

STREET & SMITH'S  
**WILD WEST**

**15¢**

**WEEKLY**

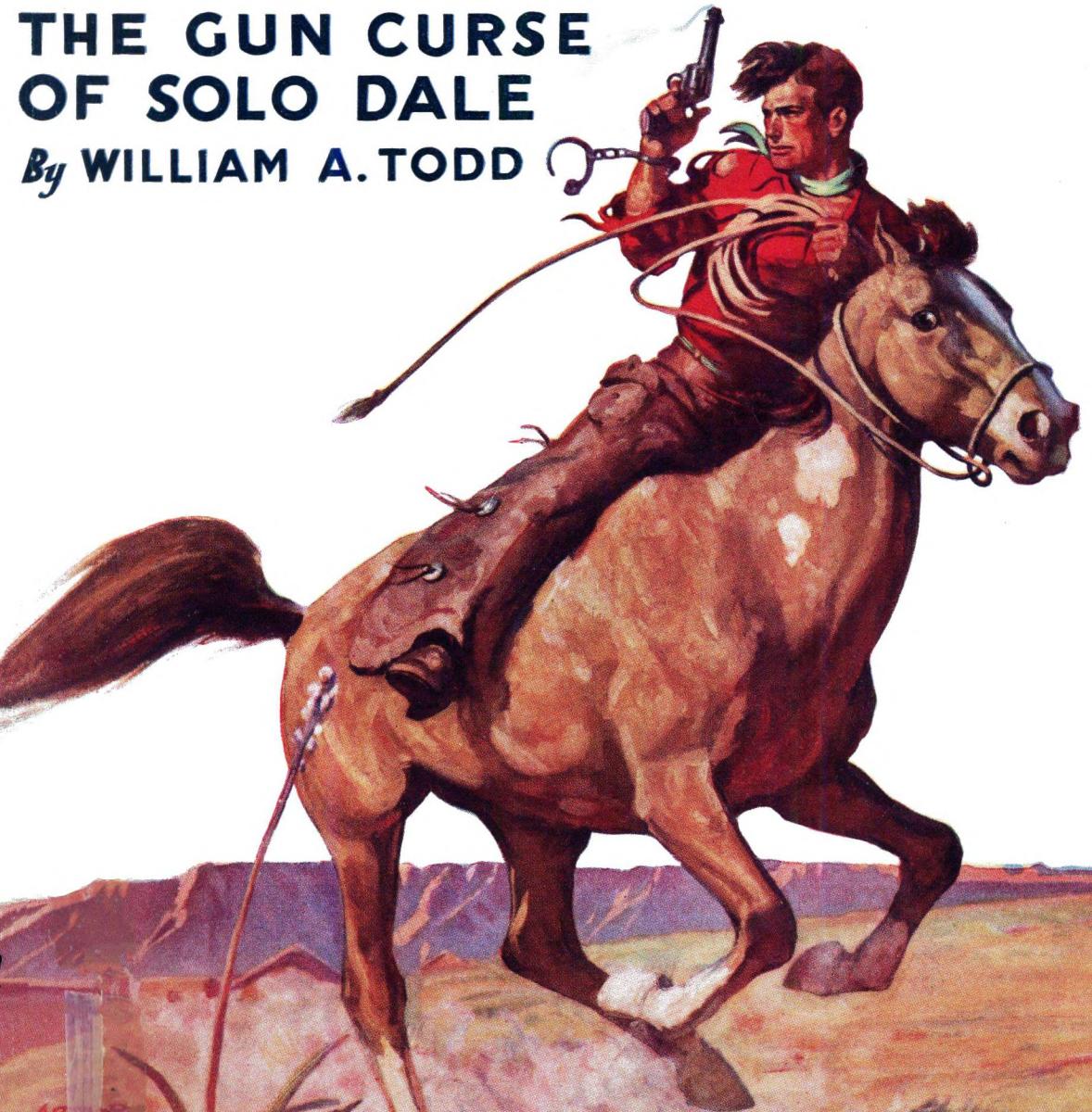
CONTENTS COPYRIGHTED 1934

**DEC. 29**

**ALL STORIES COMPLETE**

**THE GUN CURSE  
OF SOLO DALE**

*By* **WILLIAM A. TODD**



# ANNOUNCING AMAZING TYPEWRITER BARGAIN

BRAND NEW MODEL No. 5

REMINGTON  
PORTABLE  
10¢ A DAY

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE



10 DAY  
FREE TRIAL  
OFFER

## BIG PRICE REDUCTION

● Positively the greatest portable typewriter bargain ever offered! Now for the first time Remington, world-famous manufacturer, offers a NEW purchase plan... only 10¢ a day buys this latest model machine! Not a used or rebuilt typewriter. Not an incomplete machine. A beautiful brand new regulation Remington Portable. Standard 4-row keyboard; Standard width carriage; margin release on keyboard; back spacer; automatic ribbon reverse; every essential feature found in standard typewriters!

### ACT... WHILE LOW PRICE HOLDS GOOD!

New wage scales in our own factories, and in the factories of the companies which make our materials, point definitely to higher prices. Stocks of machines on hand make possible the present unbelievably low cash price on this machine. Everything points to higher prices. We don't believe that we can maintain the present big price reduction in the face of constantly rising costs in every one of our departments. So we say..."Act fast!"

### 10 DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER

You can try this machine for 10 days without risking one penny of your money. *Not even shipping charges.* Send for complete details on this most liberal offer. Get attractive new catalogue illustrating and describing the many Remington models available on unusually low terms. Clip coupon today!

