahogany, richly carved, and seemed to have been stolen from some old mission. Roughly made stools stood side by side with expensive stolen chairs.

There was a large whisky keg in one corner and the fumes from it mingled with the acrid smell of Mexican cigarettes. Rifles and other guns were stacked and piled about the room, which made it seem a fortress, or arsenal.

Some freshly stolen loot littered the big table—rolls of bright silk, some gleaming silver bars, and pieces of gold plate. Around it were more than a dozen outlaws, talking in a grumbling monotone.

The men were of one type. All looked like ruffians, and many a Western sheriff would have found his favor-

ite "wanted man" in the gathering. Some were bearded, others were dirty and unkempt; all were heavily armed and more than half drunk. Liquor was being passed from hand to hand in rusty tin cups.

"Change the guard in the cave," said Alacran in a silky voice.

The hut was built against the wall of the mountain, and a cowhide covered an opening in the side of the dobe that faced the cliff, just large enough for a man to pass in and out without stooping.

At their leader's order, one of the men passed through the hole in the wall—a broad-shouldered Mexican who took a farewell swig from his tin cup as he left.

As he disappeared into the dark opening, another desperado—the guard he had replaced—stepped out.

"Criswell hasn't showed up yet? *Que?*" Alacran demanded.

Alacran in his gaudy Spanish costume, made an impressive figure. He wore a black, flat-crowned sombrero, trimmed with silver coins, the strap of which fell just below his thin lower lip.

His trousers bore a wide stripe, and his *chaleco*, or vest, was embroidered with gold. In a heavy leather belt, nearly ten inches wide, he wore a knife, and a gold-mounted .45.

Alacran's swarthy face testified to Indian blood, while his features were the sharply chiseled ones of a white man. He was probably a half-breed, and, although his hair was still jet black, he looked to be past fifty. His eyes were narrow, long lashed, and his thin mustache and abnormally high cheek bones added to the animal cruelty and cunning of his face.

Alacran's translated name—The Scorpion—fitted him. One could see that he was as savage as that terrible insect, and that his sting would be deadly. Like his namesake, Alacran was one of those crawling things that only come out at night.

The guard shivered as he caught his

chief's eyes. All of the gang, white and Mexican, feared The Scorpion. He ruled them with terror.

"He hasn't showed up," he said. "Has Criswell had time?"

"*Naturalmente.*" Alacran frowned. "He has had plenty of time. If he has bungled the job, I'll have his throat cut! For all his size, he is a child. Bah! I should have sent a dozen of you. To keel one man—ah, *el stupido!*"

The Scorpion lighted a long black *cigarillo* and leaned back moodily in his chair to await the news.

Sheriff Coleman and Dave had passed through the "notch." For several miles they twisted this way and that between beetling cliffs, following dry washes and sandy-bottomed canyons. The moon had sailed to the zenith and its silvery light showed them the wild and dreary landscape almost as brightly as day.

It was nearly three o'clock in the morning when the high walls of the Mesa Redonda loomed up blackly ahead of them. Here they abandoned their horses, for the rest of the way must be traveled on foot.

At Coleman's suggestion they removed their spurs lest their jingle should betray them.

"What I can't understand," whispered Dave, "is what he meant by 'through the cave'! I thought it ended in a blank wall."

"Find the cave," returned the sheriff, "and maybe we'll see."

Walking so cautiously as to make no more noise than a couple of padding coyotes, they climbed upward, following a ledge in the rocks. They kept their revolvers in readiness, for at any moment they might be sighted by some lookout.

They saw or heard nothing, however, and finally they reached a black hole in the rocks.

Coleman knelt and examined the sand about the entrance. He could see fairly well in the moonlight.

"Men's tracks," he whispered briefly. "Let's go on."

Entering the black cave was like falling into a well. It was velvety dark. The sandy bottom pitched downward, then up at so sharp an angle that they seemed to be climbing a ladder.

There was no light, nothing to be seen, and no sound save their own guarded breathing.

Suddenly they halted, coming up short. The cave ended, it seemed, in a solid wall!

Coleman felt of it with his hands. Then he cautiously struck a match. It sputtered out, but the sheriff—and Dave, too—had seen enough.

"Savvy?" the older man whispered.

Dave nodded. Above them, the cave turned almost straight up. Apparently, a shaft had been blasted out of the solid rock. Over their heads they had seen the end of a rope.

"Up we go," muttered Coleman.

Dave, being lighter, drew himself up first, then gave the sheriff a hand. Both found themselves on a rock shelf, and it was as pitch dark as ever.

Groping with their hands, they followed the new tunnel as it veered sharply to the light. A yellow glow began to appear on the rocky walls.

"Look sharp," Coleman whispered.

Rounding the corner, they found themselves suddenly confronting a man with a lantern between his knees, sitting in a niche in the stone.

The guard saw them at the same instant. There was no backing out! The desperado's hands were already moving toward the handle of his two six-guns—and his eyes were wide with alarm and recognition!

It was time to *do* something!

CHAPTER X.

IN THE SCORPION'S DEN!

DAVE was a step in the lead, and he saw at a flash that all depended on him. To fire, even if he could beat the Mexican bandit's draw, would

probably bring a hornet's nest of trouble about their ears—before they were ready for it. His agile body shot out like a steel spring, his two hands flashing toward the desperado's wrists.

They had approached so close to the guard before he had seen them that Dave had only to move a few feet. His fingers closed over the Mexican's with a steel grip, just as the bandit drew. A powerful twist sent the pair of six-guns clattering to the stone floor.

Coleman had lost no time in getting into action. He, too, seized the guard, getting him around the neck. Before the desperado knew what had happened, he found himself stretched at full length in the stone passage, with a hand held firmly over his mouth to prevent an outcry.

"What'll we do?" Coleman whispered, undecided. They strained their ears, but evidently nobody had heard the scuffle. "Maybe we'd better tie and gag this hombre, and go on."

"Wait a minute, dad," breathed Dave quickly. "I've got an idea. It's dangerous, but I think it'll work—and give us a good chance to clean out this nest."

"What is it?"

Instead of explaining, Dave carefully unloaded the Mexican sentry's two revolvers. Then he held his own weapon against the man's temple.

"All right, take your hand away from his mouth. That's it." He spoke crisply to the prisoner. "One word, and yuh'll be sorry—savvy? Yo're goin' to take us to Alacran—as *yore* prisoners. Walk between us and stick *yore* guns against us, tight.

"They're empty, so don't try anything. Tell Alacran yuh captured us, and don't say a word more—don't even look like yuh want to say anything—*comprende*? If Alacran suspects anything there'll be shootin', and yo're liable to be the first to drop. I can draw plenty quick."

Coleman was grinning. "We'll try it," he nodded. "We'll walk right among 'em with our hands in the air,

and at the right time——” He dragged the frightened Mexican to his feet. “March us to Alacran,” he said. “And remember, no false moves. If yuh betray us by word or sign, it’ll go hard with yuh.”

The bandit did as he was told and stepped behind his two captors, pressing his empty guns in the small of their backs. Then, at a whispered order from Coleman, he marched with them up the passage.

“Yuh’d better make yore talk convincin’,” was Coleman’s final warning.

Alacran was restless and impatient, and his evil face showed it. He tossed his cigarette end away and took a long drink from the liquor cup at his elbow.

“*Que hora es?*” he demanded of one of his followers, wiping his thin lips.

“It’s nearly four o’clock,” replied the ruffian.

The Scorpion ripped out a terrible Spanish oath. “All night we have sat and waited for news,” he rasped. “I could have put Darrell out of the way in half the time! Wait! I hear footsteps! It is surely Criswell!”

All listened intently. Steps were ringing in the passage.

“*Quien es?*” Alacran shouted. “Come in, you fool!”

The cowhide curtain was brushed aside, and three men entered. Alacran jumped half to his feet, his eyes staring wide. His hand went toward his gold-mounted gun, and then he took it away again.

Two strangers had walked into the circle of lantern light, hands over their heads. Behind them, holding a gun in the back of each, was the guard.

“What is the meaning of this, Pedro?” The Scorpion cried.

“They—they were coming up the passage, Señor Alacran,” the Mexican said hoarsely. “I captured them.”

Alacran’s snakelike eyes widened with recognition. He laughed loudly.

“Why, it is the sheriff—Señor Coleman. But who is with heem?”

Dave’s searching glance took in everything. He played his part well, and pretended to be afraid. Among the men in the room, he noted, were Criswell’s half dozen punchers—the gunmen he had chased from the J Cross.

They recognized him, and passed the information on to Alacran.

“So!” he ejaculated, with a cold smile. “It is Señor Darrell’s brave young *nino*—who gave my men trouble at the J Cross. It seems to be our turn now, *muchacho!*”

He turned to the guard.

“You did well, Pedro,” he praised. “Hold your guns on them. I have a few words to say—words which perhaps they will not like.”

“Seems as if yuh’ve got us, Alacran,” admitted Coleman.

The Scorpion threw back his ugly head and laughed loudly.

“By accident,” he chuckled. “I did not expect the honor of your visit, Señor Sheriff.” His smile changed to an evil frown.

“Coleman,” he rasped, “you’ve been a trouble to me—The Scorpion—for many a year. I have you now! And you are going to feel The Scorpion’s sting!”

Dave’s eyes were on the sinister face of Alacran. He tried to keep out of his expression the white-hot rage that consumed him. So this was The Scorpion! The man that had ruined John Darrell, and who had brought misfortune and death to so many! He was waiting tensely for Coleman’s signal—for action!

A quick draw—and a back against the wall—might turn the trick. The suspense began to tighten.

“Before you die, Señor Sheriff,” snarled Alacran, “I have something to say to you. It may startle you to know—but the *muchacho* beside you is your son!”

“I know it!” drawled Coleman calmly.

“*Que es esto?*” Alacran’s face went blank with surprise. “Who told you?”

"Never mind who told me!" thundered Coleman. "I know! And I know who murdered his mother sixteen years ago!"

And with all the speed of light, the sheriff's big right hand went to his gun! Dave also drew like a whip-crack, whirling on his feet to put his back to the wall and facing his enemies even before his big .45 was out of his holster.

"Hands up!" roared Coleman. "We've got yuh, Alacran!"

The Scorpion was astounded. The guard had his guns clapped against the backs of the prisoners—why didn't he shoot? What was the matter? The other desperadoes were taken quite as much by surprise!

But it was two against more than a dozen! Two of the bandits reached for their weapons at the same instant!

The room rocked under the crash of twin explosions! Sheriff Coleman had thumbed the hammer of his Colt—once, twice! A jet of smoke curled from the blue-black muzzle, and the two outlaws, too slow by half a second, felt lead!

One swayed back against the wall, a slug through his shoulder. The other screamed over a dangling wrist and his gun thudded to the hard-packed floor.

"*Arriba!*" shouted the sheriff. "Up! We mean business and plenty of it!"

The face of The Scorpion had gone livid. He had been so sure of these two gringos—and now, they were getting the upper hand. His eyes were poisonous and his teeth were bared as his clawlike right hand snapped down at the gold-mounted revolver in his wide belt.

His draw was magically swift, but not fast enough. It was now the turn of Dave's .45 to speak!

A blaze of fire streaked toward The Scorpion. The big Colt jumped fiercely in the youth's hand as the explosion thundered.

Spat! Dave heard the bullet hit. He had aimed at the crook of Alacran's

elbow, and his eye had sent the bullet true. The Scorpion's nerveless arm seemed to suddenly wilt.

But Alacran was desperate. In his crazed eyes was the vision of—the rope! Screaming an oath, he nimbly transferred the gleaming gun from his useless right hand to his left.

It was a lightning-swift play. The sights were coming up in line with Dave's body!

Dave snapped his hammer down and there was a shower of red-hot sparks. The Scorpion turned half around, whirled by the big bullet that had caught him solidly in the left arm! Dave could just as easily have ended him, but he did not intend to kill unless necessary.

Helpless now, the crippled Scorpion sank back against one wall, his body writhing like the insect that gave him his name.

Sheriff Coleman had kept the others from joining in the gun fight. His revolver, leveled from his hip, covered them menacingly. The rest of the desperadoes had elevated their hands.

"Buemo!" barked the sheriff grimly.

While the elder Coleman held his gun on the captured men, Dave disarmed them, removing their guns and swiftly searching their clothing for extra weapons. When the guns had been piled on the table they made a sizable stack.

This done, the arms of the desperadoes were tightly bound with a coil of rope Dave found in one corner of the room. The outlaws were swearing in disgust, but it did them little good.

"Shut up," ordered the sheriff, "or we'll gag yuh, while we're at it."

When the others had been secured, the sheriff turned his attention to Alacran. The Scorpion was in a bad way, both arms being broken by Dave's quick bullets. He was, however, in no danger and would live until the rope got him.

When Coleman stood over the moaning bandit leader his fierce blue eyes were snapping.

"Well," he said grimly, "it looks like that boy o' mine dealt two fast cards in yore little game. Now, Alacran, I'm goin' to ask yuh a question, and I want yuh to answer it, savvy? When yuh discovered that Darrell had rescued Dave here from the wagon train yuh waylaid—you and yore murderin' Apaches—what was yore plan?"

"I won't talk," muttered Alacran, sending the sheriff a look of hate.

"Yuh'll chatter like a magpipe when yo're about to swing," said the sheriff contemptuously. "I know yore kind."

At the mention of the rope, Alacran's bluish face went a shade paler. Like most desperadoes, he was a coward when face to face with the inevitable end.

"Don't hang me. I'll tell," he gasped. "Have some mercy, señor. I had the Apaches raid the wagons only to rob. Why they killed I do not know. When I learned that a babe remained alive I knew it to be your child. So——"

"Go on!" flared the sheriff.

"I let Darrell keep him. I was going to make a rustler—a cattle thief of the *muchacho*. You understand, señor—so, if ever I was caught, I could hold the secret over your head. For if you knew your son was a rustler, also, you might buy my silence."

"Blackmail, eh? So that was the scheme!" Coleman muttered. "And it might have worked out different—than it did!"

When the sheriff and Dave left the cave with their prisoners, soon afterward, dawn was streaking the eastern skies. Dave rode ahead of the men, and Coleman brought up the rear.

Rather than walk the long miles to Trujillo, the bandits had come through with the information as to the whereabouts of their horses. They had been concealed in a well-hidden corral at the foot of Mesa Redonda.

Soon after sunup, the party sighted a dust cloud moving toward them from the south. A few minutes afterward,

they could see that it was stirred up by the hoofs of a dozen or more galloping ponies.

Dave watched the horseman approach, and soon recognized them as the posse that captured him the afternoon before. The posse must have been in the saddle most of the night for their mounts were tired and lathered.

They sighted Dave and the outlaws, but did not notice Coleman behind them, evidently, for they came swooping up with drawn six-guns.

"Hold on thar!" the foremost shouted. "Put up yore hands, kid, or we'll blow yuh plumb to blazes!"

"How'd he get here?" yelled another. "Why we left that young hombre safe in jail!"

"Put 'em up! We'll hang him right now!"

Then, for the first time, they noticed that Dave was not among the outlaw prisoners. They saw Sheriff Coleman come riding up and they lowered their guns in astonishment.

"Howdy, sheriff! What the——"

"Who are yuh goin' to hang?" Coleman drawled.

"Golly, sheriff, how did yuh manage to bag a bunch like that? But how come yuh ain't got that kid tied up with the others? We aim to string him up right here and now! He escaped from the jail at Trujillo, somehow!"

All tried to talk at once, but Coleman raised his hand for silence.

"Boys," he drawled, "meet my son, Dave Coleman—the fightin'est little maverick that ever reached for a smoke wagon!"

The others stared in amazement.

"Yore son!" they gasped. "Not thet rustler kid?"

Smilingly, the sheriff told the story and he had to tell it again and again. Even then, the cattlemen failed to understand it. Not until Coleman told the details of the gun fight in the cave did they grow enthusiastic. Then they be-

gan to cheer. Dave was thumped on the back, and his hand shaken until he feared it would be wrenched off.

"Are yuh aimin' to keep on helpin' yore dad with the sheriffin', Dave?" several yelled. "Now that yur've got The Scorpion, I guess he won't have much to do."

"He'll have plenty to occupy him, never fear." Hale Coleman laughed.

"John Darrell hasn't any other folks, and bein' as he didn't make a will, his ranch—the J Cross—goes to Dave. O' course," and the sheriff's eyes twinkled humorously, "if his dad ever gets in trouble—well, what do yuh say, Dave? Will yuh help me out?"

"I'll have to," Dave said, grinning, tears of joy in his eyes, "ain't I wearin' the Coleman brand?"

SOUR DOUGH BOOT HILL

SNUGLY hidden away in an almost inaccessible chasm of a wild, unexplored range of towering mountains, the old mining town of Panamint knew no law but that of lead and steel. Any man who had hopes of living to a ripe old age could only see this hope realized by being an adept with the six-shooter, for this was the only means of settling personal disputes.

In this respect Panamint was not very different to other mining towns of the wild West, but the manner in which this particular gold-filled wilderness came into existence was different, and gave it the special privilege of being more wicked than all the others.

A group of road agents who had fled from the rigors of the law to the safe retreat afforded by the rugged Panamint range, discovered the lodes of rich ore which brought the town into its short-lived but riotous existence.

Here was a range of barren mountains rising above the Mojave Desert, where death by thirst or starvation claimed the lives of many adventurous pioneers, who plunged into its dreary wastes in order to reach the lands that beckoned them.

The mountains, with their forbidding cliffs and deep dark gorges, formed a safe hiding place for the desperadoes who were the first comers, for few, even of the bravest man hunters, dared to penetrate this unknown region, where death lurked behind every boulder.

It is said that Panamint, at the height

of its glory, contained an assortment of the worst criminals in the country, and had a record for violence that placed it in the front rank of all the wild towns.

There was a small boot-hill cemetery in a narrow canyon that had been given the name of Sour Dough and it often happened that when a well-known character did not show up for some time and an acquaintance would inquire as to his whereabouts, the answer to his question would be short and to the point. "Red-eye Joe? Oh, he's planted in Sour Dough."

An incident characteristic of the times and conditions occurred when an employee of the stagecoach company, named McKinley, had a dispute with one Jim Bruce just as the coach was about to start. The two drew their firearms and proceeded to settle it in the usual way.

The passengers sought refuge behind a stone wall until the storm of lead was over, and when they came cautiously forward they found both men stretched out on the ground, their weapons grasped tightly in their hands.

Bruce recovered, but with a crippled arm, and McKinley died three days later. When the local paper gave a short account of the occurrence it did not mention the names of the combatants, but said casually that "Previous to the departure of the stage three days ago, one of our esteemed citizens was compelled to resort to violence to protect his person. His opponent will be buried in Sour Dough cemetery."



Robbers' Lake

A "Jim Hazel, Forest Ranger" Story

By Lee Harrington

Author of "One-man Canyon," etc.