### EVERY ESSENTIAL FEATURE found in Standard Machines

Buying a typewriter isn't like buying a suit of clothes. Many Remington portables, seeing 10 years of hard service are still in active use. When you buy...buy a machine with every standard feature. Remington Model 5 is the most compact and durable portable ever built...includes all essential standard typewriter features. This beautiful machine

represents the height of economy... unequalled economy in first cost... unequalled economy in service.

It is today the best value ever offered in typewriter history... and that statement comes from the company that has constantly made typewriter history. Now. It is a real bargain offer.

### Specifications...

The Model 5 includes every essential feature found in standard machines. Standard 4-row keyboard. Complete visibility. Standard width carriage for long envelopes. Margin release on keyboard. All design for easy and rapid opera-

tion. Margin release on keyboard. Automatic ribbon reverse. Backspacer. Two-color ribbonshift. Variable line spacer. Adjustable carriage stop. Patent paperclip. Key one of the most useful features found on any typewriter. Weight 5 lbs. 10 oz. Furnished with Price of Elite type.

### TYPING COURSE

When you get your new Remington Portable, get the **ABSOLUTELY FREE** a 16-page course in typing. It teaches the Touch System, speeds up work. It is clear, simple and illustrated. Instructions are easy as A, B, C. Even a child can understand this method. A little study and the average child can learn to type in a few days. Follow this course during the 10-DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER that we give you on your typewriter. At the end of that time, you should be able to dash off letters faster than with pen and ink.

FREE



### CARRYING CASE

With every Remington No. 5, a **FREE** carrying case sturdily built...tightly closed...with heavy Ospont fabric. Top is removed in one motion, leaving machine firmly attached to base. Can be used anywhere... on knees, in chair, on train.

FREE



Remington Rand Inc., Dept. 108-12 Buffalo, N. Y.

Please tell me how I can buy a new Remington Portable typewriter for only 10¢ a day. Also enclose your new catalog.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

### Money making opportunities always open

Hundreds of jobs are waiting for people who can type. A typewriter has many uses. It is used in logical, informative form, helps you write clear, understandable reports, letters, articles, or stories. Remington Portable has started many a young man and woman on the road to success.



### A Gift for Every Member of the Family

If you want a gift for birthday, Christmas, or graduation... one that both mother or father or brother will use and appreciate for years to come... give a Remington Portable. It's the one gift that can be used and enjoyed and built by every member of the family.

**CLIP COUPON NOW**

REMINGTON RAND INC., DEPT. 108-12, BUFFALO, N. Y.



# ARE YOU AFRAID YOU WILL BE FIRED?

ARE you sitting on the anxious bench wondering what will happen to you if business slacks up? Are you one of the many small-salaried, untrained workers who are always the first to go when employers start cutting the salary list?

Don't have this spectre of unemployment hanging over your head forever. Train yourself to do some one thing so well that your services will be in demand. Employers don't discharge such men. They *promote* them!

Decide today that you are going to get the specialized training you must have if you are ever

going to get a real valuable job at a real salary.

Right at home, in the odds and ends of spare time that now go to waste, you can prepare for the position you want in the work you like best. The International Correspondence Schools will train you just as they are training thousands of other men to get ahead in the world.

At least find out how, by marking and mailing the coupon printed here. There's no cost or obligation, and it takes only a moment of your time, but it may be the means of changing your whole life.

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Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "Who Wins and Why," and full particulars about the subject before which I have marked X:

- Architect
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Age.....

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Occupation.....

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



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Cover Picture—Scene from

"The Gun Curse Of Solo Dale" . . . *Painted by Arthur Mitchell*

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STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC., 79 7th AVE., NEW YORK, N. Y.

# WAS BROKE -- 6½ MONTHS LATER WORTH \$1200.00 CASH

## NOT A CONTEST—THIS OPPORTUNITY IS OPEN TO EVERYONE

ARE you "penny pinching"—with a gold mine of opportunity right at your finger tips? Have you let doubts and fears bluff you into living in poverty? Have you skimped and pinched until you think there is no hope for the future? Then stop and read the startling true story of Hans Coordes. For the sake of your loved ones and your own future welfare, investigate my plans. Don't pass judgment until you get the actual facts. Resolve to be fearless and daring in knowing the truth.

## SHACKLES OF POVERTY BROKEN

### Men and Women Find Financial Independence

With my plans your earnings begin at once. Not tedious course of training. No long wait or delay in getting cash. I start you with an amazing plan which brings you rich profit rewards the very first day. The work is pleasant and healthful. Even beginners make up to \$2.50 an hour. Those who can work full time make up to \$60.00 a week. I furnish everything to start you in this good paying business. Better write me at once.

#### Many Vacancies Already Filled— Big Earnings Reported

Men and women who have already accepted my generous offer send me glowing reports of big earnings made. Elmer Hughes, Mo., reported \$72.00 cleared in a week. Howard B. Ziegler, Pa., as much as \$103.32 in a week. W. J. Way, Kans., \$78.15 in a single week. Here's Max Barrett, Wash., who made \$62.00 in one week. Florence R. Tripp, Mass., had profits of \$10.00 in a day and was given a car besides her steady daily earnings. I have scores of exceptional reports like these to show you positive evidence of the wonderful earning possibilities of my offer.

#### "Quick Start" Plan Brings Instant Profits

I help you get a flying start with proven plans showing you exactly what to do. No waiting for the cash you need now. You don't even need a car to start. I'll explain all of this in my 20-page free book, including my plan for giving cars to producers. I'll send everything just as soon as I get your name. In this book of facts I reveal all of the startling details of my money-making plans free to you.

#### Prompt Action Pays

If you want your share of these quick cash profits, then don't delay. I must hear from you first before I can put my plans in your hands. The sooner you send for them the quicker you will get relief from money distress. I am president of a million-dollar nationally known company. I manufacture and pack nearly 300 famous Food Products and Necessities and need your help to distribute these products to waiting consumers. Anyone who is honest and ambitious can quickly qualify. The more urgently you need money the more important it is that I hear from you at once.

**EXTRA CASH FOR YOU**



#### HANS COORDES

Stated the following under solemn oath: "I made net profits of \$27.95 in a day and \$66.40 in a single week. In addition to these cash profits I was given a new Ford Tudor Sedan as a bonus."

#### Read This Amazing True Story

Hans Coordes was penniless. He saw one of my public announcements. He sent me his name. Later he wrote me this letter of gratitude: "Only 6½ months ago I started with your company without a penny to my name and today (I just finished my balance) I am worth a little over \$1200.00. I can hardly believe it possible—such success in times like these. But it's true—many a day I made from \$15.00 to \$20.00 clear profit."

My plans are simple and direct. You don't need experience or training. I start you and back you up to the limit. The profits are large and you get them all—you don't divide up with anyone. The work is dignified and pleasant. There are no layoffs or dull seasons. The business belongs to you. You have no big cash investment like a storekeeper. And yet you make up to \$60.00 a week.

#### Send No Money

I need your help, just as I needed Hans Coordes. He broke the shackles of poverty when he wrote me. Why not you? Costs nothing to find out. There is no obligation—just send your name on coupon or penny postcard. Mail it now.

#### FREE OPPORTUNITY COUPON

ALBERT MILLS, President

3234 Miamisburg Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio



Here's my name. Without obligation tell me how I can make up to \$60.00 a week.

Name .....

Address .....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)



# SPECIAL OFFER! GUARANTEED UNDERWOOD

Yours for  
**10¢ a Day**

**No Money  
Down**

Sent on  
**10 DAY FREE TRIAL**

**\$100.00 MODEL ONLY \$39.90**



Famous  
No. 5

Positively the greatest bargain ever offered. A genuine full sized office model Underwood No. 5 for only \$39.90 (rental) or on easy terms. High-grade improvements including standard 4-row keyboard, 2-color ribbon, automatic ribbon reverse, shiftlock key, 2-color ribbon, etc.

This perfect all purpose typewriter. Completely rebuilt and **FULLY GUARANTEED**. Lowest terms—**10¢ a Day**.

#### Money-Back Guarantee

Send coupon for 10-day trial. If you decide to keep it, pay only \$39.90 a month until \$12.00 (term price) is paid. Limited offer—act at once.

Learn Touch Typewriting  
Completely—Genuinely! Courtesy of the Famous Van Patten Touch Typewriting System—fully illustrated, easily learned, given during this offer.

INTERNATIONAL TYPEWRITER EXCHANGE

233 West Monroe St., Chicago, Ill., Dept. 1212

Send Underwood No. 5 (P. O. in Chicago) at once for 10-day trial. If I am not satisfied, I can return it without charge. If I keep it I will pay \$3.00 a month until I have paid \$44.90 (term price) in full.

Name ..... Ago .....

Address .....

Town ..... State .....

## New Streamlined ELECTRIC TRAIN "Silver Bullet"



25c

kit ready to assemble is only 25c, plus 10c postage and packing. Rush your order to—

INTERSTATE ELECTRIC COMPANY  
DEPT. 13

A complete Electric Train kit for only 25c! Of course this isn't a \$20.00 train, but just listen to what you get for your quarter: the parts for a fast, peppy motor—complete base, wheels, wire, etc.—beautiful black and silver paint, etc. Needs no tracks or transformer—big savings! And as for building it, why some kids say they have twice as much fun building it as running it—it's so simple! This neat & flashy

kit ready to assemble is only 25c, plus 10c postage and pack-

ing. Rush your order to—

INTERSTATE ELECTRIC COMPANY  
MADISON, WISCONSIN

## \* BALD MEN!

### WAKE UP YOUR DORMANT HAIR ROOTS!

If your hair roots are not dead but merely dormant, give your scalp a chance by stimulating the hair roots with Japanese Oil, the anti-septic counter-irritant. Thousands have reported astonishing results. Many who had given up in despair turned to Japanese Oil as a last resort, and have been rewarded with hair growth.

You owe it to yourself to try this highly successful preparation. You'll be amazed at the way it removes loose dandruff, stops scalp itch and helps promote new, strong, healthy growth. Get a bottle at any druggist in America. (Economy size, \$1.)

**FREE:** Valuable book, "The Truth About the Hair." Write National Remedy Co., 56 W. 35th St., Dept. 54, New York.

## JAPANESE OIL

\* This advertisement was reviewed and approved by a registered physician.

# Was this a Miracle?



HER

## ASTHMA DISTRESS

### VANISHED

. . . and has not returned

It happened like magic. After years and years of pitiful suffering, her asthma torture suddenly disappeared. And during the seventeen years that followed, it has not returned! Read her own words:

"I had asthma for 17 years. I coughed most of the time and couldn't rest day or night. I tried everything, but grew so weak I could hardly walk across the room. After taking one bottle of Nacor, I could do most of my housework. I am still feeling fine."

So wrote Mrs. Mary Bean, Nashua, Iowa, seventeen years ago.

### Seventeen Years Later— Still In Splendid Health

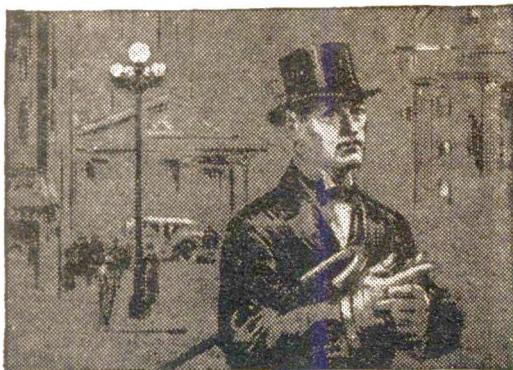
Was her relief merely temporary? Read what Mrs. Bean has to say *seventeen years after taking Nacor*.