AT the crack of Bill Tigor's rifle the bighorn ram slumped to his knees and slowly fell over on his side. He lay kicking for a moment, then down the side of the mountain he began to roll. Faster, faster the great brown body tumbled and rolled and tumbled.

Dust arose behind him, little rocks followed eagerly in his trail. Suddenly he shot over the lip of a precipice. Silence ensued while a man might have counted ten. Then came a muffled crash.

"My meat, Jimmy," drawled Bill Tigor of Black Canyon.

Jim Hazel, forest ranger, arose from behind the shoulder of rock where the two men had been crouching. Three hundred yards away five bighorn ewes and two yearling lambs were running in panicky flight from the death-dealing rifle which had claimed their leader.

A half mile above the two men an

eagle uttered a harsh scream. From among the rocks a coney whistled, and a black and yellow butterfly flitted aimlessly above the crimson blossom of an Indian paintbrush.

"Too bad," said Jim Hazel. "But I guess you don't feel that way, Bill, now that you've got three hundred pounds of meat for winter."

"Yuh are right, Jimmy," said the tall, lanky, fierce-faced mountaineer, as he pulled at an end of his drooping black mustache. "It shore is too bad that we'll have to go cl'ar down to the bottom of the mountain before we can get our mutton."

"I wasn't thinking of that, Bill," said the ranger, "I was thinking that it was too bad to kill off such a splendid animal."

"Shore was," agreed Bill Tigor soberly. "We'd ought to have tied a pink ribbon round his neck, and led him down to the school kids at Spear Point

City." Grinning like a particularly well-pleased devil, the mountaineer began to chant in a hoarse, though not unmusical voice.

"Jim Hazel caught a mountain ram, whose tail was crooked bent,
And everywhere that Jimmy'd go, that ram was shore to went."

"You'll never reform," said the ranger with a laugh. "Let's go take care of the meat."

They went and got their horses, which they had left hitched to some scrubby, blue-berried junipers while they had stalked the bighorn sheep. Then slowly they began to pick their way around and down the mountain.

It took them two full hours to reach the spot where, with his head twisted beneath him, lay the great ram Bill Tigor had shot. After they had turned over the carcass, Jim Hazel took a steel tape from his pocket and measured the circumference of the huge, coiled horns.

"Nearly twenty-three and one-eighth inches," said the forest ranger as he arose to his feet. "So far as I know, it is the biggest ram ever shot in the Spear Point Range."

"Yuh can have the head, Jimmy," said the mountaineer. "All I want is the meat."

"It will be all the pack animal can do to carry the meat back to your cabin, Bill," said the ranger. "We'll skin out, salt down, and hang up the head. I'll return for it in a few days."

While Bill Tigor was skinning the ram, Jim Hazel thought he would stroll around and familiarize himself with the locality, so that he could give a short description of it in his daily report. Leaving his horse with Bill Tigor, he shouldered his rifle and began to pick his way around the base of the precipice over which the ram had fallen.

For a half mile, the ranger saw nothing very unusual. Then as he stepped around a shoulder of the mountain, he saw before him a small lake. Beyond

it, among a grove of blue spruces which grew on the opposite shore stood an old, gray log cabin.

Apparently it was inhabited, for a plume of smoke was rising from a crazily leaning stovepipe, and from where he stood, the forest ranger could see an ax sticking in a block of wood. Fearing that Bill Tigor would think an accident had happened to him if he stayed away too long, Jim Hazel returned to where he had left the mountaineer skinning the bighorn ram.

"Bill," said the ranger, "there is a cabin standing among the spruces across the lake. Seems like there is somebody living in it, too."

"Trapper, I reckon, Jimmy," said the mountaineer, as he wiped his crimsoned hands on a clump of grass. "Soon as I get through, we'll go get acquainted."

Leading the loaded pack horse behind them, the ranger and mountaineer rode around the lake. A hundred feet in front of the cabin, Jim Hazel raised his voice in a shout.

"Hello, the house! Anybody at home?"

II.

The door of the cabin opened, and a man stood framed in the doorway. Shading his eyes with his hands, he gazed toward the newcomers.

"Get offn yore horses and come right in," he invited. "I ain't seen a stranger in a month o' Sundays."

Hitching their horses in front of the cabin, Jim Hazel and Bill Tigor made themselves known by name. Their host extended a work-worn hand in welcome.

He was a huge old man of sixty-five or more, with shaggy gray hair and mustache. His face was tanned to the color of mahogany, and his eyes were blue and clear.

"Morrow is my name," he said by way of introduction. "Matt Morrow. Ran across this shack some months back while I was prospecting. Reck'n

"I'll put in the winter hyar. Thar's fur in this valley."

He led the way into his cabin and told his visitors to be seated. Curiously he glanced at the badge Jim Hazel wore.

"Ranger, ain't yuh?" he asked as he set about cooking a meal.

"From Ghost Lake Station," explained Jim Hazel. "Tais is part of my district."

"Ever hear of the Guffney gang of outlaws who used to hang out among these mountains?" asked the prospector.

Jim Hazel never had; neither had Bill Tigor.

"Reck'n they were before yore time, ranger," said the prospector. "Goss Guffney was the leader. They held up a train some years back and got away with some thousands of dollars' worth of jewels. Sheriff's posse rounded 'em up finally some'eres near this lake.

"Killed off most of the outlaws in the fight that followed, and captured Goss Guffney. He is still serving time down to State's prison."

"What became of the jewels?" asked Bill Tigor with sudden interest.

"Son," replied the old prospector. "That's what I'd like to know myself. Fact is, that is why I am here. Them jewels are said to be cached some'eres around hyar. Ever sence the fight 'tween the sheriff's posse and the outlaws, this place has been known as Robbers' Lake."

"Yeah?" said Bill Tigor dryly. "Thar's most always a Ghost Lake and a Robbers' Lake and a Lost Lake in every mountain range. I ain't sayin' thar yuh are romancin', stranger. But I've heard sech yarns before."

Matt Morrow busied himself around the stove for some time without making any reply. When the meal was on the table and his visitors were eating, the old man sat in his chair watching them. From time to time he would run his hand through his heavy gray hair, as though he were taking counsel with himself.

After a while he arose and stepped over to his bunk. He fumbled beneath his mattress for a moment. Then suddenly he turned with outstretched hand.

"One of yuh is a United States Forest Ranger," he said, "and both of yuh look honest, so I'm going to take a chance on yuh. If thar ain't any truth in the story I jest now told yuh, what do yuh call that?"

"That" was a beautiful gold ring set with a cluster of blue sapphires in the center of which there twinkled and scintillated a white diamond as large as a pea!

"Great Goobas!" exclaimed Bill Tigor. "Whose ten-cent store have yuh been and robbed?"

Jim Hazel took the glittering bauble from the prospector's calloused palm, and examined it critically. Like Bill Tigor, he could not bring himself to believe that the stones were genuine.

Turning the ring over in his hand, he examined the inside of the golden circlet. Still faintly discernible was an engraving which had been done many years before either Jim Hazel or Bill Tigor had been born.

Carrie—June 8, '89

"Where did you get it?" asked the ranger, as he handed the ring back.

"Right here in this cabin, ranger," replied the prospector. "I found it while I was cleaning out on the first day I arrived."

Bill Tigor stared from the prospector to the ranger, as though he thought they both had taken leave of their senses, and might attack him if he said a word. Suddenly he threw back his head and laughed aloud.

"Do yuh mean to say yuh are going to fall for such a yarn as that, Jimmy?" he asked.

"Yarn or not," said Jim Hazel soberly. "I believe that those stones at least are real."

"Yeah?" drawled the mountaineer. "So is my foot!"

All the way back to Ghost Lake, Jim

Hazel and Bill Tigor argued about the genuineness of the stones in the ring. Too obstinate to give in in a matter of which neither of them knew very much, the mountaineer ridiculed the whole story. Finally Jim Hazel began to lose patience.

"You may just as well wait a while, Bill," said the ranger. "Fact is Matt Morrow intrusted the ring to me to send to a jeweler. If the stones are real, I am to go back to Robbers' Lake and report to the old man. In any case, you know I have to return there after the head and horns of the ram you shot. I left the trophy in charge of Matt Morrow."

"Go ahead, Jimmy," said Bill Tigor with a grin. "But seeing as I've got my winter's meat, I ain't coming along."

They parted company at the cabin the three Tigor brothers had built in Black Canyon, and Jim Hazel returned to his station at Ghost Lake. That evening he wrote a letter to a prominent jeweler in the State capital.

With it he sent the ring which Matt Morrow claimed to have found in the cabin at Robbers' Lake. Three days later Jim Hazel mailed the ring and the letter from Spear Point City.

Three weeks later he received the ring back. With it the jeweler inclosed his report, and a clipping from a local newspaper bearing the date upon which the jeweler had received the ring.

"The stones are genuine," the report read. "They have a market value of about seven hundred dollars."

Having satisfied himself that he had put one over on Bill Tigor, Jim Hazel read the clipping the jeweler had inclosed.

DIAMONDS AND SAPPHIRES UNEARTHED AT ROBBERS' LAKE.

A valuable ring set with diamonds and sapphires was recently found at Robbers' Lake by Mr. Matt Morrow, a prospector.

Robbers' Lake, it may be remembered by our older readers, was the scene of the capture of the Goss Guffney gang of outlaws, who fled to the Spear Point Mountains some

years ago with jewels estimated to be worth fifty thousand dollars. The loot was never recovered, and the ring undoubtedly forms part of the treasure which for thirty years has lain hidden among the lonely defiles of the Spear Point Range.

Goss Guffney, the leader of the outlaw gang, is now serving time in the State penitentiary.

Further discoveries are expected shortly.

"Darn that fool jeweler!" exclaimed Jim Hazel. "I wouldn't wonder but what he has started a stampede to Robbers' Lake in giving the news to the paper."

III.

Seeing no particular reason why he should not inform Bill Tigor that the jewels were real stones, Jim Hazel stopped at the cabin of the Tigor boys, on his way back to Robbers' Lake the following day.

Not finding any of the Tigor boys at home, the ranger had to content himself with leaving a note on the table, in which he stated that the jewels were real, and that he was on his way back to Robbers' Lake, to get the trophy he had left with old Matt Morrow.

On the evening of the third day after leaving the station, Jim Hazel rode up to the lonely cabin on the shore of Robbers' Lake. Outside the door lay a soaking wet, moss-covered keg, which the ranger did not remember having seen before.

Being expected, Jim Hazel had not troubled to announce his arrival by shouting, as is usually the custom in the more isolated parts of the mountains.

Dismounting, he hitched his saddle horse and the pack animal he had brought with him to carry back the head of the bighorn ram. Then he rapped smartly at the door, rather wondering why old Matt Morrow had not come to meet him.

Twice, three times Jim Hazel rapped. Receiving no answer, he pushed open the door and stepped inside. A fire was burning in the stove and dishes were

on the table. The lamp, lighted and with its wick turned down, was on its shelf above the bunk. And on the bunk lay old Matt Morrow, breathing noisily as though sleeping heavily. Unwilling to disturb the old man, Jim Hazel seated himself in a chair to wait until the prospector should awaken.

Suddenly old Matt snorted more like a hog than a man, and slowly turned over.

Jim Hazel glanced up with a grin, that quickly died. In another moment he was leaning over the figure on the bunk.

Matt Morrow lay with his face buried in his pillow. The haft of a knife was sticking out from between his shoulder blades!

There was little Jim Hazel could do. To have removed the blade would have meant that the old man would bleed to death in a few seconds.

As it was, the ranger guessed that the prospector was slashed internally, and that in any case he had not much longer to live. With the hope that he would be able to disclose the identity of his murderer before he died, the forest ranger bent over him.

"Who did it?" whispered Jim Hazel.

Twice he had to ask the question before the dying man understood. Slowly the lips of the prospector parted. Bubbles of pink foam rose to his lips, and his eyes glared wildly as he strove to speak. Slowly his jaw dropped. Matt Morrow was dead.

Horried at the tragedy, Jim Hazel withdrew the knife from between the dead man's shoulders. For one brief instant he stood staring at it. Then he dropped it on the bunk as though afraid to handle it any longer. For Jim Hazel had recognized the knife as the one with which Bill Tigor of Black Canyon had cut off the head of the bighorn ram!

Picking up a blanket, the ranger covered the dead man. Feeling that he must get a breath of fresh air, he turned toward the door. Throwing the

door back, he took a step forward, suddenly to stop dead in his tracks. Before him stood a burly, blue-jowled man with a revolver aimed at the ranger's stomach.

"Stick 'em up," he barked.

There was nothing Jim Hazel could do but to obey. With his hands above his head, he backed into the cabin and seated himself in a chair, never taking his eyes from the desperado who held him at bay.

"Unbuckle yore gun belt and toss it over here," ordered the man.

As the belt and gun clattered to the floor, he stooped. Picking it up, he hurled it out of the cabin. Then he lowered his revolver.

"Yuh can put yore hands down now," he said brusquely. "But don't get the idee that I won't shoot to kill if you make a move. What I want to know is, what are yuh doing at Robbers' Lake?"

"So you are Goss Guffney, the outlaw who was supposed to be in prison?" said Jim Hazel. "When did you get out?"

"I ain't," snarled the desperado. "I'm 'Slick' Hellit, the feller Goss Guffney told about the jewels he hid here. Goss Guffney died in prison a month before I was let out. I thought his yarn was a pipe dream until I read in the paper about the ring."

"So you got the jewels, did you?" said Jim Hazel quietly. "And killed this old man."

"Nix to both of 'em," snapped the desperado. "The jewels were gone from where Goss Guffney said I'd find 'em. As for the old man here, he was dying when I reached the cabin. I heard yuh coming and sneaked outside and waited for yuh. What do yuh want here at Robbers' Lake?"

Jim Hazel nodded toward the horned head of the mountain ram, which lay where he left it in a corner of the cabin.

"Came after that head," said the ranger shortly. "That's all."

"Yuh are a liar!" snarled the desperado. "Yuh came after jewels. Yuh know where the old man hid 'em."

"Have it your own way," said Jim Hazel.

"I'm going to," snarled Slick Hellit. "What did you do with them jewels?"

"Ask him," said Jim Hazel, nodding toward the blanket-covered body of the murdered man.

"I did ask him, and he wouldn't tell me what——"

Suddenly aware that he had convicted himself, the desperado jabbed the muzzle of his revolver against the ranger's stomach.

"Yeah," he snarled. "The old man wouldn't tell me, so I killed him. Just like I'm going to kill you."

As he spoke he pressed down on the hammer of his revolver with his thumb. The weapon clicked to full cock.

"Then you never will find the jewels," said Jim Hazel, forest ranger.

At this Slick Hellit seemed to momentarily relax, as if to give his excited brain a chance to cope with the ranger's meaning.

Believing that Jim Hazel knew the whereabouts of the jewels, the desperado lowered his gun. White-faced with fury, he glared at the ranger with steely eyes. For a moment he seemed thwarted, then suddenly a thought struck him.

"Being a ranger," he said, "yuh've got handcuffs on yuh. Take 'em out of yore pocket and handcuff yoreself to that feller on the bunk."

IV.

Jim Hazel hesitated, but his hesitation died, as he saw the desperado's finger tighten on the trigger of his weapon. Jerking the handcuffs from his pocket, Jim Hazel did as he was told.

Snapping one handcuff around one of the dead man's wrists, he made the other cuff fast to his own right wrist. Then he whirled and faced his captor.

"What next?" he asked pleasantly.

"Where did the old man hide them jewels he took out of a keg that was sunk in the lake?" asked the desperado. Then as another thought struck him he barked:

"Toss me the key of those cuffs."

Jim Hazel handed him the key of the handcuffs and grinned.

"So," he said, "that's where the jewels were all the time!"

"And that's where yuh'll be—yuh and that stiff lying on the bunk," said the desperado. "But first, in order to refresh yore memory, I'm going to apply a hot poker to the palms of yore hands."

Turning toward the stove, he filled it with dry wood. Into it he shoved an iron poker.

Handcuffed to the dead man on the bunk, Jim Hazel watched the outlaw with desperate eyes.

Paying no further attention to the ranger, Slick Hellit crouched over the stove. From time to time he opened the door of the fire box and shoved in more dry wood, until the top of the stove was a slab of crimson heat.

At last the desperado drew the poker from the stove. White hot for nine inches of its length, it shot off fiery-red sparks which filled Jim Hazel's soul with horror too great for speech.

Like a bird fascinated by the lidless gaze of a deadly snake, the forest ranger stared at the terrible instrument of torture by the use of which the desperado expected to force him to disclose the whereabouts of the treasure of Robbers' Lake.

"Going to tell where them diamonds and rubies are?" snarled Slick Hellit. Holding the red-hot poker at arm's length, he took a step toward Jim Hazel.

"I would tell you if I knew," said the white-faced ranger. "But I don't know where they are any more than you do."

"You are a liar," snapped the desperado. "But there is a way to make you talk. Hold out your free hand."

"I most certainly won't," said Jim Hazel, backing as close as he could against the bunk.

Slowly Slick Hellit came forward, holding the red-hot poker in front of him. Confident in the helplessness of his victim, he had laid his revolver on the table, so that he could grasp Jim Hazel's wrist and draw the ranger's free hand toward the red-hot instrument of torture.

Guessing the brute's intention, Jim Hazel thrust his hand behind him, so that it lay on the bunk beside the body of the dead man to whom his other wrist was handcuffed.

Closer stepped the desperado, closer still. Suddenly Jim felt the heat of the poker on his face.

"All right," snarled Slick Hellit. "If you won't hold out your hand, I'll see what I can do to your face."

Raising the poker, he held it in front of the ranger's eyes, and Jim Hazel suddenly remembered a story he had read as a boy, of how the eyes of a Russian courier had been burned out by his enemies.

Jim Hazel closed his eyes before the terrible heat that was now so near his face. Suddenly he opened them and gasped from sheer relief.

The fingers of his free hand had come in contact with the haft of the knife he had drawn from between the murdered man's shoulders, and dropped upon the bunk.

Closer the red-hot poker approached the ranger's face. The would-be torturer's brutal features were drawn into a bestial snarl.

"I'm going to count three," barked Slick Hellit. "If yuh don't tell me where yuh hid them jewels by the time I have said three, I'll jam this bit of hot iron squarely into your eyes!"

"Go ahead!" said Jim Hazel defiantly.

"One," said the desperado, "two—three!"

As the last word left Slick Hellit's lips, he lunged forward.

Raising his right foot, Jim Hazel kicked the red-hot iron out of the desperado's hand, so that it flew clean across the cabin. At the same instant, the ranger's right hand swept from behind him. In his powerful grip he held the red-stained hunting knife with which Slick Hellit had killed old Matt Morrow.

Lunging forward as far as he was able, Jim Hazel struck downward with the knife—only to find his wrist caught in the powerful grip of the desperado.

With his left hand handcuffed to the wrist of a dead man and his right wrist in the grip of a man fully as powerful as himself, the desperate forest ranger sought with all his strength to bring down the crimson blade and once and forever end the battle.

Gripping the forest ranger's wrist with maniacal strength, Slick Hellit drew back his left fist and smashed Jim Hazel full in the mouth, so that crimson spurted from his broken lips and trickled down the front of his shirt. But still Jim Hazel hung onto the knife.

Again and again, Slick Hellit smashed the forest ranger in the face with his fist; but realizing that his only chance of life lay in retaining possession of the knife, Jim Hazel fought with the fury of a panther, at the same time lowering his head in an effort to avoid as much as possible the smashing blows which were cutting up his face.

Snarling and swearing, Slick Hellit suddenly ceased battering the ranger's face, and made a wild clutch at his throat with the intention of choking his victim into submission. At that moment Jim Hazel raised his right foot and with all his strength drove his heavy boot squarely into the pit of the desperado's stomach.

V.

Howling with agony, Slick Hellit released his grip on the ranger's wrist. Bent double, he squirmed and gasped in an effort to regain his breath.

Then suddenly he remembered the revolver he had left on the table. His hand was on it, when Jim Hazel drew back his right arm and hurled the knife as he had been taught to do by Bill Tigor of Black Canyon.

Like a thing of life the crimsoned blade hissed through the air. Straight through the back of Slick Hellit's hand it drove, pinning his hand to the table!

But in an instant, maddened with pain and rage, the desperado grabbed up the revolver with his left hand. With his right hand pinned to the table, he raised the revolver with his left hand and covered the forest ranger, who was still handcuffed to the dead man on the bunk.

Realizing that death was at hand, Jim Hazel drew himself up to his full height and calmly looked the desperado in the eye.

"I lose and you win," said the ranger. "I hope you find the jewels."

"Yeah!" snarled Slick Hellit. "I'll find 'em, if I have to take this cabin apart a log at a time. But first I'm going to put yuh where yuh won't throw any more knives."

Slowly his thumb came down on the hammer of the revolver he held. Slowly the hammer rose to full cock. Jim Hazel watched the gun with despair in his eyes.

"One," said Slick Hellit. "Two——"

Crash! The revolver flew out of his hand, and he stood holding a shattered wrist, while a look of utter amazement spread over his brutal features.

"What the——" he exclaimed. Then suddenly he raised high the hand that was not pinned to the table by the knife.

Bill Tigor of Black Canyon strode into the cabin with a Colt .45 in each hand.

"Lo, Jimmy," said the mountaineer. "What is that ornery-looking cuss doing with my knife?"

Jim Hazel looked at Bill Tigor and tried to speak. Then, overcome by the nervous strain of the past few minutes, he slumped slowly to the floor.

He opened his eyes to find Bill Tigor standing over him. Across the cabin, Slick Hellit lay with his wrists handcuffed, and both ankles bound.

"Seems like thar's been quite a shenanigan going on hyar," said Bill Tigor. "What's it all about?"

"How do you happen to be here?" asked Jim Hazel.

"Came back to get my huntin' knife," replied the mountaineer. "I accidentally left it over the other side of the lake when I skinned that bighorn ram. Couldn't find it thar, so I reckoned maybe ol' Matt Morrow had found it and was keeping it here at the cabin for me."

"He was," said Jim Hazel. "Old Matt Morrow was lying on his bunk with your hunting knife driven between his shoulder blades. He died shortly after I arrived."

Bill Tigor's black eyes gleamed fiercely as he glanced toward Slick Hellit.

"Yuh don't think I killed the old man, do yuh, Jimmy?" he asked the ranger.

"I didn't know what to think at first," confessed Jim Hazel. "But now I know you didn't. Matt Morrow was killed because he wouldn't tell that fellow over there where he had hidden the treasure of Robbers' Lake."

"Do yuh mean to say the stones in that thar ring didn't come out of a ten-cent store?" asked the mountaineer.

"They are real," replied Jim Hazel. "I left a note in your cabin telling you so."

"Didn't get the note, Jimmy," said Bill Tigor. "I guess I left home before you got there."

Jim Hazel arose to his feet.

"We had better take a look around and see if we can't find the rest of the jewels, Bill," he said. "There is little doubt that old Matt Morrow found and hid the treasure, or else where did that keg come from that is lying outside the door?"

Leaving the desperado bound and handcuffed, Jim Hazel and Bill Tigor

went and examined the keg. In the bottom of it they found a single diamond, which had evidently fallen out of a bracelet or a ring!

Excited by the find, together they spent hours searching the shores of the lake, and the cabin itself; but dusk descended on the mountains, and still they had not found the treasure.

"Maybe that's all there was, Jimmy," said Bill Tigor.

But Jim Hazel felt that somewhere very close the bulk of the treasure still lay concealed. And far into the night they persisted in their search of the cabin. But morning dawned and still they had not found the jewels.

Realizing at last that there was little hope of finding the treasure, they decided to take the killer over to Ghost Lake Station and return later to carry on the search for the jewels.

"Yuh go ahead with yore prisoner and the head of the bighorn ram, Jimmy," advised Bill Tigor. "And I'll stay and do what ought to be done for old Matt Morrow."

And so at noon of that day, Jim Hazel departed. Handcuffed to his stirrup was the man who had killed the old prospector. Behind the ranger's horse, the pack animal followed, bearing the head of the bighorn ram.

Arriving at Ghost Lake, Jim Hazel locked his prisoner up in the storehouse. Then he telephoned the sheriff's office at Spear Point City, telling that official what had happened, and requesting him to come and take charge of the murderer.

That evening, Jim Hazel went to work on the head of the bighorn ram, so as to assure himself that it would reach the taxidermist in good condition.

With a knife, the ranger scraped away every vestige of meat from the great skull. Then he took a heavy iron spoon and began to work on the cavity from which the brain had previously been removed.

And, spoonful by spoonful, out of the skull of the bighorn ram Bill Tigor had shot, Jim Hazel drew forth diamonds, rubies, sapphires and emeralds to the value of nearly fifty thousand dollars!

Every jewel had been removed from its setting. Crimson and blue and white and green, the precious stones lay on the table in the ranger's cabin, flashing and gleaming, and making him dizzy with their beauty in the light of the kerosene lamp.

When Jim Hazel drew forth the last jewel from the great skull, with it came a damp scrap of paper, on which, now almost illegible were these few penciled words:

RANGER: I found the treasure at last where it was hid in the lake. But I got one of them hunches that I ain't going to be here very long, so I'm leaving the stones where I know you'll find 'em. If anything happens to me, I want you to have 'em.

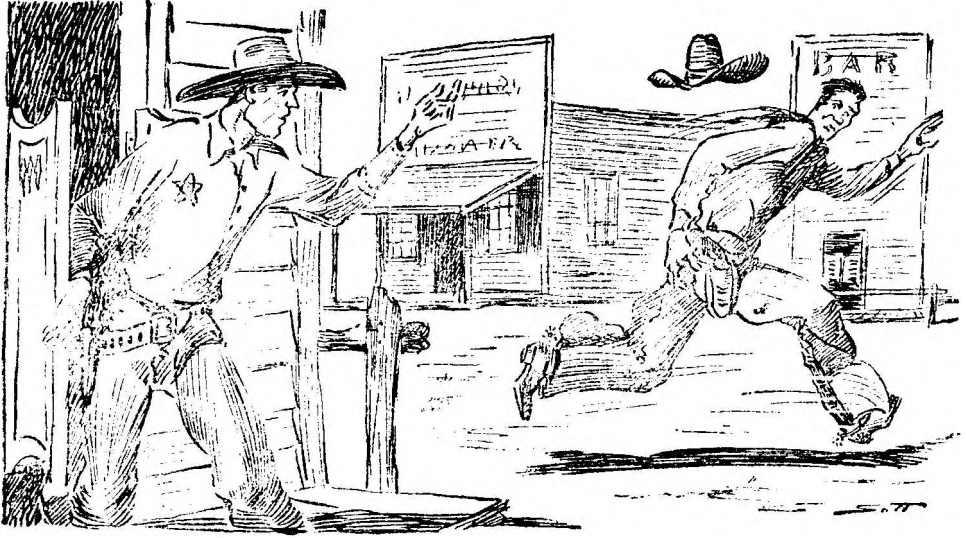
Yours trooly,

MATT MORROW.

The note fell from the ranger's hand, and he sat staring at the jewels that represented more wealth than he had ever hoped to possess. For how long Jim Hazel was tempted, only he knew; but at last he rose to his feet. Taking down the receiver of the telephone, he called the sheriff's office.

He was told that he would receive five thousand dollars reward for having recovered the treasure of Robbers' Lake.

Thar ain't no one what has a greater sense of duty than Jim Hazel. Friends, himself, everythin' comes second ter his work as forest ranger. When he found Bill Tigor's knife in Matt Morrow's back, it looked as if his friend had done the dirty job. An' yuh can bet thet if Bill had kilt Matt, Jim would 'a' taken his friend ter the hoosegow. He ain't partial to nobody who interferes with the law. Watch fer the next Jim Hazel, Forest Ranger, story, comin' soon in **WILD WEST WEEKLY**.



The Nester Of Purple Draw

By Andrew A. Griffin
Author of "With Their Own Pizen," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE SHERIFF'S VISITOR.

THE man who was known as "Wall-eye" Wallace was only another one of the pesky nesters who had come to infest Purple Draw. The community naturally resented him and all his kind; but when Wall-eye appealed to Sheriff Bob Barstow for protection, Bob listened tolerantly enough.

"Though when a fella's as spooky as you," the tall, good-looking sheriff observed, "he'd be better off back in the city whar thar's a burglar alarm on every window an' a cop walkin' up an' down in front o' the house all night. Whyn't yuh go back whar yuh come from, mister? Out hyar, yo're sort o' like a ewe lamb in a herd o' tough, long-horned cattle."

There was a good deal of truth in what Sheriff Bob said. Wall-eye had no more business in Purple Draw than a joker in a poker deck. Purple Draw was a place for he-men, rannies who

could ride and would fight, and who were willing to work from sunup till nightfall.

"I can't live back there in the city," Wall-eye whined in reply. "I'm a sick man. Doctor says I got ter live in a high altitude."

"From the tale yuh tell," said Bob dryly, "yuh don't look as if yuh'd got much chance o' doin' that—livin', I mean—anywhar."

For the story Wall-eye told was that he was being shadowed, hounded constantly by mysterious enemies who were evidently imbued with evil intent. And fishy as the tale was, there was no doubt that Wallace was in the grip of a deadly fear.

As he sat now in the sheriff's bare office, the man's chair was carefully backed against the wall, his eyes roamed back and forth from open door to open window, from window to door. On either hip the man wore a long and heavy .45 Colt.

"You're the sheriff," complained the

visitor, "an' it's your job to pectect me, ain't it?"

"That's right. But if yuh'd give me more of a idee what these fellers that are after yuh look like, or why they should be after yuh——"

"I dunno who they are." The man's voice rose excitedly. "And there ain't any reason why they should be after me. Back in Chi, where I came from—'fore I got took sick—I was an honest, hard-working man, tendin' my own business an' never——"

"What business?"

"Uh?" The abrupt question, snapped out so sharply, disconcerted the visitor for an instant. "Uh—a watchmaker," he presently managed to answer. "Had a nice little place on South State Street, an' was doin' good until——"

"Until you took sick," soothed the young sheriff. "Well, I see. And this I can tell yuh, Mr. Wallace. As you say, it is my business to preserve law an' order in this community, an' I'll give yuh the best pectection—— What bit yuh?"

For Wallace's single good eye was bulging in fright while his wall eye glared horribly at the ceiling.

"Him! At the window! He looked in!" the man babbled.

Bob was on his feet, his six-gun drawn and ready.

"Where?" he demanded.

"At the window!" Wallace was futilely fumbling for his own artillery.

But, as the young sheriff had noticed, the man wore his revolvers holstered so high that drawing them in any position would be difficult. Seated, it was almost impossible.

Bob's head went out the window instantly. The window looked only on a short and narrow alley which ran from the dusty main street to a little-used back door of Blondy's Bodega Saloon.

There wasn't cover for a rat in that weed-grown path. If somebody had peered in the window, he could have disappeared only to one of two places—the street, or the saloon.

Bob ran to the front door. At this hour, in the noonday heat, there was nothing in the street except half a dozen discouraged-looking cow ponies at the Bodega hitch rack, and a naked Indian baby, impervious to the sun, sucking its finger on the stoop of Flinders' General Store.

The young sheriff knew that there had been time for a man—if there had been a man at all—to cross the street, or go down the same side of the street and enter any one of the dozen buildings on the main highway.

It seemed more possible, though, that the person Wallace so abjectly feared had sought the cool consolation of the Bodega. He suggested, therefore:

"Waal, we'll step into Blondy's an' see."

"You. Not me," was the prompt answer.

"Huh!" Certainly this fellow was a coward. "Well, o' course you don't have tuh come. But yuh might tell me, brother, what markin's this hombre carries. That might make it sort o' simpler tuh pick him out." Bob didn't attempt to mask his disgust.

"Why, you couldn't never forget him, once you'd seen 'im," offered Wallace eagerly. "He's a tall man—tall as you—with a kind o' long, chalky face, awful white, an' a mop o' black hair he wears kind o' long over his collar."

"No," Bob agreed. "Yuh wouldn't miss him so fur. Long hair's kind o' gone out o' fashion these days. An' anybody in Purple Draw that's got a pale face is either a lady or some one that never goes out in this toad-toastin' sun we've got. Waal, I'll step into the Bodega."

Without any real belief that he would confront such a peculiar specimen as his nervous caller had described, the young sheriff passed next door to the popular saloon.

As he anticipated, there was no one in the Bodega save half a dozen waddies from the Flying Y and the bartender. Certainly none of these wore

long hair. And as for being pale, the boys were as dark as a wet saddle, and "Pokey," the barman, had a complexion that was a beautiful purple.

Bob refused a drink and an invitation to sit in the game of stud, and went out to the street again. His gaze ran up and down the dusty highway, but he never thought to raise his eyes to the second story of Ma Jernigan's select boarding house.

Had he done so he might have glimpsed the burning eyes of a white-faced man with long black hair.

CHAPTER II.

AT WALL-EYE'S.

IN a day or two, the young sheriff had almost forgotten the matter. Willful, premeditated murder had just about gone out of fashion in Purple Draw, as a matter of fact.

Men still died suddenly with their boots on, as artillery crackled abruptly through a calm twilight. But these were the killings of hard-living, hot-tempered men, not the sly, sneaking assassinations of slinking criminals.

Public opinion, ably assisted by young Sheriff Bob, had purged the town of thieves and thugs and bad men who slaughtered just for the fun of it. The last four cattle thieves, for example, who had tried to operate in the neighborhood of Purple Draw, had all been strung up in a row from the top rail of Mrs. O'Malley's corral gate.

That just happened to be the handiest place to hang the cusses. And if Mrs. O'Malley didn't like it very much, well, neither did the rustlers.

Wall-eye's story of the gloomy-looking stranger with the white face and the long hair did sound pretty fantastic, therefore. And Sheriff Bob would probably have put the matter out of his mind altogether, had he not happened one day to be taking a short cut through the dry wash which came down through the western angle of the town, and was known as Coon Creek, though it had

been years since any water had wetted its dusty bed.

Here it was that Wall-eye Wallace had his solitary cabin, within a rifle shot of the houses of the town, to be sure, but rarely visited, since it was far from the road and callers were not welcome.

And Bob, too, would have passed on by, had he not noticed, with an eye long used to reading sign and to spotting cattle far over dusty prairies, the slightest movement of the burned tassels of corn in the center of Wall-eye's measly garden patch.

Bob, sitting his strawberry roan, Cherry Bounce, wondered what animal might be lurking there, and reined in his mount a moment to watch the movement. The sunshine caught some metal and sent out a glinting reflection.

"Never knowed a weasel tuh carry weapons," said Bob aloud. "An' thet critter, whatever it is, is shore heeled." He raised his voice in good humor: "Howdy, Wall-eye! How's yore eatin' corn?"

The man, discovered, issued from among the cornstalks surlily enough. He was shoving his right-hand gun back into its high and awkward holster as he came.

"Just gettin' me a mess for dinner," he explained.

Bob said nothing, though he chuckled inwardly as he now identified the crop as the feed-corn variety, which is tough chewing for human molars. His amused eyes wandered over to the box-car house which Wall-eye elected to call home.

In the three months since Wall-eye had settled there, it had just so happened that Bob had never passed the place close by. What he now saw, therefore, interested him.

For the simple dwelling, of the conventional box-car shape and pattern, had been converted into a veritable blockhouse. First glance would have shown only the usual covering of crude tar paper on the outer walls. But at one or two points where the paper had

been scuffed away, a bright underlay showed through.

Obviously the man had sheathed his whole cabin with some sort of metal. Moreover, in the windows at either end of the box-car shack, steel gratings, strong enough to have served in a bank, had been sunk in the window frames.

There might be something in this crazy coot's story, after all. Or, at least, the fellow might honestly think there was.

Curious, Bob pulled around his horse and went forward toward the single door, not waiting for the formality of an invitation.

"Thought I'd jest drop over an' talk tuh yuh some more, Wall-eye," he said.

His host answered nothing—did not even offer the courtesy of taking the horse. Cherry Bounce, however, good cow pony that he was, didn't stir when his master dismounted and let the bridle reins trail.

Bob, with his usual calm good humor, strolled on into the cabin, helped himself to the one sturdy armchair in the place, and with his boot heels on the table, proceeded to roll himself a cigarette and make himself completely at home.

Wall-eye remained hesitatingly in the doorway. The door itself was three inches thick, Bob noticed. And a stout crowbar which could be jammed across it at night lay on the dirt floor.

"Waal, yo're right snug hyar, Wall-eye." The young sheriff grinned, taking in all these elaborate defenses. "Reckon nothin' but a gopher could bore in hyar."

"Not even a prairie dog," answered Wall-eye.

He pointed to the bottom of the walls. Strong chicken wire had been sunk into the ground there to prevent any one from even burrowing under. Certainly, concluded Bob, this lonely outcast was in the grip of some real and deadly fear.

It was characteristic of Bob Barstow that he should lay his cards on the table.

His was a frank and straightforward mind.

"You come to me fer help, Wall-eye," he spoke. "But yuh don't tell me *why* yuh should need help. Ef I'm goin' tuh play marbles with you, you got ter play with me. What have you done thet a white-faced human coyote's a-houndin' yuh for—stole a tin cup from a blind man? Or chopped up yore mother-in-law?" Bob had had some dealings with crazy men, and he knew that the only way to handle "loonies" was to pretend to humor them.

Wall-eye merely shook his head, however. Whatever his secret was, he didn't intend to divulge it now. That was evident from the restless manner in which he teetered from one foot to the other, all the while he turned his heavy six-gun over and over in his two hands. Bob finished his cigarette in silence.