"I continue in good health and am still praising Nacor. I have no signs of asthma."

What is Nacor? Is it a medicine? Is it an opiate? How is it used? Is it safe to take? Why is it called, "The Great Benefactor To Those Who Suffer From Asthma?" Why do so many who suffered say it is worth its weight in gold?

Do you know the answers to these questions? If you suffer the miseries of asthma, if you are a victim of those dreadful, weakening gasping spells, you *cannot afford NOT to know these answers*. Once you know them, you should never again feel your case is hopeless. You, too, should realize that asthma suffering is no longer necessary.

**FREE.** Regardless of how long you have suffered, you should still be able to get relief. Write today for the booklet, "The Health Question—Answered by Nacor." It is absolutely free. Write Nacor Medicine Company, 636 State Life Bldg., Indianapolis, Indiana.



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*Secret Service Operator 38 is on the job*

**F**OLLOW him through all the excitement of his chase of the counterfeit gang. See how a crafty operator works. Telltale finger prints on the lamp stand in the murdered girl's room! The detective's cigarette case is handled by the unsuspecting gangster, and a great mystery is solved. Better than fiction. It's true, every word of it. No obligation. Just send the coupon and get—

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No. 38 Made to His Chief**

And the best part of it all is this—it may open your eyes to the great opportunity for **YOU** as a well paid Finger Print Expert. This is a young, fast growing profession. This school has taken men and trained them for high official positions. This is the kind of work you would like. Days full of excitement. A regular monthly salary. Rewards.

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**INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE**  
1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 27-79 Chicago, Illinois

**Institute of Applied Science**  
1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 27-79 Chicago, Illinois  
Gentlemen:—Without any obligation whatever, send me the Reports of Operator No. 38, also your illustrated Free Book on Finger Prints and your low prices and Easy Terms Offer. Literature will NOT be sent to boys under 17 years of age.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_

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**GOODRICH-FIRESTONE**  
**GOOD YEAR** **2-15**  
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desire anyone to excel  
our quality. Every standard  
brand tire reconstructed  
by our superior, modern  
method is positively guar-  
anteed to give full month's service under  
severest road conditions. This guarantee is backed  
by the entire financial resources of an old reliable  
company. Order Now at Today's Lowest Prices.

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Size	Run	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40-21		\$2.17	10.11	30x3.16	2.38	.76
29x4.50-21		2.45	.88	31x4	2.98	.88
29x4.60-21		2.45	.88	32x4	2.98	.88
29x4.75-20		2.45	.96	33x4	2.98	.88
29x5.00-20		2.88	1.06	34x4	3.46	1.16
29x5.00-20		2.88	1.06	32x4.5	3.35	1.16
29x5.25-18		2.96	1.12	33x4.5	3.46	1.16
29x5.25-18		2.96	1.12	34x4.5	3.46	1.16
29x5.25-19		2.96	1.12	35x4.5	3.46	1.16
29x5.25-19		2.96	1.12	36x4.5	3.46	1.16
29x5.50-18		3.38	1.32	37x4.5	3.46	1.16
29x5.50-18		3.38	1.32	38x4.5	3.46	1.16
29x5.50-19		3.38	1.32	39x4.5	3.46	1.16
29x6.00-18		3.45	1.38	40x4.5	3.46	1.16
29x6.00-20		3.45	1.38	41x4.5	3.46	1.16
32x6.00-21		3.61	1.38	42x4.5	3.46	1.16
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Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
80x6	94.25	11.96	80x6	7.98	2.76
82x6	94.25	11.96	82x6	10.28	3.06
84x6	94.25	11.96	84x6	12.45	4.26
86x6	12.45	4.26	87x8	18.98	4.96

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SEND ONLY \$1 DEPOSIT on each tire (On each truck tire send a \$4 deposit.) We ship balance C. O. D., 5% discount for full cash with order. Any tire failing to give 12 months' service will be replaced at half price.

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### PILGRIM RADIO

## PILES DON'T BE CUT Until You Try This Wonderful Treatment

for pile suffering. If you have piles in any form write for a FREE sample of Page's Pile Tablets and you will bless the day that you read this. Write today. E. R. Page Co., 2315-L Page Bldg., Marshall, Mich.

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DR. W. D. SMITH  
INVENTOR

MIWEST PRODUCTS CO., B-300, KALAMAZOO, MICH.

An enlarged, inflamed or faulty Prostate Gland very often causes Lameback, Frequent Night Rising, Leg Pains, Pelvis Pains, Loss of Vigor, Insomnia, etc. Many physicians endorse massage as safe & effective treatment. (See Reference Book of the Medical Sciences, Vol. VII, 3rd edition). Use "PROSAGEER," a new invention which enables one man to treat his Prostate Gland in the privacy of his home. It often brings relief with the first treatment and must help, or it costs you nothing. No Drugs or Electricity.

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EXPLAINS TRIAL OFFER. ADDRESS  
MIWEST PRODUCTS CO., B-300, KALAMAZOO, MICH.

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25c

Post-  
paid.

own one of these automatic repeating pistols and be the envy of all the other kids in the neighborhood. PRICE 25c.  
Big catalog of novelties, jacks, tricks, puzzles, books, etc., 10c.

JOHNSON SMITH CO., Dept. 100, RACINE, WIS.