"All right," said he at last. "The things yuh don't say causes yuh the least trouble. But now I'll speak my piece. They's a gent new come to town that's willin' to buy this wuthless forty o' yores. Tain't hardly credible, but he'll give yuh real money for it."

"Whut's he want it for?" There was little interest in the harassed nester's inquiry.

"That's in the way o' bein' his business, brother. But I do hear tell that he has some fancy idea o' gettin' water tuh run down Coon Crick once more. Ef he could do that, he could irrigate all them flats yonder an' grow somethin' besides green lizards an' purple locoweed. But——"

"Well, he can't have it. What's his name?"

"Pottleford, he calls hisself—ef that means anythin'."

"Don't." Then, inconsistently: "Where can I see 'im?"

That sudden change of purpose in this eccentric hermit was quite in keeping with Bob's belief that the man was a bit cracked. He was perfectly will-

ing, though, to arrange a meeting between the recluse and the ruddy, rich-looking stranger called Pottleford who had blown into town on the stage the night before.

Bob was a good citizen and always had the best interests of Purple Draw at heart. And if anybody could irrigate the dusty acres of alkali flats below Wall-eye Wallace's cabin, it would be a blessing to the whole neighborhood.

"I'll have 'im in the Bodega, come sundown," the sheriff promised. "You'll be thar?"

"I don't dast to be out after night-fall."

"Waal, yuh can come right home after yuh meet 'im. Don't take yuh ten minutes tuh walk down hyar. An' nobody's goin' tuh drill yuh while it's still daylight, ef that's what you're spooky about."

"I dunno." The man hesitated. Then again with his sudden change of resolution: "But if I come tuh your office an' you'll go in there with me to see——"

"All right! All right!" Bob let his chair thump down on all four legs and got to his feet, spurs jangling. He was pretty sick of this cowardly worm. "Be thar when the sun hits Ol' Hogback."

And rather to his surprise, Wall-eye Wallace did arrive at his office door sure enough just as the evening sun dipped below that outjutting spur of the Henry Mountains locally known as Ol' Hogback.

The man was as nervous as ever, staring up and down the street carefully before he ventured out again even in company with the sheriff. If he was looking for his white-faced enemy, though, he was disappointed, for no such character was within sight.

So Wall-eye was almost calm. The fingers which caressed the checked walnut stock of his gun trembled only a little, as Bob pushed wide the swinging doors of the Bodega and the two entered.

Bob saw the man Pottleford at once—a big, ruddy, prosperous-looking fellow, dressed in an expensive suit of city tweeds, but wearing the soft low boots and sombrero of the typical rich cowman on a vacation.

The capitalist's face was in profile against one of the already lighted kerosene lamps at the end of the bar. He sat alone at one of the small white-painted iron tables, a full whisky glass in front of him, a big cigar tilted almost straight up to one shaggy eyebrow.

In the usual evening clamor of the place, Pottleford had not heard the slight squeak of the swinging doors, and as the newcomers stepped over the threshold, he did not alter his position or appear to see them.

But Wall-eye Wallace saw Pottleford. With a gasp, as if some one had suddenly tried to strangle him, he whirled and fled.

"Hey, thar!" Bob stepped out into the street, waving at the flying figure. He might as well have tried to stop a runaway horse by throwing kisses at it.

Disgustedly Bob returned to the saloon.

"Got yore hoss up tuh the gate, but couldn't fog him through," he greeted Pottleford. "He's head-shy as a Injun cayuse. Reckon yuh'll have tuh linger round hyar a few days 'fore you git nigh enough even tuh rope 'im."

"No hurry," allowed the obese Mr. Pottleford. "Have a drink, sheriff. Just as well tackle 'im to-morra."

But Pottleford was not destined to tackle Wall-eye Wallace to-morrow or any other day. It was just midnight when, without the formality of knocking, a frightened man came tumbling into the privacy of Bob's sleeping quarters—a small lean-to which adjoined the sheriff's office.

Bob, instantly aroused by the man's unceremonious entry, reached for the gun which always lay by his bedside on the floor, then struck a handy match with his left thumb nail.

"Waal, Flinders," said he, as he iden-

tified the storekeeper as his visitor, "why don't yuh send in yore cyard by the butler? This ain't no way tuh come a-callin'."

"Dead! They's a—dead man over to my store!" gasped the shopkeeper. "It's that—that Pottleford!"

CHAPTER III.

MYSTERY.

BOB was sitting up instantly, diving into a poncho to cover his night-shirt, pulling on his low boots. Flinders was still in the dark, for the match had flickered out, and Bob couldn't stop to light the lamp.

Buckling his belt with its two guns over his poncho, the sheriff led the way across the street. There he found the front door of the store wide open.

"You come down and found him, I s'pose?" Bob asked. It was pitch dark; there had been a spatter of rain earlier in the evening. "Then you come out this a way an' left the door open?" Flinders lived alone in the single second-story room which was above the store.

"No," replied the storekeeper amazingly. "I shot 'im!"

"Which?"

Bob had known Nathan Flinders for only a couple of months. The small, watery-eyed man with the ridiculously big mustache had drifted into town only recently and taken over the slim business of the general store which its previous proprietor had been only too glad to get rid of.

The big mail-order houses had pretty well ruined the country-store trade in that vicinity. But that Flinders—small, wheezy, and frightened looking—would ever get up courage enough to kill anything bigger than a fly in a sugar barrel, was inconceivable.

"Yeah, I—I—shot 'im!" the man reiterated now. "I hear a noise, see? An' I pull on my shoes an' come downstairs as quiet as I can. Then I see somethin' movin' against the light o'

the back window. I can just see it. So I shoots."

"An' then?" Prudently, though Bob had moved away from the yawning opening of the front door. "Suppose there had been more than one midnight visitor, Flinders? Though they wasn't, o' course. You lit a match tuh see what you'd knocked over?"

"Sure. I never thought about there bein' another," the storekeeper agreed. He, too, now moved out of the doof's opening. "But there couldn't of been. He'd ha' plugged me sure when I lit that match an' seen it was Pottleford."

"Would seem that a way," the sheriff agreed.

Standing on the narrow front stoop, he gazed up and down the empty darkness of the street. There was not a light in town save the yellow slits from above and below the swinging doors of the Bodega. That resort never closed; but, from the absence of boisterous sound, patronage at the Bodega must be scant at the moment.

"Jest the same," Bob mused, "thar might be another fella hidin' out somewhere behind all them boxes an' barrels you got. Lend me yore gun a minute, Flinders. I was cleanin' mine to-night an' plumb forgot tuh load 'em up again."

He took the storekeeper's weapon, his fingers telling him that it was the usual Frontier .45. Crouching, he entered the dark cavern of the store. There, behind one side counter, he waited for a moment. Then cautiously he flashed a match.

By the back window, sure enough, was a mound of clothing. Bob let the match burn out. Then, satisfied that the store was empty, he stepped swiftly to one of the bracket lamps, lifted the chimney and lighted the wick.

"Don't need the gun, thanks." Bob handed the weapon back to Flinders, then stooped to examine the body.

Pottleford it had been, all right. And he had been killed instantly. A big-

caliber ball had gone in one ear and out the other. The Frontier Colt shoots with terrific velocity. Bob promptly found the only slightly misshapen slug half embedded in a cracker box on a shelf near by.

"So Pottleford was just a common sneak thief, after all," Bob murmured. "Waal, live an' learn. Who'd ha' thunk it?"

"You don't blame me, then?" jabbered Flinders.

"Blame yuh! No! Yo're a benefactor. We may have got purty civilized round hyar, but we ain't got so as a man can't perfect his own prop'ty. No, I reckon I got authority tuh exonerate yuh hyar an' now. An' Purple Draw'll likely give yuh three cheers."

As far as Bob was concerned, his interest in the case seemed to be over.

"Jest pull one o' yore tarps over that thing"—he waved at the body on the floor of the store—"an' we'll have it carted away in the mornin'. We're well rid o' night snoopers like that bombe evidently was."

"But I ain't goin' to spend the rest of the night alone here in the store. Not—not with that!" protested the badly rattled little merchant. "Couldn't you let me sleep on the floor over to your place, sheriff?"

"Waal, no, I couldn't," answered Bob Barstow, rather surprisingly for him.

The blue-eyed young sheriff was noted for his good nature. There was a saying in Purple Draw that Sheriff Bob would give a feller his shirt and boots. But in this particular case Bob had a reason for refusing Flinders.

"But they'll let yuh sleep on one o' the pool tables in the Bodega, Flinders," Bob supplemented. "Come on over, an' I'll tell Pokey how it is. My own self, I got some work to do."

And with Flinders safely disposed of in the unghostly environment of the Bodega, Bob, silently and in the dark, went at his work in a thoroughly deliberate and painstaking manner. There

were elements in the sniveling little shopkeeper's story which the astute young sheriff could not at all accept.

His first step, therefore, was to return to the still open store, taking care that no one at all would see him enter the place. This he made fairly certain of by patrolling the street on both sides for a block in either direction from the store, pausing silently to listen now and then to determine if any one lurked in the shadows or was attempting to spy upon him.

Satisfied at last that he was unobserved and sure that no one except the one man he sought knew about the crime, Bob entered the store. He swept the place carefully with the electric flash light he had stopped at his office to procure. To Pokey, the Bodega bartender, he had casually and somewhat humorously hinted that Flinders was suffering from an attack of delirium tremens and could not be left alone.

A search of the pockets of the thing which lay sprawled beneath the tarpaulin disclosed nothing more than a wad of bank notes in the trousers pockets and, in the inner coat pocket in a plain leather case, some large business cards flamboyantly engraved in black and gold:

PERCIVAL K. POTTLEFORD
Farm Real Estate and Insurance.

Personal letters, memoranda, or membership cards to clubs or associations were significantly missing.

The suit of clothes, expensive material though it was, had been from the ready-made shelves of a St. Louis department store. The shirt and underclothes were from the same store, new and consequently without laundry mark.

"Mebbe, an' mebbe not," mused the young sheriff, for the sixth time inspecting the ornate business card under the glare of his flash light. "Just the same, if this gent's name was Pottleford, I'm the Queen o' Siam. Now I wonder—I wonder"—he shook his

head in puzzlement—"why that ring-tailed worm of a Flinders had tuh go lyin' tuh me."

He went out again into the night, first, however, closing tight both the store windows which, after the custom in that country, had been opened six inches and nailed there to allow ventilation during the torrid summer season.

"Can't tell which window the cuss was shot through," continued Bob to himself, as he pried out the nails. "But he wasn't shot from inside. I know, though I can't prove it."

The front door of the store he padlocked shut with a lock to which he helped himself from stock.

He moved then down the main street toward Wall-eye Wallace's stronghold.

He did not, however, directly approach the fortified cabin. The soil in that vicinity is a hard-baked clay loam, overlaid in patches here and there by coarse sand. This surface would reveal no traces in dry weather, particularly did there happen to be a wind to shift the loose sand.

But it just happened that the rain of the evening had put the ground in perfect condition to catch and hold footprints. Young Barstow knew, therefore, that the nervous recluse would not possibly have been able to leave his dwelling without making telltale marks in the loam.

Though he circled the house three times, with flash light sweeping back and forth as he crept along, no betraying footprint was revealed.

"If he's home at all, he ain't been out," was the natural conclusion.

Sheriff Bob was well aware that a certain amount of prudence was advisable in approaching the strange residence of this eccentric individual.

The precautions which Wall-eye had taken demonstrated that the miserable craven was in deadly fear of attack—was, indeed, in a position to stand storm or siege.

Dark though the night was, there-

fore, Bob took the precaution of getting well down into the bed of the creek before hailing loudly.

His first two challenges went unanswered, though in the quiet of the night, his voice boomed and echoed resonantly round about the circle of the hills. No light showed in the fortified box-car cabin, and though the young sheriff strained his ears, he could distinguish not the slightest sound.

"Ho, thar, Wall-eye! Rise an' shine!" Bob summoned again.

For answer, from a height, it seemed, there was the flash and vicious crack of a rifle. Wall-eye had certainly come to life, and was banging away at random into the night.

"Keep yore shirt on!" roared Bob. "It's me—Barstow—the sheriff! What in tunket yuh think yo're tryin' tuh do, yuh jassax?"

"You keep away from here! You keep away from here!" The voice rose to an hysterical scream. "You can't fool me!"

There followed a string of insane profanity. Three, four times again the rifle cracked.

Bob, crouching beneath the lip of the bank of the creek, was not in the slightest danger. But the lunatic antics of the hermit irritated him acutely. If this fool wanted protection, Bob was there to provide it for him. But emphatically it was not his duty to serve as a target.

"Cut out that nonsense, Wall-eye," he now announced clearly and distinctly. "or I'll come back hyar to-morra an' run you cl'ar into the Rio Grande River! I'm Barstow, understand. And I aim tuh talk tuh you, like it or not."

"How'd I know you're Barstow?" The voice indubitably came from up above somewhere.

That was puzzling. Where was the wall-eyed loon?

"Yuh got ears, ain't yuh? Yuh can hear me," replied Bob.

"How'd I know it ain't somebody pertendin' to be you?"

"It ain't, yuh dodderin' ol' gummer! Show a light now. I'm comin' in."

Suiting his action to the words, Bob rose out of the creek bed and marched forward.

If he expected to see a light show up in the cabin, he was wrong. For when the light did come, it fell in a feeble beam from above. Perplexed and still angry, Bob stared up into it—saw that it was no more than a candle in a lamp chimney with a tin reflector behind it. But beside the light, on the roof of the box car was the vague shape of the proprietor of that strange residence.

"Tryin' tuh play you're a bloomin' buzzard?" growled Bob. "Waal, spread yore wings, Wall-eye, an' light. Me an' you got tuh chew things over some."

Unexplained as it had appeared, the light on the roof vanished. The bar which held the door clanged off its clamps onto the ground. Cautiously the door was opened.

Wall-eye, within, had abandoned his rifle. But he wore his customary two guns, belted high as usual. And for good measure he had now provided himself with a heavy, wicked-looking bowie knife.

"Goin' tuh eat peas fer supper?" Bob grunted sarcastically, shouldering his way through the door. "You won't need that load-sticker elsewise. An' you might just as well unburden yoreself o' all that hardware yo're totin'. Ain't yuh never heard it ain't polite to pack yore guns tuh prayer meetin', Wall-eye?"

"Huh?" inquired the host, in no condition to appreciate humor. The man was still shaking with abject fear.

"Listen, 'Spavin,'" said Bob unsympathetically. "Me an' you require a mess o' conversation. Set an' give yore feet a rest."

His eyes were searching the soles of the heavy shoes which, instead of the usual Western boots, Wall-eye wore. There was not, however, a vestige of wet clay on the leather. The fellow certainly had not been out that night.

"I don't want——" Wall-eye began.

"Aw, toot, toot, toot!" the sheriff interrupted. "Want or not, it makes no nevermind with me. There's a fella been killed up in town, and I'd like tuh know what *you* know about it." Bob was seated in the one solid armchair in the place, and kept his alert gaze focused on his host.

If he had expected to see Wall-eye start, he wasn't disappointed. The unfortunate man actually jumped.

"Killed!" he cried.

"Don't shy an' r'ar back. Killed—yeah. Shot through both ears, and deader than Jesse James."

"Killed! Who?" The voice was so choked that the sound was no more than a whisper. Right well Bob knew that Wall-eye already knew who that victim was.

"Pottleford," said the sheriff, nevertheless. "Fella you sheered off from this evenin'." Wall-eye's lack of surprise confirmed the sheriff's opinion that this was no particular news to the recluse. "You didn't do it, o' course, Wall-eye. I know that. But yuh ain't surprised it was done, eh? Waal, who was this gent who branded hisself 'Pottleford'?"

"How should I know?" was the sullen reply.

Deliberately Wall-eye turned and put the bar across the door, intending evidently to take no chances, even with the authority of the law present.

"I didn't ask yuh *how* yuh should know; I asked yuh *who*, Wall-eye."

"An' I tell yuh I don't know."

The response was so surly, however, that not the slightest doubt remained in Barstow's mind that the squint-eyed hermit knew considerable about the matter.

Extracting that information would be quite a job, though. Bob had had enough experience with nervous, timid horses to know that harsh measures only defeat their own ends.

Slow movement, gentleness, a soft voice are essential to calming fright-

ened brutes. A terrified man might well be handled the same way.

Lazily Bob rolled himself a cigarette. He lighted it, inhaled deeply, yawned as he let the acrid blue smoke trickle out of his nostrils.

When at last he did speak, his tone was a sleepy drone:

"Natchally I thought yuh knowed the hombre, Wall-eye. A fella don't balk like you did at meetin' a teetotal stranger. Fur be it from me, howsomever, to go excavatin' into yore past. They's many a man—an' good ones to-day, too—who's left his record an' name on tother side o' the mountains. Yuh can tell me or not tell me about this Pottleford just as yuh please. But if yuh care tuh talk at all, try tuh tell the truth. It's always easier, anyways."

The tone and the manner had their effect. Still trembling and frightfully nervous, it was evident that the man who fancied himself hunted was trying to make an effort toward some revelation. Three or four times he licked his bluish lips.

"The white-faced man!" he whispered at last. "The man with the long white face!"

Impatiently Bob grunted an indignant *whoof* like that of a suddenly annoyed bear. He was getting pretty sick of this fairy tale. The fellow was loony—that and nothing else. The thing was a mania, an obsession.

You can't argue with an insane man, however, any more than you can talk logic to a stampeding steer. Bob just lay back in his chair, therefore, and stared at the ceiling.

There, he noticed, right in the center of the flat ceiling of the room was the rectangular mark of the trapdoor to the roof. A stepladder in one corner could be utilized to employ this unique exit.

"So it's the white-faced fella again," was all Bob bothered to say eventually. He'd get no valuable clues, after all, here.

For ten minutes, the two sat in silence. Then Bob wearily rose. Nei-

ther spoke as the cabin's owner unbarred the door; neither said so much as "So long" as Bob strode away into the night.

Fagged and weary after a day which had commenced at sunup, the young sheriff trudged directly home, and divesting himself only of boots and hat, threw his long frame prone on his narrow bed, from which, so unwillingly, he had been roused at midnight.

He woke at half past six, oddly possessed by imaginings of that pesky white-faced man.

By the time he had finished a substantial restaurant breakfast at the Big-plate Lunch, Bob had developed a determination to discover whether this ghost-faced gentleman was indeed a tangible object or not.

Leisurely he started the rounds of the town lodging and boarding houses, inquiring casually for a fictitious "Mr. Gumph, the big oil man," but describing that nonexistent character as Wall-eye had described his haunting shadow to Bob.

At the very last house, back almost opposite his own office, Bob interviewed the vinegary-faced Ma Jernigan.

Of all folk, she was the last from whom Bob hoped to elicit any helpful information. Not quite a year ago, Bob had had the unpleasant duty of arresting the late Mr. Jernigan for habitually stealing horses. Later, they'd had to hang Mr. Jernigan, and the widow somehow seemed to think that the young sheriff had had something to do with it.

Pointedly the Widow Jernigan didn't like Bob Barstow. So Bob was not surprised when she greeted him at her threshold with:

"Yuh got ter have a warrant tuh set foot in this house, yuh loblolly!"

"Barstow's the name, ma'am," he answered, sweeping off his hat and bowing good-humoredly. "That there Loblolly fambly left town quite a while sence.

"There ain't been no crimes com-

mitted here—lately,” he continued smoothly. “Matter o’ fact, I was jest inquirin’ fer a certain Mr. Gumph, the big oil man from Oklahoma, what I think I can turn a little business to. A tall gentleman, he is, kind o’ pale, as if he’d been right poorly lately.”

“His name ain’t Gumph,” snapped the widow.

Bob’s pulse jumped. There was such a person here then, after all. He had to work his mind fast to outmaneuver the natural suspicion of Ma Jernigan. His hand went into his pocket and pulled out a roll of bills.

“I thought his name was Gumph,” Bob explained, “but likely I misheard it. He was settin’ in a little game o’ draw with me an’ the boys last night, and unfortunately got took sick an’ left without cashin’ his chips. He’s got this comin’ to him.”

Correctly he had estimated the widow’s character. With so much money on hand, her star boarder might well be induced to pay more, particularly as he required a lot of service, demanding all his meals in his room, and such.

“Oh, well, all right,” she assented. “I’ll call ‘im. Hi, Mr. Smith! Gentuh see yuh!”

Mr. Gumph-Smith didn’t answer, however. The widow’s pasty complexion went even paler than its natural hue. She had a horror of “havin’ them roomers die on me,” as she put it.

“Must be he’s sick again,” she faltered. “He do look ga’nted up.”

Hastily and wheezily she mounted the stairs. Bob, uninvited, followed.

The star boarder’s door was unlocked. The single tenant of the room was a loudly buzzing fly.

CHAPTER IV.

SHERIFF BOB ON THE JOB.

BURIAL of the remains of Mr. Pottleford proved to be quite an event in Purple Draw, and the humble storekeeper, Flinders, blossomed out as quite a hero.

The little merchant was visibly puffed up by the attention and applause his resolute exploit had attracted. The mayor made a high-flown speech about “protecting the inviolability of the home,” and every one pressed forward to shake Flinders’ skinny hand.

That they were all for law and order in Purple Draw now was the common sentiment. Pottleford—the slimy city crook, as every one pretty accurately guessed him to be—had got exactly what was coming to him.

And Bob Barstow was the last to throw cold water on his fellow citizens’ enthusiasm. But he did step to the front door of the store just before closing time that evening and suggest to Flinders that after he’d locked up, they might have a short chat on the front stoop.

“Pleased to accommodate you, Mr. Sheriff! Pleased to accommodate you.” Flinders rubbed his blue-veined hands as if there were an invisible cake of soap concealed in the palms.

He had combed his mustache for the great day and even put a drop or two of highly potent scent on it, Bob surmised. And his thin hair was brushed forward into a single picturesque lock which curled upon his eternally worried-looking forehead.

When the last customer was finally dismissed and the last sight-seer had been shown the spot where the burglar had fallen, Flinders, still massaging his hands, came out to join Bob on his own front steps.

Purple Draw had not yet risen to the dignity of ornamental street lights—or any other street lights, for that matter. But the night was starry, and there was illumination enough for the sheriff to distinguish his companion’s features. He could, as a matter of fact, even see Flinders’ jaw drop and his mouth gape open when the sheriff shot his sudden question:

“What did yuh lie about killin’ Pottleford for?”

The little storekeeper was speechless.

Then he choked, as a vagrant fly flew into his open mouth. All his assumed air of importance collapsed as if some one had stuck a pin into him and let the air out.

"Me—lie?" was all he could yammer, as he finally coughed up the fly.

"Shore—you," grunted Bob. "When I borrowed yore gun, what yuh was supposed tuh shoot him with, it was cold as a banker's heart. An' when I touched the lamp chimney, which wasn't supposed tuh have been lit, it was hotter'n a red-headed woman's tongue. They's millions o' men have tried tuh play they was innocent. But why try tuh play yo're guilty?"

Flinders, for all his insignificance, was no fool. His mind ran swiftly back to the clever ruse by which Bob had secured the momentary loan of his gun—recalled that it had been Bob who had lighted the lamp when first they had entered the store to survey the body.

"Well, sheriff," he admitted hesitantly and humbly, "you got me to rights, I guess. Course I didn't shoot the cuss."

"Then what'd yuh say yuh did for?"

"Derned if I know, sheriff. But I guess—I guess it was just because I never did nothin' nor was nobody. Here sudden, I realize I have a swell chance to be somebody. Yuh know"—his voice was pleading—"that sort of—well, appeals to a feller like me, sheriff."

There was a sort of appeal in it, Bob understood that. A little, meek, no-account became abruptly an important figure in the community.

"Who's that little runt?" a stranger would say.

"Him?" must be the answer. "Why, that's Flinders what killed the swell city gangster. We're right proud of our Flinders."

And the exploit would grow with time. Yes, poor little Flinders would exist and live on to fame as a local hero.

"Let 'er ride," chuckled Bob. "But the point is, who did do it?"

Surprisingly Flinders answered: "Now, derned if I know!"

Pottleford had, he explained, come to the store door just before midnight and knocked gently but so persistently that Flinders had been awakened, had got dressed and come down, never unwilling to turn an honest penny.

Pottleford had made a couple of insignificant purchases—a necktie and a pair of suspenders—and then had sat down as if in a mood for conversation. Flinders, to humor this prosperous-looking stranger—and in the hope that he might be induced to spend some more money—had perched on the counter with his back to both slightly open windows.

Then had come the shot. Pottleford had fallen dead.

The little storekeeper finished his story and nodded his head in the gloom.

"Thar was a six-gun layin' there on the counter, close to my hand," he explained. "I'd forgot to put it back in stock after some fella had been lookin' at it that evenin'. The idee came to me about claimin' credit for shootin' a burglar. I did have sense enough to pull one cartridge out o' the gun's chamber; but I clean forgot that the barrel o' the gun had ought ter be warm. That's all, sheriff."

Bob pondered. There was something mighty peculiar about all this. Still, it probably didn't matter. Pottleford had been almost certainly a crook. Let him rest in peace.

"But you won't tell nobody how it really was, sheriff?" Flinders begged humbly. The meek little man's fear that he might be deprived of his halo of heroism was comic, if it had not been almost pathetic.

"No, I won't tell," agreed Bob, rising to go home.

In the light of this new information, Bob reckoned that he could guess pretty well what the true facts of the case

must be. Both Wall-eye Wallace and Pottleford were obviously city men; "tenderfoot" stuck out all over on both of them.

The feuds and intrigues of city gangsters and gunmen were remote enough to Purple Draw, but even out there in the clean-fighting, open West, people read the papers.

"Looks like," said Bob to himself, "as if they've transplanted one o' their ruckuses right spang into our midst."

That seemed the logical explanation of the whole thing. Somebody was gunning for Wall-eye, all right; and somebody had very successfully potted Pottleford. And it didn't appear very difficult to conjecture who that somebody was.

The sudden disappearance of Ma Jernigan's star boarder—"Smith," or whatever his name was—together with the fear of the man which Wall-eye had displayed, pointed to Wall-eye as the avenger.

That should explain Wall-eye's horror at recognizing Pottleford in the Bodega, too. They had been accomplices in some crime, presumably. Wall-eye had been comparatively secure in his loneliness.

But the conspicuous Pottleford would be easy for enemies to trail. With Pottleford in the neighborhood, therefore, Wall-eye Wallace's sense of security naturally vanished.

"Now, if that pesky Wall-eye would only skeedaddle, we'd be shet o' the whole kit an' boodle of 'em," was the young sheriff's last thought before he sank to the placid depths of slumber.

According to the lifelong habit the cow-puncher acquires, Bob woke at half past five, just previous to the first pale streak of dawn. As he often did when he waked so early, he lay there for a moment in his comfortable bed, thanking his luck that he was now a sheriff.

He had no more to tumble out at the first harsh summons to rope and saddle and cinch a lot of pernickety brones in

the freezing cold and gloom which precedes sunrise.

The job of the sheriff of Purple Draw was no snap; a fellow had to be lightning-fast with his guns as well as his fists. But you didn't have to get up every morning and Sunday, too, to wrastle a cavy of cussed cayuses in the frigid darkness.

From such pleasant and luxurious reverie, Bob was suddenly shocked to attention. The *put-put* and patter of rifle and pistol fire was distant, but unmistakably distinct.

"Some fool outfit ridin' in fer a bust so early in the mornin'!" the conscientious young sheriff growled to himself. "Do I have to git up and calm down a passel o' wild waddies even before I git my breakfast? Dog-gone! Don't they know the evenin's the time fer Cain-raisin'?"

He boosted himself to a sitting posture on his bed, however, disgustedly pulling up his boots and jamming on his big, beaver-belly colored Stetson.

In leisurely fashion—for the continued reports of firing did not seem to be rapidly approaching—he drew up his orange Angora chaps and buckled on his six-guns. He had no intention of using his weapons to tranquilize a mere gang of Cain-raising rannies. Live and let live is a good old Western precept, and Bob Barstow was the last man to begrudge any of the boys their fun. He wore his pet long-barreled Colts just as he wore his chaps and spurs and hat—to be properly dressed.

Funny, though, that the sound of the firing didn't approach more rapidly. Usually, once freed from work, the boys from the various cow spreads lined out directly for the hospitable Bodega.

At his front door, Bob listened intently. There was only the faintest splash of silver-gray in the eastern sky, and the dusty main street of Purple Draw was still dark and gloomy and indistinct. There were the usual two bars of light from the adjacent saloon. But

no object moved abroad, save a silently slinking cat.

Yet the sounds of the shooting continued. Opposite, in the single second-story window of Flinders' store, there was a flicker of flame as a match was struck and a lamp lighted.

Flinders' window went up with a squeak and groan, and the form of the storekeeper, garbed in a voluminous nightgown, appeared. Bob's spurs, clanking on the puncheons of the porch, evidently attracted the little man's attention.

"That you, sheriff?" he hailed. "What's all the shootin' for?"

"Aim tuh find that out myself." Bob answered, moving round the house to the shed where Cherry Bounce was stabled.

For a moment he considered asking Flinders to come along, then recollected that the little merchant's reputation for bravery wasn't quite so well founded as some folks in Purple Draw imagined.

"Kill a burglar—Flinders!" Bob chuckled as, with caressing hands, he saddled and bridled Cherry Bounce. "Why, I don't believe that feller'd squash a cockroach! Hi-yup, Cherry!" He blithesomely swung aboard. "Le's go an' investigate these yar fireworks!"

Holding down his pretty roan to a quick, impatient fox trot, Bob passed to the end of the village street.

Then the roan leaped forward. For Bob knew, abruptly and chillingly, where the firing came from now. They were shooting up Wall-eye's lone cabin.

The hunted man was run down.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE CABIN.

BOB was glad indeed now that he had buckled on his reliable six-guns. Heading the strawberry roan in the direction of the lonely, fortified cabin, then nonchalantly looping the reins over his saddle horn, Bob had his two hands free to draw and break his weapons.

Spinning the cylinders, he assured himself that every chamber was loaded and ready for desperate action. For he had a fight on his hands, well he knew.

With the pioneer's usual scorn for the tenderfoot, Bob was wise enough, nevertheless, to be fully aware of the fact that if he was to be pitted against a gang of city gunmen, he would be meeting fierce and dangerous foes.

They might not be able to ride much, or to shoot with any accuracy at long range. But let those killers once get within a short distance—well, Bob had more than once seen what those soft-nosed bullets can do to a man. They go in clean enough, but they come out the other side tearing a horrible hole one can shove a fist into.

He pulled up his roan, therefore, as he arrived at the creek bed and descended to the treacherous, boulder-strewn floor of the dry wash. Discretion—careful maneuvering—would here indeed be the better part of valor.

Besides, having seen how strongly Wall-eye had fortified himself, it was highly unlikely that the lone recluse could as yet have suffered any serious injury.

The shots were close by now. At the elbow of the creek bed from which the first glimpse of the box-car cabin might be had, Bob reined in Cherry Bounce abruptly as they almost ran among four big shapes in the gully. These were horses, picketed and apparently unattended.

Bob lay low alongside his saddle horn for an instant, waiting to see whether any human being would materialize through the gloom. But, sure enough, the horses had been left alone.

"Mistake No. 1 for the wise guys!" chuckled the young sheriff, as he ranged his roan up to the deserted ponies, sliced their hitch ropes with the sheath knife he always carried behind his cantle and kicked all four, one after the other, into frantic flight. "Now we only got infantry tuh buck up against, Cherry."

In that conclusion he was in error, however, as presently he saw when he had moved on just around the creek's elbow. Flashes of fire there were from various points on the ground. But in addition to the dismounted attackers, two figures on horseback circled round the black bulk of the cabin at a discreet distance. That meant that there were at least six of the thugs in all. Heavy odds!

For a moment Bob considered returning to town to rout out a couple of his deputies or a volunteer posse. From the top of the box-car cabin, intermittent flashes of fire could be seen, which told the young sheriff that Wall-eye had again utilized his trapdoor to the roof and was, at that superior height, pretty strongly situated.

Bullets alone were not likely to dislodge Wall-eye. He might be able to hold out for hours.

Perceptibly the day was coming. Misty shadows which crouched and crawled on hands and knees now took definite shape as human figures.

The trousered legs of the mounted men were distinct from the bodies of their animals. Soon it would be broad day. No matter how desperate, six city gangsters would certainly not have the nerve to continue their attack in open sunlight.

Wall-eye, presumably, was well supplied with ammunition. The spurting shots, now from one end of the roof, now from the other, indicated that the defender was not yet even wounded. Not once, though, did the figure on the roof show itself.

"Dunno that I'm called on tuh take a hand in this game, Cherry—yet," Bob reflected.

It might be the simplest plan to wait until the mob gave up their attempt and started to retreat, and then to ride up behind the whole outfit and corral the crowd.

But the attackers' next move immediately upset that plan of procedure. Bob, still at a furlong distance, could

not make out exactly where the missile came from.

But thunderously at one lower corner of the cabin boomed an explosion, and a fan of livid flame leaped upward. It was a grenade or bomb—a "pine-apple," as Bob knew the gangsters called it.

The air trembled with the reverberations of the shock. Indifferent to his own peril, recognizing only that such explosives would quickly stun the lone defender into insensibility, Bob gathered his Cherry horse and recklessly went charging forward.

Directly in his path a man rose darkly. Cherry swerved, loath as are all good horses to run down a human being.

But Bob's iron hand on the bridle flung the horse back to smash right into and over the obstructor of the way.

"One!" growled Bob grimly, holding his right-hand gun ready.

Ahead, he saw the two horsemen who were beyond the cabin gather their mounts and come converging toward him. They were out of sure range yet, however. And there was more instant and immediate danger.

Ting! A bullet had clanged against the iron horn of Bob's saddle and glanced upward past his face. Bob swung to the right, where the nearest detonation of an automatic pistol had issued. He was just in the nick of time to see a stooped figure slide round behind a rock.

Headlong he put his roan for the boulder. Leaden bees zoomed threateningly over the young sheriff's head. But the thug was shooting too fast and too high.

Cherry Bounce was up to and around the boulder almost instantly. Despairingly the thug rose, evidently with an empty magazine in his pistol. Desperately he hurled the gun directly into the roan's face.

Cherry reared in pain, lightly grazed on his sensitive nose. But Bob, with superb horsemanship, kept his balance

perfectly, and leaning over from above, drilled the fellow almost straight down through the top of the skull.

But there was no time now for self-congratulation. Right on him the two charging horsemen were coming, both blazing fire from their pistol muzzles. The very fact that Cherry had reared and was now dancing precariously on his hind legs supplied a lucky bulwark of protection for his rider.

A shot or two must have stung the good roan, for the mounted attackers had wheeled their horses not five yards distant. Bob felt a blow on his left hoot heel; another slug thudded into his pommel.

Then under his horse's neck Bob aimed and fired. The first rider leaped horribly straight up in his saddle, pitched free and was dead before he struck the ground.

"Three," whispered Bob, as, getting Cherry's forefeet back to earth, he let the roan run for a minute.

When he reined and turned to look back, the one remaining horseman was sitting stockstill, watching, but not offering to press the combat.

Bob paused to catch breath. He had the fellow at his mercy at that range, since he could knock off a man's hat at a furlong's distance, while an automatic will not shoot with any accuracy at more than fifty or seventy-five yards. If the fellow wanted to surrender, however——

That wasn't his intention, it instantly developed. Yanking his horse around and beating its flank with his gun, the fellow headed away at a full gallop down across the alkali flats.

"Oh, no, yuh don't, mister!" Bob gasped. "Yuh all right, Cherry?" The game little roan curvetted as if in answer. "Waal, come on, then!"

It wasn't a long chase. This city brigand was certainly not fitted for hard riding over Western desert land.

He had not gone a hundred rods before a sudden stumble of his horse tossed him, like an acrobat doing a

double flip, clear into the air and into a bunch of cactus.

Bob had to laugh as he saw the poor cuss struggle free from the cactus spines, writhing and twisting as, with empty hands, he rose to his feet and raised his hands to the heavens in surrender.

"Wrong ridin' rink you picked this time, mister." Bob grinned, loping up. "S'posin' you jest walk on ahead o' me back to the cabin, an' we'll set down an' chin things over. You hombres do seem to be sort o' sot ag'inst Mr. Wall-eye Stick-in-the-mud Wallace."

Bob's good humor came near being the undoing of him. Seeing this prisoner unarmed, Bob had temporarily lowered his own weapon. Decent, straightforward as he himself was, he knew nothing of the poisonous treachery of a typical sewer-rat criminal.

For as Cherry Bounce stood, head lowered, waiting his master's command, the villainous thug with all his strength slapped the little horse cruelly across the eyes.

If he had thought to stampede the roan and thereby give himself time to escape into the tumbled morass of boulders in the canyon beyond, the crook was mistaken. Cherry Bounce was blinded momentarily, indeed, wild with fear and pain.

He reared up convulsively on his hind legs, every muscle quivering beneath his burnished, satiny skin. Bob, for all his natural, perfect seat, had all he could do to stay in the saddle. He managed to swing to his mount's surge, but his gun arm was automatically thrown upward.

The thug twisted round to run from beneath the menace of Cherry's wildly lashing forefeet.

Unlike most brones, Cherry Bounce was shod in front as well as behind, however. There was a *crack* like the driving of a rivet. Cherry reared again, then came down on all fours.