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Train for

## RADIO IN 10 WEEKS AT COYNE

The great Coyne Shops in Chicago have a world-wide reputation for training men here in Chicago in this big-pay field in only 10 weeks. Then they get behind you to assure success by giving you life-time employment service. By my new plan YOU can take advantage of their wonderful method of learning-by-doing NOW—no need to lose time and money while you strive and save to raise the necessary tuition.



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H. C. Lewis

President

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ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_

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# Help Your Kidneys

## Don't Take Drastic Drugs

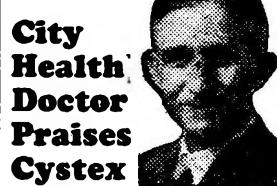
You have 9 million tiny tubes or filters in your kidneys, which are at work night and day cleaning out Acids and poisonous wastes and purifying your blood, which circulates through your kidneys 200 times an hour. So it's no wonder that poorly functioning Kidneys may be the real cause of feeling tired, run-down, nervous, Getting Up Nights, Rheumatic Pains and other troubles.

Nearly everyone is likely to suffer from poorly functioning Kidneys at times because modern foods and drinks, weather changes, exposure, colds, nervous strain, worry and over-work often place an extra heavy load on the Kidneys.

But when your Kidneys need help, don't take chances with drastic or irritating drugs. Be careful! If poorly functioning Kidneys or Bladder make you suffer from Getting Up Nights, Leg Pains, Nervousness, Stiffness, Burning, Smarting, Itching, Acidity, Rheumatic Pains, Lumbago, Loss of Vitality, Dark Circles under the eyes, or Dizziness, don't waste a minute. Try the Doctor's prescription Cystex (pronounced Siss-tex). See for yourself the amazing quickness with which it soothes, tones and cleans raw, sore irritated membranes.

Cystex is a remarkably successful prescription for poorly functioning Kidneys and Bladder. It is helping millions of sufferers, and many say that in just a day or so it helped them sleep like a baby, brought new strength and energy, eased rheumatic pains and stiffness—made them feel years younger. Cystex starts circulating through the system in 15 minutes, helping the Kidneys in their work of cleaning out the blood and removing poisonous acids and wastes in the system. It does its work quickly and positively but does not contain any dopes, narcotics or habit-forming drugs. The formula is in every package.

Because of its amazing and almost worldwide success, the Doctor's Prescription known as Cystex, (pronounced Siss-tex) is offered to sufferers of poor Kidney and Bladder functions under the fair-play guarantee to fix you up to your complete satisfaction or money back on return of empty package. It's only 3¢ a dose. Ask your druggist for Cystex today and see for yourself how much younger, stronger and better you can feel by simply cleaning out your Kidneys. Cystex must do the work or cost you nothing.



Dr. W. R. GEORGE

### City Health Doctor Praises Cystex

Doctors and druggists everywhere approve of the prescription Cystex because of its splendid ingredients and quick action. For instance, Dr. W. R. George, graduate Medical Dept., University of Indiana, former Health Commissioner of Indianapolis, and Medical Director for insurance company 10 years, recently wrote the following letter:

"There is little question but what properly functioning Kidney and Bladder organs are vital to the health. Insufficient Kidney excretions are the cause of much needless suffering with aching back, weakness, painful joints and rheumatic pains, headaches and a general run-down, exhausted body. This condition also interferes with normal rest at night by causing the sufferer to rise frequently for relief, and results in painful excretion, itching, smarting and burning. I am of the opinion that Cystex definitely corrects frequent causes of poor kidney functions of such conditions and I have actually prescribed in my own practice for many years past the same ingredients contained in your formula. Cystex not only exerts a splendid influence in flushing poisons from the urinary tract, but also has an antiseptic action and assists in freeing the blood of retained toxins. Believing as I do that so meritorious a product deserves the endorsement of the Medical Profession, I am happy indeed to lend my name and photograph for your use in advertising Cystex." Signed W. R. George, M. D.

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# The Gun Curse Of Solo Dale

By William A. Todd

Author of "Hoss Thieves Of Porcupine Canyon," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### COWARDICE.

THE outside night had grown as black as gunpowder when a heavy knock shook the cabin door. Inside, by the light of the fireplace, "Horse" Canby was teaching arithmetic to an orphaned kid who was working for him as a wrangler. The queer old bachelor wasn't much good at adding and subtracting himself. He was saying:

"Solo, we has ter figure this problem out like change fer a dollar. Now, suppose yuh buy two bits' worth of java. How much dinero do yuh git back out of one buck?"

"Six bits," replied "Solo" Dale, a sheepish grin twisting his freckled face.

"And how much is six bits?" Horse asked loftily.

"Three quarters."

"No!" Horse exploded. "That ain't what I'm shootin' at. Six bits is seventy-five cents. A dollar is



one hundred cents. Yuh must figure everythin' in cents—only I figures that yuh ain't got no sense."

At that moment, the cabin door trembled under the blows of what seemed to be a gun butt.

Horse Canby caught his breath. Quick fear drained the healthy red from his long, bronclike face. It wasn't the first time that the old bronc breeder had been scared rabbit-stiff by unexpected callers. His large eyes flashed to the front window, where a skulker might spy into his lonely cabin and recognize him in the firelight.

Horse Canby's past was a mystery, but he had hinted once to Solo that old foes still hoped to catch him napping. The young wrangler asked in an awed tone:

"Do yuh think it's one of yore old enemies?"

"Sit tight," the veteran whispered, "whilst I slide over ter the bunk fer the ten-gauge."

Before Horse could get his old bones out of the chair, the knock sounded again—emphatic, commanding. And a voice called:

"Open up, hombres. It's me—Jake Riley of the Flying Shoe."