Bob twisted his head over his shoulder to see where his assailant had been.

He was there yet, but prone on the ground. Like a cleaver, the edge of one of the roan's bright plates had sliced through the gangster's skull.

In the savage, fighting temper he was in now, Bob had no sentimental feeling of horror.

"Four!" he growled fiercely. "Cherry, yuh done fine. Now let's get the rest of 'em."

But the rest weren't staying. In the growing gold of the glowing morning light, Bob spied them already nearly half a mile away, scrambling over the quartz and flint rock which led up the hogback to the impenetrable wilderness of the Henry Mountains.

It was useless to pursue them further. With four of their number already wiped out, it was extremely unlikely that they, however strong the inducement, would ever venture to come back.

"Five---and six!" said Bob, soothing and petting the frightened little Cherry. "Come on, lad--let's mosey 'long home. I reckon this show is over."

Holding the roan under strong but gentle restraint, Bob urged his pony back toward the lately beleaguered box-car cabin.

If the guardian of that peculiar castle was still on the roof, he was not visible from Bob's seat in the saddle.

"They're gone, Wall-eye!" Bob hailed. "Are yuh all right?"

"You alone?" Still the embattled hermit was not in sight. But he was evidently in some post of observation where he could see what was going on.

"Shore," answered Bob promptly. Then he saw that his assurance had been premature. Standing at some distance, afoot and all alone, was little Flinders, the storekeeper.

"Wait a minute!" shouted Bob to the yet invisible Wall-eye. "Flinders from the store's hyar, too." He rode up to the little man. "Waal, what brought you down hyar?"

"I seen you going out, you remember," explained the drab little merchant.

"Then I heard all the firin', so I thought I'd come on down tuh see what was all the excitement."

"Check." Bob nodded. "Say, Flinders an' me are a-comin' in!" he shouted toward the cabin roof once more. "Come on!" He beckoned Flinders forward.

Wall-eye opened up to them almost eagerly. The hunted man was still quivering with fear and excitement; there was more of the maniac than ever in his rolling eyes. But he could at least recognize the young sheriff as his preserver.

"Come in! Come in!" the man gasped. "I got ter talk to you, sheriff---got to talk to you. Oh, lawsey! Oh, lawsey!"

CHAPTER VI.

INSIDE THE FORT.

ONCE within the improvised fortress, Flinders gazed about him with a quite natural curiosity. No one, probably, save the sheriff himself, had seen the interior of this queer domicile.

"Guess I'd better fix up my own store like this, if there's goin' to be any more doin's like this around here," said the shopkeeper sagaciously, as he noted the heavy gratings over the window, the reinforced door, and the heavy bar which shut it.

Bob, curious in another way, had mounted the stepladder, without asking leave, and now had his head out through the open trapdoor. Immediately he perceived why, from the ground, it had been impossible to see the defender of the house.

The roof was not flush with the top of the walls, but was sunk about two feet below them. And back of the projecting walls was a row of potato bags, stuffed tight with dirt and gravel.

The man had constructed himself a fortress fit to withstand a battalion armed with ordinary weapons. The employment of grenades or bombs, however, had apparently not fallen within his calculations.

Bob, interested and puzzled, came down from the roof and settled himself in his customary armchair. Flinders, apologetic as usual, withdrew to the bed, at the head of which was a crude table upon which lay still a whole arsenal of weapons—a rifle, an old and rusty .38 Special revolver, a tiny .25 pocket automatic, and a long, thin-bladed skinning knife. Bob surveyed this extraordinary layout, too.

"Don't yuh think, Wall-eye," he said, his voice soothing but firm, "thet it's about time yuh told us what all this carryin'-on is about, anyway?"

"I'm goin' to, sheriff—I'm goin' to!" the man exclaimed. "Maybe I'm safe at last now." He waved his hand to indicate the terrain outside where four corpses of his enemies still lay unburied.

"Shoot, Wall-eye. Flinders hyar won't talk—I'll guarantee that."

He knew very well that Flinders would stay dumb as a clam rather than have Bob expose his pretense of being a hero.

Moreover, if Wall-eye had a criminal confession to make, which would force Bob to take action, it was well to have a witness.

Not that the young sheriff foresaw any likelihood of taking action against this brooded outcast. The man had suffered enough, obviously.

"Yeah. All right." Wall-eye hobbled his head. "I got ter talk, sheriff. I got ter."

"Tah—it easy," was the soothing confirmation. "We got all day."

"It was back in Chi where it began, years ago." The man, twitching spasmodically, stood up against the door, his back against it, as if he yet feared an attempt at entry. "I was a watchmaker, then in the jewelry business in a small way. Then—then I got back in my hills, an' some stuff came to me that I sort o' guessed was stolen. An'—well, sheriff, I got to be what's known as a 'fence.'"

"Uh-huh." That much Bob had

rather suspected. "A fella that makes a business o' buyin' stolen goods, eh?"

"That's right."

Flinders, sitting on the bed, was staring at this self-confessed criminal with the awed respect of the country hick who comes for the first time in contact with the wickedness of the great cities.

"So," Wall-eye went on tremulously, "things went worse an' worse, until I was dealin' regular with the gang that was known as the 'East Side Strangers.' I didn't want to have nothin' to do with them, sheriff. Oh, golly! I didn't want to. But once you're in that racket, you can't get out, sheriff. You understand that?"

"Shore," agreed Bob.

He'd had enough experience with rustlers to know the methods of terrorism by which subordinates are forced to continue faithful to their implacable employers. Once a man is trapped in the mesh of gang warfare, whether in town or out on the prairie, there's seldom any escape save death.

"But finally the Strangers make a diamond haul," Wall-eye went on, his fingers writhing through one another in nervous horror of the memory. "They bring the stones to me to get rid of. Well, sheriff, they've killed a couple of these here men servants in the house, getting the stuff. I was scared o' being mixed up anyways with a murder. I dassn't tell 'em so, though. I take the stones, sayin' I have to go to some other town to get rid of 'em—New York or Philly, I tell 'em."

"So," put in Bob, "instead o' that, you just fade out o' the picture and hop down here."

"Uh-huh. That's it, sheriff."

"That explains yore buildin' yerself this sort o' strong box tuh live in, eh? And that's why yuh were so upset when yore white-faced, long-haired friend comes snoopin' round, lookin' in windows, an' so forth. Who was he, by the way? I'd sort o' like tuh ketch up with him myself."

Bob, in respect to Flinders' pride,

Missing Page

Missing Page

from the country—was wise to all the country ways. He could pass anywhere, as he did here, for a small-town hick. That's how he got his alias of Rube Flynn. Gosh knows what his real name was."

"Wonder he didn't crease pore Wall-eye sooner," Bob reflected. "But I suppose the pore coot never went out nights, an' got himself locked up here so tight thiet Flinders—or whatever his right name might be—never even got a chanct."

"That's about the way of it," the city man agreed. "The gang gets sort of tired of waiting for Flinders to get results. We'd closed down on 'em pretty tight, and they were getting hard up for money. So they send Pottleford down here to scout around first. Then, when I get high-handed and bump him off, the whole mob sails in. That's where you put a mighty bad kink in 'em, boy."

"Waal, I reckon you'd ha' got 'em after a while," Bob smiled magnanimously. This city detective was a good one!

"And have had Flinders get me—through the back; that was his style." The officer shook his head. "That's what he was doin' down here to-day, I dare say—waiting for me to show up, and to get me from behind during the

ruckus." Parson Grimm—grim by name as well as by nature—sniffed.

"Geewhillikens!" Bob agreed. "The fella shore was a sidewinder."

"All o' that. But he'll strike no more. Too bad he had to get Wall-eye. Still, I dunno. Just as well to clean up the whole nest at once, I suppose."

The officer threw open the cabin door to let sunlight stream in upon this grisly shambles of crime and death.

Outside, the mountains rose from their dark green bases of foliage in streaks of pink and ocher and pale gold to summits touched with snow. A north wind, crisp and exhilarating, blew down across the prairie.

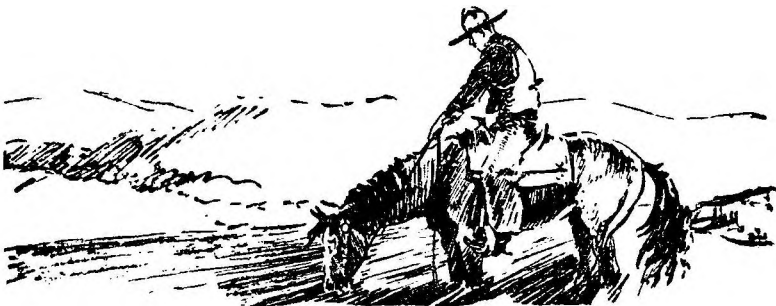
The city man filled his lungs deeply. Bob came out to stand beside him.

Both kept their eyes raised to avoid the silent objects which polluted the sweet earth so close by. But the mind of neither man could ignore those stark figures.

"You certainly know your work, young man." The captain laid his hand on Bob's shoulder. "You wouldn't consider a detective job in Chicago, would you? Pay's three times what you get here. How about it?"

Bob's answer was prompt:

"Cap'n, I'd ruther be jest a plain citizen out hyar than the governor of any State east o' Kansas!"



Injun Guns

THREE adventurous men were waiting in a camp at Prickly Pear for something to turn up when word was brought to them that a company of miners was working the bottom of a creek in Pikes Peak Gulch, about sixty miles from the Prickly Pear camp, over the Rocky Mountain range. On receiving this news, the three started immediately on a horseback trip to the new camp, hoping to get employment there for the winter.

They intended to make camp at the head of Summit Creek on the first night out, knowing that there was good grass and water there, but before they could reach it one of the horses gave out, and all efforts to urge him on failed.

This was a serious setback to their plans, for it was desolate country most of the way, and a worthless horse could not be replaced. Besides, all sorts of dangers were likely to be encountered along the trail, and the outlook for the man whose mount had given out was anything but promising. So they kept trying to induce the beast to move, losing precious time in a country that they were eager to leave behind them as soon as possible.

He wouldn't budge, so the only thing to do was to make camp right where they were. It was an unpromising spot near the roadside, and could not escape the notice of any band of marauding Indians that might chance to cross the range.

It was the custom of packers, trappers, and other white men, when passing through this Indian country, to pick out some secluded spot at least half a mile from the trail for camping purposes, but these three found themselves cooped up in a narrow canyon, through which ran the only passable route over the range, exposed to the view of any one on the trail.

It was known that the whole surrounding country was full of roving

bands of Bloods and Piegans, who were constantly on the lookout for horses and provisions, and who always helped themselves to these when they came across them and didn't hesitate to kill the rightful owners if any resistance was made. They were merciless, murderous savages, without the slightest consideration for human life if they saw an opportunity to obtain what they wanted at what, to them, seemed so small a price.

Two of the men rolled in their blankets and slept while the third kept watch, each one taking his turn during the night. A heavy fall of snow added to the discomfort of the campers, and about three o'clock in the morning the horses became restless for want of food, as there was no grass.

All three were up early, and breakfast was being prepared when the counterfeited neigh of a horse warned them that danger was near. This was answered by another, and they knew then that the signal and reply of the Indians had been given, and that they had been discovered.

Two of them seized their guns while the other made a rush to the picket pin and pulled in the four horses. This was no sooner done than, from behind a thicket of willows just above the camp, there dashed down the canyon in full gallop between forty and fifty Blackfoot Indians.

Their faces were hideous with war paint, their long black hair floated in the wind, their heads were adorned with eagle feathers, and their knees and elbows were decorated with strips of antelope skin and feathery skunks' tails.

As they galloped forward they looked like a troop of demons that had suddenly sprung out of the earth. Each man held a gun in his right hand and guided his horse with the left. Well-filled quivers and bows were fastened to their shoulders, and close behind the main

troop, driven by five or six outriders, was a herd of fifty or more horses, moving along swiftly, some splendid animals among them, others ordinary range cayuses. It was a valuable cavvy, and one which any observer could see at a glance was of much better breeds than the usual little Indian ponies.

The Indians had just stolen these animals from a company of miners who were on their way to the Bannack Mines, and had encamped for the night at Deer Lodge.

The stolen horses were driven rapidly past the camp of the three white men and down the canyon. In the meantime, the main troop formed into line on the other side, presenting an unbroken front of horsemen drawn up for attack. It was a formidable array, and one which would have struck terror to the hearts of more timid men than the West produced in those courage-testing days.

By this time the three intrepid miners were ready, having brought their guns to an aim from behind their horses. The two opposing forces were not more than twenty yards distant from each other, but just as the attack was expected to begin, the Indian chief rode among his men in a threatening manner.

Then it was seen that the Indians, in obedience to a command from their chief, hung their guns on the pommels of their saddles, and drew their bows. From the antics and utterances of the braves it was understood that their guns were wet and their caps useless. This meant that their firearms were of no

more value to them than mere sticks of wood, for without dry powder and caps, the old type of weapons could not be discharged at all. Yet bows and arrows were deadly enough in the hands of savages who were expert in their use.

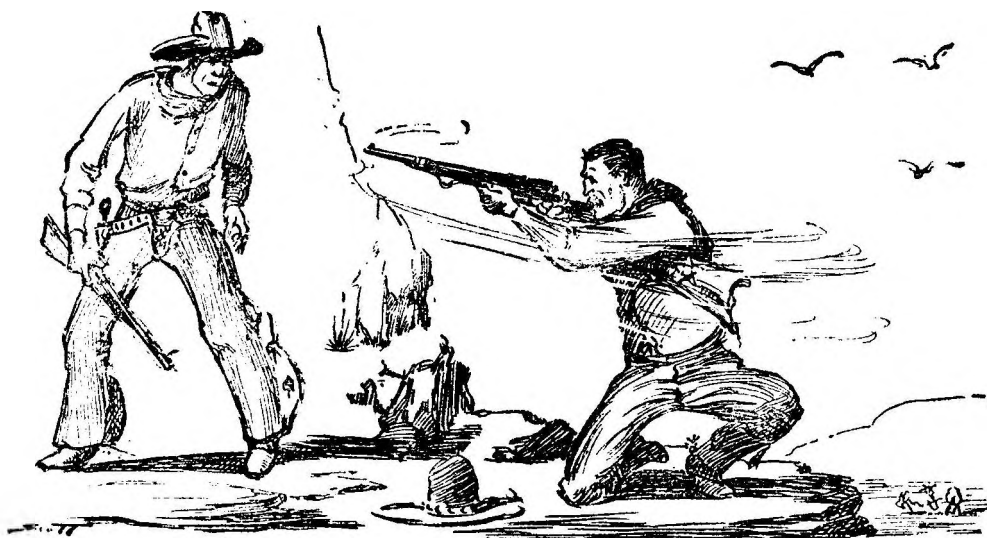
The guns of the white men were dry and were good for twenty-four shots, and the revolvers in their belts were good for as many more, so they felt fully prepared for anything that might happen.

Knowing that an open attack would mean certain death to some of their number, half of the Indians passed down the canyon, and reappeared from the thicket on the opposite side. The four horses were wheeled into a hollow square and, standing in the center, the three presented their guns at each attacking band.

As the four horses were what the Indians were after, they were afraid that they might kill them instead of the men, so they hesitated again. A short consultation followed, then the chief gave orders for them to withdraw. They all wheeled into rapid line, dashed down the canyon, and disappeared.

Feeling thankful to the snow which had unfitted the Indians' guns for use, the three white men saddled their horses and hurried over the mountain range to Pikes Peak. They found no work here for the gulch was fully occupied, so they went on to Bannack, which was then the most important gold placer east of the Rocky Mountains, where they had better luck.





Them Bar M Bar Steers

A "Lum Yates" Story

By Collins Hafford

Author of "Ride Him Slick!" etc.

"And as, my friend, you ask me what makes me sad and still,
And why my brow is darkened like the clouds upon the hill;
Run in your pony closer and I'll tell to you the tale
Of Utah Carroll, my partner, and his last ride on the trail."

LUM YATES, the slim, dark-haired youngster who rode for the Bar M was singing as much to keep up his courage as anything else, for this was strange country over which he rode.

And it had none too good a reputation for peace and safety. Lum would never have ridden here of his own accord. Had it not been that some of his steers bearing the Bar M Bar had wandered—or been driven—over the Cimarron, he would not have ventured alone into the hills.

But suddenly he broke his song off short. The howl that had begun to

burst from the throat of Job, his little yellow dog who rode in the nose bag at the saddle horn, died swiftly.

Then it changed to a deep and menacing growl. Old Joshua, the dun mule which the young puncher rode, stopped in his tracks and laid his flopping ears back.

Crack, crack, crack! Again came the sharp bark of the rifle—the sound that had wrought the sudden change. The series of staccato reports seemed to come from around the big shoulder of rock that jutted out into the trail a hundred yards ahead. And closely following, roared the deeper-toned sound of blazing six-guns.

Lum slipped swiftly from his saddle and crouched behind a rough boulder. For five full minutes he remained motionless. A half dozen times more the rifle and six-gun barked—but no bullets came his way. As far as he could tell, he was not concerned in the gun fight.

He straightened and reached for the saddle horn to swing atop old Joshua. Then the inborn curiosity that was his besetting curse—or blessing—bade him stop. He took a long step toward the scene of battle. A whimper brought him up sharp. With almost human entreaty, Job begged to be taken along.

A slow grin spread across Lum's wide mouth. "Reckon yo' an' me is always stickin' ouah haid into places we got no business to be," he said softly to the little dog. He lifted Job from the nose bag and set him gently upon the ground.

Now like an Apache of the plains, he catfooted along the ledge toward the bend in the trail. Job followed at his heels. Flat on his face, Lum inched his way the last two yards. He did not know what would be revealed around the bend, but he did not believe in taking useless chances.

Cautiously he thrust his head beyond the jagged rock. For a long minute he surveyed the surprising spectacle that revealed itself.

The ledge twisted sharply at right angles. But below it some forty feet was another ledge. And below that a canyon made a great gash in the slope.

And on the lower ledge Lum could see a man stretched at full length behind a boulder as large as two horses. Calmly this man levered a cartridge into the chamber of his rifle. He aimed the gun and squeezed the trigger. Then the same procedure again. Very cool and businesslike this man appeared.

Now the young puncher's gaze followed the direction of the smoking gun. He made out two or three blotches of color near the opposite wall of the canyon, a hundred feet below.

These blotches, apparently men, appeared but seldom. For each appearance was the signal for an angry bullet from the lone man's rifle. But little gray puffs of smoke below, the sound of heavy six-guns, and the whine of ricocheting bullets told Lum the men were not idle.

"It ain't noways right," the slim puncher grunted to himself. "They're at leas' fo' to one. Reckon mebbe we got to offer to he'p thet waddy. He might be a road agent, but he's sho' a cool scrapper."

Job whined softly, and looked up into his master's face. Lum sensed with a start of amazement that the little dog's warning was directed against the men below, apparently, and not the lone fighter on the ledge.

But the determination to help, and the deed itself were two entirely different things. The ledge that sheltered the gunman was forty feet below—and the distance was almost perpendicular.

It could be reached by means of a saddle rope, but the descending man would be in plain view of the deadly guns in the canyon. Lum's keen young eyes surveyed the layout carefully.

Now he wriggled cautiously around the shoulder of rock. Keeping well to the back of the ledge, he was out of sight of the men on the canyon floor. Almost directly over the lone gunman, he stopped.

Here, beginning almost halfway back on the floor of the ledge, a water-worn crack led downward at a steep angle. It was only two feet wide, and twisted tortuously, but to Lum's eyes it offered a possible means of descent.

At first the slim puncher hesitated. It seemed queer that the man should have taken his stand just where the crack met the ledge. Then it dawned upon him. The swift water which swirled down this crack during the torrential rains had pushed the great boulder to the rim of the canyon. It was the only cover for hundreds of feet on either side.

Bidding Job to stand guard, Lum made his cautious way back to where Joshua stood. He loosed his rope from the saddle horn and hung the coil about his shoulders. He drew his long squirrel rifle from its scabbard, examined his six-gun to see that it was in smooth working order.

Again at the crack in the ledge, the slim young puncher made one end of the rope fast to an outcropping rock. The other end he dropped carefully down the twisting crack. When all was paid out, he slipped into the narrow space and began the painful descent. Job followed, whimpering softly.

Sharp rocks scraped his elbows and knees. At times the space was so narrow that it took real effort to worm his way through. But at last he neared the end. And he devoutly hoped it would bring him out behind the boulder that sheltered the lone man. Otherwise he would make a plain target for the marksmen in the canyon.

Digging his high boot heels into the sides of the steep crack, he peered cautiously out. A stifled sigh of relief escaped him. He had guessed right. The boulder, even larger than it appeared from above, fully shielded the mouth of the crack from below.

The prone man was so busy with his methodical loading and shooting that he was entirely unaware of Lum's approach. The young puncher grinned wryly to himself, but a shiver of apprehension chased itself up his spine.

He slipped noiselessly out onto the flat floor of the ledge. For a moment he stretched to get the kinks out of his muscles. Then he crawled quietly to the strange man's side.

II.

"Can I he'p yo', strangeh?" Lum's soft, drawing voice gave the grim man his first inkling that he was not alone on the ledge.

He jerked swiftly to a sitting posture. His rifle swung unerringly to the newcomer's middle. A fleeting grin spread across Lum's face.

"Yo' might plug me, strangeh—an' heave me oveh the rim of the canyon. But thet wouldn't be right neighborly to a waddy thet offered yo' he'p—now would it?"

Lum's keen eyes had caught sight

of the shiny star on the lone man's vest. Now he was all the more sure that his help would be appreciated.

For a tense moment the sitting man surveyed the newcomer. From the black thatch of hair to the well-worn boots, he missed not a detail of the slim youngster. Perhaps it was the boyish earnestness of the slender face that set the man's mind at rest. For at last he spoke.

"Yuh don't 'pear to be no rustler or bushwhacker, even if yuh did sneak up on me like an Injun. Reckon yuh could o' plugged me from behind ifn yuh had a mind to. I'm a-gettin' too old fer this here sheriffin' business. Kind o' fer-gettin' to keep my eyes peeled. Yuh might jest as well as not be one of thet 'Baldy' Sampson outfit."

"An' who might the Baldy Sampson outfit be, sheriff?" drawled Lum.

"Passel of rustlers thet's runnin' the whole range ragged," grunted the grizzled officer. "Runnin' me ragged, too."

Lum's eyes lighted up. Perhaps this was the very gang that had run off his steers. It might even be that this occasion would offer an opportunity to recover them. But as yet he would not mention his own loss to the sheriff.

"This heah does look like a right smaht uncomfortable position, sheriff," said Lum. "Yo're safe as long as yo' stick behind this rock—but yo' can't stay heah forever, huh?"

"Ifn I'd stick my haid around this here rock, an' hold it there a minute, I'd stay here forever." The old sheriff chuckled grimly. "An' now yuh got yoreself in the same fix, young feller."

"I come down a rope—an' I'm sho' I can get back the same way. But I'm scared yo' couldn't make it. Me, I'm too much of a coward to get into a hole I ain't got no way out of."

"Coward, huh?" The old sheriff surveyed Lum through narrowed lids. Then he chuckled grimly. "Wish I had a whole posse of thet kind of cowards. Whut's yore name, son? I'd plumb admire to know yuh."

"Lum Yates from the Bar M," answered the young puncher modestly.

"Bar M, huh? Mighty nigh the brand this here outfit was changin' when I run onto 'em. Bar M Bar, it was—an' a right likely lookin' bunch of steers."

"Thet's my brand," exclaimed Lum. "And it was them steers I come into the hills a-huntin'."

"Well, yuh found 'em—but yuh got Baldy Sampson to lick afore yuh can claim 'em," said the old sheriff dryly.

The old sheriff had almost forgotten his plight in his astonishment at the young puncher's arrival. But as if to remind him of it, bullets began to ping wickedly on the rock in ever-increasing number.

Evidently persuaded that they had at last shot down the old officer, the men below were becoming bolder with every minute that went by without an answering shot from the ledge.

"Been gabbin' long enough," grunted the sheriff. "Got to git back to business. I aim to polish off a few afore they finally git me. Yuh better high-tail it back up the rope whilst yuh got a chance." He turned again to the notch in the rock from which he had been firing.

Ever since his arrival beside the sheriff, Lum's keen mind had been busy trying to figure out a way of overcoming the old officer's predicament. But as yet only a hazy idea had come.

"Yo' could burn all the powder in these heah hills without doin' much damage, sheriff. But theah ought to be some way of smokin' 'em out. How come yo' got in this fix, nohow?"

"Ain't been doin' much but chasin' this outfit fer a year," grated the sheriff. "They been stickin' up the stage, an' runnin' off fat stock till they think they own the whole range. I trailed 'em up here to-day."

"Same place thet I've lost 'em a hundred times. Lost 'em again to-day—I thought. Ridin' along this here ledge like a tenderfoot. Bing! Bullet kilt

my hoss. Me, I jest managed to make it to this here rock. An' here I am."

"Their hideout must be in this heah canyon, then?" suggested Lum.

"Yep—I reckon so," said the old sheriff slowly. "But no one knows where. They jest ride into the canyon—an' disappear."

For a long moment the young puncher sat wrapped in deep thought. At last he looked up at the sheriff. "They cain't jes' disappear. They must go somewhere. An' it's my job to find out where. Could yo' kind o' tell me about the spot yo' generally see 'em last?"

"They jest ride around a shoulder of rock thet sticks out in the canyon wall mighty nigh straight acrost from here. An' when me an' my posse gits there—they're gone."

Lum's eyes lighted with a sudden dawning idea. He remembered a certain adventure of his own, months ago in Devil's Sink. Just such a mystery as this, it was.

"Do yo' reckon yo' can keep them waddies right smaht interested fo' an hour?" asked Lum. "'Cause if yo' can, mebbe we can sling ouah loop aroun' 'em after all."

"Huh!" grunted the old officer. "I been a-scrappin' with 'em for three hours now. Another hour won't make no difference. But what yuh figurin' on, nohow?"

Lum shook his head slowly. "I cain't tell yo' exactly yet. Don't quite know myself. But if yo' see me wavin' my red neckerchief acrost on the other side of the canyon, thet means it's time to pour lead plenty fast. I'm dependin' on yo' to keep 'em watchin' this side."

III.

Lum crawled swiftly back to the crack in the canyon wall. With Job inside his shirt, he clawed his way upward. In a scant five minutes he was again astride Joshua. He touched the old mule lightly with his rowels, and

Joshua hurried his pace at the unexpected urging.

A half mile northward along the canyon wall, Lum found a gentler slope, down which the old mule could make his way. A bend in the canyon hid it from view of the rustlers.

Down this slope Joshua clattered and slid while Lum gave him free rein. Another hundred yards north a passable slope led upward on the other side, and in scarcely more than fifteen minutes the slim puncher was making his way back toward the battle.

Lum's keen eyes searched the twisting and rocky rim of the canyon. There was not a sign that it had ever been traveled before. It was more than possible that no one had ridden this path, for the floor of the canyon held the regular trail.

If that were true, his theory was still more plausible. For if he was right, the bandit's hideout would hardly be discovered except from above.

When the sound of the firing below told him he was nearing the scene of the gun fight, he turned Joshua's head back from the rim of the canyon. When he was fifty yards or more back, and well out of sight of the canyon floor, he resumed his first direction.

In a moment he pulled the old mule up short, and slipped swiftly from his saddle. Ahead was a deep gash in the canyon wall that ran at right angles to the canyon itself. His heart beat fast in excited satisfaction. For this was just what he had hoped for.

With Indian stealth he made his way to the edge of the gash. Cautiously he peered over. Hardly ten feet wide, the zigzag gash was deep and straight-sided.

And to his peering eyes it appeared passable to horsemen in single file. He was almost sure that he could distinguish hoofprints in the occasional patch of crushed rock below.

Back from the canyon, he followed the edge of the narrow defile. His way led up over a low ridge. And at its

crest he drew up startled. For beyond it the defile opened into a securely hidden valley a full quarter of a mile in circumference. It looked as if in some long past time this valley had been a deep lake, and that it had drained through the gash into the canyon.

But he wasted no time on speculation. For it was the herd of sleek cattle that grazed in the valley that drew his attention. Although they were too far away to distinguish the brands, he was sure his own steers were among them. The snug little cabin at the far side offered complete evidence that he had found the rustlers' hideout.

Swiftly his eyes swept back. The rim of the defile was thickly studded with boulders, but at only one place did he see one that seemed to fit his plan. And that was on the other side. For a long moment he eyed it. Then he clenched his fists in determination.

He strode swiftly back for fifty feet. Whirling, he dashed madly for the rim. At its very edge he leaped, trying his best to forget the drop below. His booted toes caught the opposite edge.

It crumbled, and rocks clattered into the deep gash. But his momentum carried him forward, and he sprawled among the rocks—safe.

Scarcely feeling the pain of his skinned knees and elbows, he leaped to his feet and raced for the boulder. With back and shoulders against it, he heaved and pushed. Balanced on the edge as it was, the great rock seemed fairly to resist his efforts.

Sweat poured from his face, and his breath came in great gasps from the effort. But now the boulder gave almost imperceptibly. Lum added still a few more pounds to his almost superhuman struggle. Slowly, almost reluctantly, the boulder toppled into the defile.

Lum sank to the ground exhausted. And it was five full minutes before he could arise and look at the result of his efforts. But his first glance repaid him. The defile was as effectually

blocked as if an earthquake had shaken it up and had closed it.

Although his legs trembled under him, Lum made the breath-taking leap back in safety. Catfooting to the rim of the canyon, he risked a look at the shooting men below.

Then he glanced across. A slow smile came to his face as he saw the puffs of smoke and heard the reports that came from the old sheriff's gun.

Snatching the kerchief from about his throat, he waved it twice above his head. The answer came almost immediately in the increasingly swift fusillade from across the canyon.

Now Lum turned back to Joshua. Astride the old mule, he prodded him to his top pace. Back to the slope, he urged his mount down into the canyon. A shiver of apprehension shook the slim young puncher at the danger ahead, but he steeled himself to the ordeal.

He snatched his long squirrel rifle from its scabbard and tested its action. Then he swiftly inspected his six-gun. He hoped he would not need the shorter weapon, but it was best to be prepared.

At last he touched Joshua with his spurs. Forward he urged the old mule squarely in the direction of the rustler outfit. Around the bend of the canyon they swept.

But now Lum pulled the old mule to a sliding stop. His keen eyes had told him he was well out of six-gun range, and he was sure that the rustlers had no rifles. His own squirrel rifle, he knew, would be deadly at this distance.

He slipped from his saddle and into the partial shelter of a small boulder. Across its face he rested the long barrel of his rifle. With hands as steady now as the rock itself, he aimed.

Crack! The singing bullet smashed into the right shoulder of one of the rustlers, almost hurling him from his protecting shelter. The six-gun dropped from the useless right hand.

The other three bandits whirled toward the new source of danger. In-

stinctively they seemed to realize that their protection was of no use against attack from this side. Like scurrying rats they dashed madly for better cover.

Again Lum's rifle spoke. This time another rustler went down with a bullet through his leg.

"Two!" murmured Lum grimly. "Odds about even now."

But the rustlers, evidently unnerved by the new and unexpected attack, were ready to abandon the fight. Suddenly breaking from their cover, they made for their horses fifty yards away. Unmindful of the shouts of the man whose leg was useless, they abandoned him callously.

Bullets came in a stream from the old sheriff's rifle, and Lum, too, fired rapidly. But the bandits' zigzag flight brought them to their horses safely. They swung to their saddles and jabbed the horses' flanks with their rowels.

IV.

Around the bend of the canyon they swung like a tornado. But the old sheriff had now left his cover and was following their flight with keen eyes as he dashed along his ledge.

Lum, watching the sheriff from the corner of his eye, saw the officer stop suddenly and shade his eyes with his hand. He grinned to himself, for he was sure of what the old officer saw.

Now the old sheriff whirled and raced back. When he was sure Lum had seen him, he stopped and motioned to the slim youngster. Then he pointed to the opposite wall of the canyon.

Lum straightened from behind his cover. With swift strides he made for old Joshua. He swung into the saddle and prodded the old dun mule with his rowels.

Stopping only long enough to disarm the wounded man who writhed on the ground, Lum rounded the bend. From here the canyon floor stretched straight for a full half mile. And not

a movement or a sound broke its lone-some serenity.

Lum had expected this. But his keen eyes turned to the wall of the canyon. Straight and solid it appeared at every point but one. And this place looked innocent enough, for only a scrubby tree growing at the top of a ten-foot slope broke the monotony.

Lum slipped from his saddle and dropped to his hands and knees at the foot of this little slope. Although the rocks were smooth and hard and there was no loose earth about them, he was sure that he could detect faint marks that might have been made by horses' hoofs turning from the trail.

Cautiously, with rifle ready, he scrambled up the slope. With alert watchfulness he rounded the little tree. Then he stopped short and listened for a long moment. For directly before him was the very thing he looked for.

Directly behind the tree was the narrow opening of the defile which he had discovered from above. Without doubt, the tree grew at this one point alone, because here was the only soft earth in the whole canyon—earth brought down by the spring freshets through the defile.

As effectually hidden as if devised by human minds, this gash in the face of the canyon wall was the rustlers' get-away. And through it the three had disappeared. Lum grinned as his imagination told him of the outfit's surprise when they should find their way blocked.

But wasting no time, he piled a half dozen small rocks, the only ones he could find, across the mouth of the defile. The cover was small, but he believed it was adequate. For it was a full fifty yards before the defile made a turn, and he was sure that one well-armed man could hold a hundred safely in the gash.

Now Lum lay down behind the low cover and trained his rifle muzzle up the defile. Here he would await the

arrival of the old sheriff before planning further.

Once a head was poked cautiously around the outjutting rock ahead, but a warning bullet caused it to be hastily withdrawn. Evidently the rustlers had experienced enough of the deadly rifle.

And in a half hour the old sheriff grunted up the slope behind Lum.

"By jing, son, yuh done found this here place first shot—an' I been huntin' fer their get-away fer more'n a year. But I reckon they're clean gone by this time. Ain't no doubt but what this crack leads out into the hills."

"It did," said Lum. "But I plugged it up plenty. Yore rustlers is ketched tight. They can't go on, lessn they can fly. An' they can't come back lessn they're ready to face hot lead."

The old sheriff's eyes opened in admiring amazement. "Yo're shore a fast worker, son. But now we got 'em, what're we goin' to do with 'em? Can't starve 'em out, lessn we starve ourselves."

Lum lay for a moment, his eyes narrowed in thought. Then a slow grin lighted his face. "Yo' hol' 'em heah, sheriff. I'll climb up above 'em an' parley. Reckon they're plumb ready to give up—or will be when I'm through."

"Don't yuh figure yuh better ride to town after help?" asked the sheriff.

"Yo' an' me has gone this far without hollerin' fo' he'p. Le's finish it alone."

And in another half hour Lum was again at the rim of the defile, directly above the place he had dropped the boulder. Cautiously he peered over and downward.

Huddled at the base of the plugging rock, he could see the three rustlers. He could tell by the motions of their hands and the movement of their lips that they talked in low tones. But the words did not reach him.

And as he watched, one of the men arose and stalked swiftly toward the bend that hid them from the canyon. Evidently they had determined on an-

other try at escape. Lum thrust the muzzle of his rifle over the rim and crashed a bullet to the rocks in front of the stalking man. The rustler stopped short, and threw an amazed glance upward.

"Yo're ketched—an' yo' jes' as well give up!" called Lum from above. "The openin' is plenty guarded. Yo'll save yo're hides ifn yo'll drop yo're guns an' march out slow an' careful."

Another hurried consultation below. Then a gruff voice came to Lum. "Yuh got us! We'll surrender!"

"Drop yore guns where yo' are—an' don't hold out on none. All right! Now head fo' the canyon, with yore hands plenty high!"

Keeping pace with the men below, Lum followed the rim of the defile. And now his voice was raised to carry to the old officer below.

"They're a-comin' out, sheriff. Watch 'em close, but don't shoot lessn they make a break."

And as Lum covered the three rustlers from above, the old sheriff bound them one by one. And in a short time Lum was back at the old officer's side.

"Thanks to you, son, this is the last of the Baldy Sampson outfit. You an'

me'll take 'em to town. Reckon yuh'll be right glad to he'p us celebrate."

Lum spoke softly. "Ifn yo' can manage 'em alone, sheriff, I'd a heap rather go an' look afteh my steers thet I saw in the valley. They'd ought to be a back way out o' the valley, an' I'm right smaht anxious to haze 'em to'ard home. Anyhow, they're yore prisoners. Ifn it hadn't been fo' the fight yo' put up, I'd 'a' neveh found my steers, most likely."

The old sheriff's eyes opened wide in amazement. Then he grinned. "Yo're shore mighty modest fer a nervy young buck. Shore, I can manage 'em. But I'm a-tellin' a straight story in town, an' yuh'll get yore share of the credit—an' the reward. So long, son—an' good luck."

He'pin' other folks out o' tight fixes is an ol' trick of Lum Yates. When this heah waddy comes upon an hombre what is fightin' agin' four rustlin' skunks, yuh cain't 'spect him to do nothin' but stop an' lend a hand. Lum shore makes plenty o' friends thet a way, an' enemies, too, 'cause them law-breakin' fellers he rounds up ain't thinkin' kind thoughts of him, nohow. Yuh wants to be an hand ter see what sort of adventure Lum Yates gits in next. He'll be round soon ag'in in WILD WEST WEEKLY.