Horse groaned with relief. Solo Dale sprang to unbar the oaken door for the owner of the neighboring spread.

Jake Riley of the Flying Shoe stumbled into the cabin. He was hatless. The breeze of a hard ride had made his hair stand on end like porcupine quills.

"Horse!" Jake shouted. "Two members of the Hitchcock gang are trapped in the basin. Get your artillery. One of the coyotes is Maverick Hitchcock, the son of Torch Hitchcock. The other is Joe Jennings, the famous gun slinger. Don't sit there an' stare. Get yore shooting irons."

Though Horse sat as if petrified with terror, young Solo tensed like

a hunting dog to the howl of a wolf. He knew much more about the history of the wild Hitchcock pack than about arithmetic. Wasn't it said that the Hitchcock gang had murdered his father on the cattle trail two years before—a tragedy that left the kid homeless until old Horse Canby gave him a wrangling job?

Some day, somewhere, Solo would find evidence against the owl-hoot gang. He was waiting for the day when no bronc could throw him, and a Colt .45 didn't kick like a stick of dynamite in his youthful hand.

"Mr. Riley, I'll go with yuh an' Horse!" Solo ejaculated. "Young Maverick Hitchcock ain't a year older than me."

"Yuh sartinly won't go nowhere!" Horse Canby cried, rousing from the stupor which had gripped him since the mention of the Hitchcock name. "Them outlaws ain't our fight. We want no part o' them."

Solo was staggered. "Why, Horse!" he gasped, and stared at the stark terror in his boss's face. "I never thought that yuh was a—"

Jake Riley stopped the wrangler from finishing the sentence with a word that would have branded the old bronc breeder as a coward.

"We don't want younkers, Solo," Jake said hastily. "We aim ter hang Joe Jennings. It won't be no sight fer yore eyes. We'll send the Hitchcock maverick ter the reform school." He turned to the bronc breeder. "Come on, Horse! There's man's work ter be done."

But Horse still gripped the sides of his chair, unable to get up.

"Mebbe it ain't Jennings," he argued. "I ain't goin' on no wild-goose chase. Don't think I'm

scared, but I'm busy with Solo's lessons."

"We know it's Jennings, all right, all right!" Jake Riley chuckled mirthlessly. "He an' the kid came inter town just after sundown. A storekeep recognized the killer from a 'wanted' poster. He heard Jennings call the kid by the name o' 'Maverick.'"

"They've got away already," the bronc breeder protested.

"Not with pack horses loaded with grub," Jake Riley replied testily. "The hull town rode hard ter block all the passes out o' the basin. Come on, Horse. Quit stallin'!"

A shudder ran through the old bronc breeder. The condemning daze of Solo was upon him, and he averted his head. The very net that the town was stringing for the outlaws had managed to snare Horse Canby, and he seemed to realize that he could not crawl out.

He must become a mesh in that net himself, or wear the yellow brand forever in Rim Rock Basin and lose the respect of the boy that he had come to love as his own.

With a great effort of will, Horse Canby pushed out of his chair and swayed to a side bunk, afraid to look at Solo.

"Stay hyar, Solo, pard," he muttered helplessly. "Don't leave until I get back." Still avoiding the wrangler's gaze, he drew a shotgun from under the mattress. "Fer gosh sakes, don't go outside!"

Solo said nothing. Frozen-faced, he watched Horse jerk the brim of a battered hat down to his craven eyes. Then the bronc breeder plunged out of the front door to the choking darkness. Following him, Jake Riley slammed the oaken entrance shut. And a moment later, Solo heard the beat of their hoofs

play out on the trail to the Buzzard's Nest.

For a long time, Solo stood motionless, and then his lips curled. "I never thought that Horse would balk at powder smell," he said aloud.

His bitter eyes turned to a pine chest. On top of it, coiled like a lazy rattlesnake, lay a cartridge-studded belt. In its greased holster was a .45, with chambers loaded with poison for human coyotes.

A feeling of rebellion against older minds swept the wrangler. He felt irresistably drawn to the weapon with which he had been practicing daily for two years.

"Maverick Hitchcock is my size," he breathed, and he stepped to lift the heavy leather loops to his slim hips.

Rim Rock Basin was ten thousand acres of green pasture. It was embedded like an emerald in a jagged setting of granite cliffs and towering ridges. There were five exits by way of canyons and slanting ledges, all of them perilous routes for night riders, who did not know the trails.

And in the black of this night, no strangers stood a chance of escaping from the basin except by the known passes. The cliffs were too sheer. The ridges were cracked with yawning crevasses into which their broncs would stumble and go whirling to death.

As Solo Dale spurred down the open pastures of the lowland, guiding his bronc by sheer instinct in the black void, he was perplexed by a hard problem in geography. He snorted at the methods being used by the ranchers to capture "Maverick" Hitchcock and Joe Jennings.

He meant to let the cowmen plug up the easy exits of Rim Rock Ba-

sin. He alone figured that the fugitives were too slick to use the traveled trails.

"Owl-hooters ain't dumb," he told himself.

If Joe Jennings had taken the risk of being recognized in town that evening, Solo saw no reason why the gunman would continue to take big chances.

Jennings and Hitchcock could have shot their way out of town if there had been trouble. But they never could have outrun a posse on an unfamiliar road. Not while leading pack horses loaded with grub. He figured that they meant to hide in the dark and lose any pursuit that came after them.

"They must have a private trail out of this basin," the wrangler decided.

Where was that trail up the cliff? Where was the Hitchcock gang waiting for Jennings and the outlaw kid? Those were questions in geography that Solo thought he could answer.

Two miles south of Horse Canby's cabin, he sensed the nearness of timber by the upward grade of the range beneath his bronc's hoofs. He knew every foot of this soil. He hadn't herded Morgan thoroughbreds for two years without learning many of the secrets of Rim Rock Basin.

Reining to a slow walk, he groped for the entrance to a dismal gully, found it, and tethered his bronc. Then, proceeding on foot, he waded into the thick brush of the gully's mouth. He could remember every outcropping of rock, every bend of cliff and heap of boulders.

In the spring, this gully brought torrents of rain water down to the basin from the benches and shelves of the Big Stony Mountains. And

the route gave ascent to the cliffs which appeared insurmountable from the green range below.

With the speed of a cat, Solo slipped up the defile. He met dry falls and climbed them. Now his cow boots crackled on autumn leaves blown deep into empty pools. He stumbled on fallen logs, caught himself. The walls of the defile pinched in, and he squeezed between them.

Up long troughs of bed rock worn smooth by old floods, he crawled with aid of fingers. Blowing for breath, he reached the height of the cliff, and there he halted.

"If those snakes aim to use my route," he chuckled, "they'll have to carry the pack horses on their shoulders."

Jennings and Maverick Hitchcock couldn't have beaten his time. When rested, he turned north along the rim of the basin to where the cliff had caved in under the weight of last winter's wet blizzard. It was dangerous travel among the pinnacles.

But the night was not so black up here as it had been in the basin below. He could make out the dark outlines of rock formations yards ahead, and he could detect the crevasses by currents of wind lifting from out of cold depths.

His journey ended at a break in the cliff. Halting, he listened tensely and got his reward. Far below him sounded the rattle of shale sliding down long drifts of loose rock. It was telltale evidence of climbing horses.

"They're coming," Solo growled.

It would take time for the pack animals to zigzag up the height of the basin wall.

Solo took his ease on the cliff rim, six-gun in hand.

## CHAPTER II.

### A KILLING.

**S**MOKY-GRAY dawn was filtering into the gloom of the mountain world before Joe Jennings and Maverick Hitchcock neared the last leg of the perilous climb to where Solo Dale waited. He saw them twice as the mists cleared, then hid them.

They were having a tough struggle to force the loaded animals into the foot of a break that gave passage to the cliff rim. Solo could hear the crack of their quirts, the grunt of broncs, the clatter of falling rock.

There was no fear in the wrangler. Gun cocked, eyes narrowed, he waited with the cold calculation of a hunter who bides his time for a pair of wolves that have been slaughtering stock.

He had never witnessed a gun fight or human death. He never suspected that Joe Jennings would risk a draw against an aimed and cocked .45.

Cool and sure of himself, Solo listened to the pack horses pawing up the last few yards to his view. Their pointed ears lifted out of the jaws of the break, and he dropped into hiding behind a boulder that lay directly in their path on the floor of the cliff rim.

The first, then the second packer came trotting past his covert. Then Solo heard the gruff voice of Jennings still down in the break:

"Git up thar, yuh ornery hammerhead."

Solo's finger tightened on his gun trigger as a pair of saddle broncs scrambled out of the head of the slide. His pulses swelled. The boots of his two foes crunched nearer, and they appeared.

Jennings and Maverick Hitchcock came side by side, talking, too pleased with their success to heed the danger that crouched behind the boulder ten yards in front of them.

Jennings, tall and hawk-faced, was saying: "We done it, Mav. Yuh proved yoreself. Yo're jest as good as any member o' the gang."

And the black-haired, shifty-eyed Maverick Hitchcock replied boastfully: "Ain't I always said that I don't need no coddlin' from pap? Ain't I? It's time I had a gang o' my own, instead o' takin' orders from anybody."

Solo sprang up from behind the boulder. In the morning mists, he seemed no longer younger. His leveled six-gun did not waver. He spoke with a huskiness that belied his youth.

"Yo're takin' orders from me, hombre," were his commanding words. "Hoist them dewelaws."

The wrangler's tone brought the owl-hoot pair to a dead halt. Their astonished eyes fastened on him. He saw swift terror flood Maverick Hitchcock's undeveloped face, and he knew for sure that the outlaw kid would raise his arms high.

But at the same instant he caught a fighting gleam flashing into the eyes of Joe Jennings, and the swift warning of the gunman's intentions drove sudden panic into his heart.

"Stop that, Jennings!" Solo shouted, unable to trigger against the gunman who hadn't an even chance. "Stop it! I'll shoot!"

But Solo Dale couldn't shoot. Fascinated, he saw the hands of Jennings plummet downward to low-slung gun butts. And then, almost too late, Solo ducked to safety behind the boulder, unable to tell why he hadn't fired.

His ears sang from the thunder-

ous blasts of owl-hoot powder that drove four bullets into the front of his boulder hiding place. He heard the race of boots, the fighting yells of Jennings and Maverick Hitchcock, and he knew they were charging.

Solo couldn't stay put. He had to move. Quickly. He threw himself bodily to the left to get around the boulder and meet their charge. It was the only way.

And it might have been sheer luck that Solo Dale saw Joe Jennings before the latter spied him coming around the left side of the boulder. It might have been that Jennings never suspected that the kid wrangler could rally his courage.

For Jennings, as he raced forward, took a long leap into the air to reach the top of the boulder, from where he might blast downward at the kid who he thought was still behind it.

Solo's upwhipping weapon caught Jennings's figure on its sights.

*Crash!* In a crimson flash, Solo slammed a .45-caliber slug into the gunman's right side with a stunning impact that seemed to halt the man in mid-air.