SPEEDY JUSTICE

In the old days when Los Angeles had the reputation of being the roughest and toughest town in the whole Southwest, and its records of killings showed never less than one a day, and sometimes more, it generally happened that when a decision was made to punish the guilty ones, the transaction was carried out with a speed that was unknown in localities of milder customs.

There was no haggling of lawyers over contested points, no congested courts, and no technicalities that required time and thought on the part of jurists. As a demonstration of the promptness of the legal machinery of that time an incident occurred which

proved that the law's delays did not hamper the good citizens of Los Angeles in the early days of its growth.

Two friends were walking together arm in arm down Main Street early one morning, when one of them made a remark that gave serious offense to the other. The offended one quickly drew his knife and stabbed his companion in the heart.

The killer was seized at once by indignant passers-by who had seen his act, and was haled before Judge Lynch.

He was tried, found guilty, condemned to death, and hanged before the body of his victim had been removed from the spot where it had fallen.



Western Pen Pals

Conducted by Sam Wills - Postmaster

Some day you're going out West yourself—instead of just reading about it—to the Western outdoors, where the adventures in the stories have happened. 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—real information based on actual firsthand experience and knowledge, information about ranches and rodeos, big timber and lumber camps, getting work, hunting and fishing, 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.

Address your letters to Sam Wills, care of **WILD WEST WEEKLY**, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City.

WAAL, folks, hyar's another chance for you all to get yourselves some real good pals. If you're lonesome, got some interestin' info that would interest other hombres, hyar's the chance to pick up some real good correspondents.

You all have been doin' pretty well in followin' the instructions that I gave you about writin' the name of your State, and the name and State of the pal you're writin' to. Keep up the good work, an' I'll sure do my best to get

you all some real fun and lots of friends through this department. Let's go!

A Soldier from the Philippines.

"MR. SAM WILLS: I guess maybe it will be about three months before you get this lonely appeal, but, nevertheless, I hope that it does bring me a host of Pen Pals. I have been reading your list of letters from readers and think it is just fine to help people get information about here and there.

"I sure can handle lots of Pen Pals,

because this job out here on the rock is a pretty lonely one—no one but a few buddies that help me do guard duty, so you can send my address to any one you think would be interested in learning about a soldier's life here in the Philippines.

"I hope some Pen Pals hurry up and write to me, as I have only one year to do until I am discharged, and I might want to look up some of these people, no matter where they are located.

"Good luck to you and WILD WEST WEEKLY. You may tell them that I am twenty-five years old and a World War veteran. Come on! The more the merrier! No one excused from this formation!"

This soldier's name is A. R. Rose.

A Real Westerner.

"DEAR FOLKS: Have you room for a real Westerner to tie to your hitchin' rack? I'd like to be a regular visitor, so will make myself known. I'm twenty years of age, a good rider, and was born and raised on a ranch. I can spin some pretty good yarns and would like to have a few Pen Pals. So come along, one and all, and write to Elen Kanop."

Miss Kanop is from that right nice State of Oregon.

GENERAL REQUESTS.

Lester Broom, of Georgia, writes: "I am twenty years old, and interested in the mounted police and cowboys. I would like to have some Pen Pals from among the mounted police or cowboys, because some day I hope to become either one of the two. I will answer all letters coming to me from other Pen Pals as well."

A gal from Oklahoma, Miss Corinne Cockrell, writes: "I am a fifteen-year-old girl, and would like to have some Pen Pals of my age from all over the world. I have brown hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion. I love outdoor sports and Western stories."

Hyar's word from another gal, this time from Wisconsin. She is Miss Thedora Herfurth, an' she writes: "I would like some Pen Pals from anywhere in the United States or Canada. I am thirteen years old and a freshman in high school. I am athletic and like almost any sport that a girl cares for. We have two saddle horses which we ride every day in the summer. I will answer all letters that I receive."

Herbert L. Tilley, of Oklahoma, writes: "I am a boy, fourteen years old, five feet four inches tall, and live in the oil fields of Oklahoma. I have always liked the outdoor life and would like to hear from some of your cow waddies who can tell me about the West, as I expect to come West some day in the future. I would like to know if there is any chance of my getting a job as a handy boy until I get a little older and can tackle something harder on the ranch. I hope to hear from some one soon and will answer all letters."

Hyar's a gal thet calls herself "Helen of Minnesota." She writes: "I am nineteen years old and have lived in Minnesota all my life, and have always wanted to go out West. I love the outdoors and am very fond of dogs and horses. So if you could get me some Pen Pals to write and tell me of these things, I would be very grateful to you."

An Ohio hombre, Marion Lockett, writes: "I have read many of your WILD WEST WEEKLY stories, and I want to go out West and become a cowboy. I can use a gun real handy and can ride, too. Now all I need is the job. I would appreciate it if some one could give me some good information about where I could get a job on a ranch. I am eighteen years old and am strong and healthy."

Miss Eunice Connolly, of Michigan, writes: "I have read Western stories ever since I could read, but of all the

magazines I have seen I like the WILD WEST WEEKLY the best. I love the West and everything that goes with it, even the law-breaking citizens who are in every story. I like to read the letters sent in and would like to have a few Pen Pals for myself."

Hyar's another hombre from the oil fields of Oklahoma. His name is O. White, and he writes: "I am a boy of sixteen years, and am five feet ten and one half inches tall. I have always liked the outdoor life, and right now I am living in the heart of the oil fields of Oklahoma. I would like to know if some one can help me to get a good job on some ranch in the West. I can ride, shoot, and rope a little. Any one wanting to know about the oil fields, please write, and I will gladly send the information. I will answer all letters."

A New York State gal, Miss Anna Lighthall, writes: "I am fifteen years old and a lover of the outdoor sports, especially horseback riding. I would like to hear from some real cowgirl who lives on a ranch somewhere in the West, either Arizona, Montana, or New Mexico. Now please, all you cowgirls, write, and I promise that I will answer you pronto."

Stanley Lasik, of Pennsylvania, writes: "I live in the country, and would like to have some Western Pen Pals from Wyoming, Montana, or Arizona. I would like to hear from some one who can ride, rope, and shoot. I will exchange snapshots with any one and will answer all letters that I receive."

Another Pennsylvania boy, William F. Russell, writes: "I live on a five-hundred-acre farm, and there are lots of cars here, but not the kind they have out West. I am not a bad horseback rider, and love to shoot. I would like to hear from some forest rangers, or some boys around my age, which is sev-

enteen, who live on the border of the United States and Canada. I would also like to hear from some Pen Pals in the States of Texas, California, and Montana. Please hurry and write to me. I promise to answer all letters."

Hyar's word from a Michigan hombre. He writes: "I am seventeen years old and five feet nine inches tall. I would like to have some information about border patrol, riding, roping, or shooting. Come on, fellows! Write and fill me up with information! I am waiting to hear from some one and will answer all letters." His name is Stanley Olszewski.

Ray Griggs, of Texas, writes in: "I am sixteen years old and would like to have a Pen Pal from Colorado, as I would like to have a job on some ranch in that part of the country. I wish some one in Colorado would write to me as soon as possible, and I will answer their letters immediately."

The State of Michigan is contributin' another Pen Pal to our list this week. His name is George Koskela, and he writes: "I am a boy of sixteen years of age and have spent my life in Michigan. I have always wanted to live on a ranch, but it doesn't seem possible that I ever will. I would like to learn about ranch life from some boys west of the Mississippi River, and would be very glad to receive information on anything pertaining to ranches. I will answer all letters that I receive."

Albert Hurst, of Louisiana, writes: "I would appreciate it if you will tell some of the Western gents to write to me. I am twenty-three, and my main weakness in life is the reading of WILD WEST WEEKLY, but I guess whoever sees this has the same weakness, so I have nothing to fear."

Willard Brown, of California, says as how he would like some cowboy Pen

Pals from the West. He lives in California, but was born on a farm in Missouri. He would like to hear from any one from nine to forty. I should say that that is allowin' you people a pretty wide range.

Hyar's a letter from an hombre named Ernest Schwertschaif, from Michigan, an' he writes: "I'm an hombre that wants a Pen Pal from somewhere in the West, around Texas, Mexico, and California. I am thirteen years old and would like Pen Pals between thirteen and fifteen. I can ride and rope and shoot a little, and can also tell you a lot of information about the Eastern part of the good old U. S. A."

An Illinois hombre, by name of Wilbur Jones, writes in: "I would like to exchange letters from boys between sixteen and twenty who live anywhere in the United States. I am interested in nature and the outdoors, and can give a lot of information about Illinois and Abe Lincoln's home. I will answer all letters."

A New York boy, Henry Resnick, writes: "I would like to get the words of 'The Cowboy's Lament' and 'The Dying Cowboy.' I would also like to have some Pen Pals from the West. I have a stock of paper and envelopes all ready to start answering letters. I am a chap of sixteen years, that you may call rough and ready."

"Am a very faithful reader of your **WILD WEST WEEKLY** and am much interested in all the characters," writes Russel Sanburn, of Indiana. "This is my first time to write to you, but I hope you can spare me a little corner in your column. I am interested in outdoor life and am very fond of hunting. I will be pleased to hear from any hombres, men or boys, especially those who are in the ranching business, or in good hunting districts. But I'll answer all letters I receive, and the

farther from civilization they come, the better."

Robert James, of Kansas, writes: "I have been a reader of your magazine for a long time and like to read about the West, but I would like to hear from a real cowboy, so please help me find a pal."

Francis Bell, of New York, writes: "I am a lonely fifteen-year-old boy. I have finished school and would like to punch cows. I would like to have some cowboy of Montana tell me all about a cow-puncher's life. Please have some waddy get busy."

Robert R. B., of New York, writes: "Oh boy, Sam! Will you please try to get me some Pen Pals? I should like to hear from any one from sixteen to twenty-five years of age. I don't care where you dig 'em up, although I should rather like to hear from Arizona, Colorado, Mexico, Montana, Texas or Wyoming. I am a trapper, or rather, I trap in the winter and fall, and work on a farm during the summer. I have trapped about five years now, even though I am young. I like canoeing or any boating, fishing, hunting, and picture writing. Oh, yes! I like to ride horseback, too. I'm sixteen and r'aring for pals."

Waal, folks, I sure do hope that you all are satisfied with the Pen Pals I've given you to choose from this week.

Personally, I think you all have a nice lot to choose from, an', no matter which one, or ones, you choose, you ought to get a good Pen Pal, and I hope a real good friend.

Adios, until next week, when I'll have another batch that's just as good as this one, I hope.

Don't forget them that instructions about printing your name an' address, an' givin' me the name of the State an' the magazine date of publication that you found your Pen Pal in.

The Wranglers Corner



SAY, hombres," we says, lookin' around at the rannies gathered ter hear what the mail's brought in, "it shore looks ter me like the day's comin' when we'll have ter put an extry leaf in the table an' lug in more chairs ter accommodate the crowd at the Wranglers Corner. It'll be plumb overpopulated when all the new gents that are growin' popular with the readers git together."

"I don't see as it's overcrowded ter-night," speaks up Lum Yates. "The usual crowd's heah, fur as I can see—the Circle J bunch, the Bar U twins, Jim Hazel, my pards from the Bar M, an' yo', Whistlin' Kid. We make a right smaht gatherin', but theah's still room tuh spare."

"But listen ter this!" we explains, takin' up the first letter from the pile heaped up in the middle o' the table. "I reckon this will show yuh what I mean. That was a time when yuh could expect the same old faces hyar night arter night. But now, jedgin' by what the mail bag brings in, the readers are simply insistin' on havin' their new favorites drop in more frequent—which ain't sayin' that they've seared on their old stand-bys."

An' all hands quiet down while we reads:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: We have been reading the 3W for two years and we have found nothing better yet. We heartily object to Victor Raglan's ideas concerning Billy West and the Circle J bunch. He and Kid Wolf tie for first place with us. Then Bar U twins, and the Ranny Kid, and Bud Jones are all good.

Keep the magazine just as it is. It's fine. Let's have Kid Wolf on the cover, boss. What say? We sure admire him. If there is any one else that's kickin' about Billy West, send 'em to us. We'll take care of 'em.

Say, boss, how about Poet Pete? Don't forget him. He's keen. Give us more stories about Poet Pete and Kid Wolf. And don't spoil your magazine by leaving Billy West out. Lum Yates and Zeke are fine. So long.

THE KID SISTERS.

Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

"I think Kid Wolf will be on the cover one of these days, won't he, Range Boss?" asks the Shootin' Fool. "He ought to be pictured so that the readers will recognize him when they meet him."

"He'll git there in time," we says. "But jedgin' from the letters that come in, the readers don't have no trouble now recognizin' him when he puts in his appearance on the 3W spread. An'

hyar's another letter askin' fer more o' them Ward M. Stevens' characters."

An' the room quiets while we reads:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Say, Boss, how is the 3W? Coming fine, I hope. Just thought I would drop you a line to tell you how I like the 3W spread.

All of the Circle J waddies are fine. Buck Foster is a fightin' fool when he gets mad. And I sure like Jim Hazel stories. And say, Range Boss, please put Jim Hazel's picture on the cover, and Loosh's Carey's, too.

Tell Lum Yates to be sure and clean up Dirty Mike's gang of rustlers and killers. I like all of the Wranglers Corner fine, except Bud Jones of Texas, because there are too many Spanish words in his stories that I can't understand. Tell Blondy of Twin Bells spread that I sure did like his story "Stallion Talk." The Bar U twins are fine. Give us some more Ward M. Stevens stories, like "The Ace of Colts" and "Pony Mail."

Well, Boss, good-by. Yours, till Devil Tripp kills Billy West.

FRANK L. TAYLOR.

Poyner, Texas.

Thar's a contented smile on Buck's face while he keeps tuggin' at the ends of his walrus mustache.

"That hombre shore knows his mavericks," he says. "An' I'll be a horned toad if I don't agree with him about them Spanish words. If there's anything I hates, it's ter have some one usin' lingo I can't understand."

"An' that's one thing we tries ter be sparin' with—them Spanish words," we speaks up. "We don't let a gent string off a hull bunch of 'em without explainin' what they mean in English every one kin understand. An' ef yuh examine them Bud Jones stories, I reckon yuh'll find thet most o' them Spanish words was explained in English, though some o' them gents Bud run up agin' might 'a' got by with a few thet wa'n't explained what they mean."

"Waal, yuh'd better keep yore eye on that Texas Ranger ter see that he don't git too free with that thar Spanish lingo," growls Buck. "'Cause ef I strike too many of 'em, I'm plumb apt ter fergit myself an' call him ter account with my smoke pole."

"Mistlee Floster velly ignolant,"

chirps Sing Lo. "He no likee Chineese lingo, so be."

"Ignorant, huh, am I?" howls Buck. "Waal, I'd ruther be than listen ter yuh when yuh sings yore outlandish gibberish. That Spanish lingo is sweet music ter my ears alongside of it."

"An' hyar's more sweet music fer yore ears, Buck," we speaks up, glancin' through the next letter. "Lay yore ears back now an' listen ter this."

An' Buck shore does, while we reads:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Just writin' in to let you know I think a heap of your magazine. I'm crazy about Buck Foster, and I'm with him. I like all the Circle J outfit, but Buck Foster's got the ace. Why doesn't Señor Endicott have Billy West meet up with some swell cowgirl? That would make it a heap interestin'.

I also want to make comments on a letter written to your spread by an hombre what raked the Circle J outfit somethin' scandalous. If he ever shows his face where I can see it again, he's going to feel somethin' mighty unpleasant that he won't readily forget.

I disremember his name. But he claimed as how Billy West an' his pards were so rotten you had to put 'em first to get 'em over with. I ate fire when I read that. If he don't like the stories WILD WEST WEEKLY publishes, he ought to hand the magazine to some other guy who'd appreciate it. I can't ever get a WILD WEST WEEKLY here 'cause they're all sold out, so I told the dealer to order an extra one for me every week.

I think your magazine is a humdinger. Fact is, the stories are great, and I'll be there when the fight begins.

I am a cowgirl, but am at present here in town. I am seventeen. Give us more stories like you've been giving us in the past. They're great. Tell Buck Foster I'd like to shake hands with him personally. I like the descriptions Cleve Endicott gives of Buck Foster. Tell Cleve he's great, and I admire him lots.

Good luck to the Wranglers Corner.

A pard,

BUCKY.

Joe Scott busts out with a howl o' laughter when we finishes thet letter.

"Imagine Billy West marryin' some cowgal he meets up with on one o' his cattle-buyin' trips!", he exclaims. "Tolly, kin yuh picture yoreself tied down with a ~~ball~~ an' chain?"

"No, I can't, Joe," Billy West replies. "Not yet, anyhow. But let's hear some more letters, Boss. They're a lot more interestin' to me than this talk about me marryin'."

So we opens the next letter an' reads:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Just a few lines to express my opinion of the WILD WEST WEEKLY.

I think that Billy West and his pards are in the best stories in the book, and I think Hack Lawn was very wrong in giving his opinion of these waddies. I also like the Ranny Kid, Jim Hazel, and Lum Yates and his dog, including all the rest of the waddies in these stories.

I would like to get the words to "The Dying Cowboy," if you can give them to me. I hope you will consider me a member of the Wranglers Corner.

Best regards to everybody,

ANNA LIGHTHALL.

Fort Plain, New York.

"How about havin' the Whistlin' Kid sing 'The Dyin' Cowboy,' Boss?" suggests Lum Yates. "The readers seem tuh be demandin' it, an' I reckon we ought tuh oblige 'em."

"We would, but the time's too short, it's gittin' so late," we replies. "Mebbe some other night we'll call on the Kid ter sing it fer us."

"But I shore hopes they'll never call on that heathen ter warble any o' his tunes," says Buck. "If he did, they'd shore be more'n one dyin' cowboy among them that was obliged ter listen ter him."

An' with every one laughin' in good humor, the meetin' breaks up, an' all the rannies say adios till they gather ter-gether again here next week.

THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK

DEVIL TRIPPS' THANKSGIVING

Novelette

By CLEVE ENDICOTT

The delights of a turkey dinner at Circle J git a bad setback when Billy West's old enemy hits the spread ag'in.

THE WAY OF THE EAGLE

A "Bud Jones" of Texas Story

By J. ALLAN DUNN

An' the way of a Texas Ranger brings him inter plumb fast action.

THET YEARLIN' RANGE RIDER

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Burnin' leather an' smokin' lead with Blondy o' Twin Bells.

THE MONTANA TOWHEAD

Novelette

By PHILIP F. DEERE

He rode inter Arizona on a b'ilin' hot day, an' he het up the country even more afore he headed north ag'in.

Also stories of Jim Hazel, Forest Ranger, by Lee Harrington; the Shootin' Fool, by Houston Irvine; Lum Yates, by Collins H. H. —and others.

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

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