A grunt from Jennings, and he tried to twist and shoot. But Solo fired again, and the second bullet threw Jennings backward and to the earth. Solo watched him land directly in front of Maverick Hitchcock, who was heading around the right side of the boulder to get out of range. Maverick stumbled, pitched forward, and sprawled face down, and his gun exploded and kicked out of his hand.

As quick as a flash, Solo sprang toward them. His smoking weapon rose and came down on Maverick Hitchcock's skull, knocking the outlaw kid cold. And as Maverick stiff-

ened on the earth, Solo fell on top of the shuddering body of Joe Jennings.

"I got yuh!" the wrangler cried. "Don't move, Jennings. I gave yuh one chance, but no more."

Joe Jennings, notorious bad man, didn't move. He lay with eyes shut tight, gasping for breath, shoulders twitching. There were two crimson holes in his buckskin vest. His lips were curled over his teeth, and he spoke in a deep, husky voice.

"One last chance, yuh gave me," Jennings said, "an' I was beefed by a yearlin'." He gagged, caught a slim spark of strength, and tried to grin. "Yuh outshot Joe Jennings," he said without hate. "Do yuh know what it means?"

Solo's eyes narrowed. "Yuh can't fool me," he growled. "Roll over on yore face."

"I'm rollin' inter Boot Hill, younker," Jennings replied huskily. "Listen ter me. Yo're cursed. Yuh've got a reputation fer killin' Joe Jennings. Everywhere yuh go, every saddle bum an' barroom tough will be gunnin' fer yuh ter take that reputation." His eyes shut tight. "I feel sorry fer yuh, kid. Would yuh mind pullin' off my boots afore—"

The death rattle broke in the throat of Joe Jennings; his eyes opened. They were sightless eyes, for Joe Jennings, famous gun-slinger, was dead.

Stunned, unable to believe the truth, Solo Dale sat astride the man whose vast experience with guns he had bested. The words of Jennings still echoed in his ears, and he couldn't understand their full meaning. Solo sat there, transfixed with horror, and it was a groan from the awakening Maverick Hitchcock that roused the wrangler to the present.

Turning; Solo saw the outlaw kid struggling to sit up. He flipped his gun into aim, covering Maverick, who started at the sight of Joe Jennings.

"Yuh beefed him!" the young outlaw exclaimed in panic. "Yuh killed my pap's right-hand man."

Solo's jaws went hard. "Shut up, yuh ornery little skunk!" he growled. "Flatten out on yore ugly face. I'm takin' yuh down ter the basin."

Maverick Hitchcock went pale. "Takin' me ter the law?" he gasped. "Yuh can't do that! My pap's gang will hunt yuh down an' kill yuh. They'll wipe out the hull basin. Yuh better let me go. Yuh've beefed Joe Jennings, an' my pap will git yuh afore the next night is out."

Solo got up from the body of the gunman and started toward Maverick Hitchcock. "Yo're pap don't scare nobody but yuh," he snapped. "Are yuh takin' orders from me now, or must I wrap this smoke-pole around yore skull ag'in?"

The outlaw kid ducked low to the earth. "Don't!" he yelled. "I'll go with yuh. Shore, I'll go. It won't be long afore pap will be comin'. He'll teach yuh what it means ter bully a Hitchcock."

Solo Dale snorted in disgust. The threats of this yellow kid meant as little to him as the last words of Joe Jennings. Little did he suspect that the predictions of both Maverick Hitchcock and Jennings would come true, and that he, Solo Dale, was condemned from this moment.

No longer a youth, in five short moments of gun play, he had reached the full stature of man in the eyes of Rim Rock Basin. He was Solo Dale, the hombre who had shot down the famous Joe Jennings. He was the hombre whom the

Hitchcock gang had marked for death.

It was close to six o'clock in the morning when Solo started down the cliffs with his prisoner and the body of Joe Jennings. By seven, he had reached the floor of the lowland, where a posse of ranchers searching for the trail of the outlaws ran into him. Horse Canby was not present to hear Solo's story, nor did Solo see Horse for some time.

By eight o'clock, Solo and his prisoner had been rushed to the town of Rim Rock, and riders had carried the news to every puncher and nester in the basin. Before the hour was out, a collection of one hundred dollars had been taken up and was given to the wrangler as a reward.

He sat in the office of the log calaboose, telling the facts of the shooting over and over again to incoming cattlemen who refused to believe the truth until they had heard it from his own lips. Every new visitor made him hope that Horse Canby would be the next.

Jake Riley of the Flying Shoe arrived, pumped Solo's hand, slapped him on the back, roared congratulations with the gusto of a politician.

"Yo're famous, Solo!" he shouted. "Yuh kin have anythin' I own. I'll make yuh my foreman. I'll stake yuh ter a hundred head o' cattle ter start yore own spread. I'm the worst fool in the world ter turn yuh down last night when yuh wanted ter come with me an' Horse. Yuh ain't no kid no more, younker. Mebbe yuh ain't as big as me, but in a year yuh'll be twice my size."

"Where's Horse?" Solo asked in a bored tone.

"Horse?" Jake Riley questioned.

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"Oh, yuh mean Horse Canby. Why, he's holed up in his cabin. Me an' him was up guardin' the Buzzard's Nest when we got the news that yuh'd drilled Joe Jennings an' nailed the Hitchcock kid. Horse lit out fer home like a hound. He's scared that somethin' is goin' ter happen."

Solo picked up his hat and turned to the constable sitting in front of the door to Maverick Hitchcock's cell. "I'm going out to see my boss," he announced. "Kin I ride yore bronc, constable?"

The bald-headed lawman got up. "Yuh can't go now, Solo," he protested. "The town is arrangin' things up at the saloon fer the trial fer this Hitchcock skunk. We need yore testimony."

Solo cast a glance into the cell, where the outlaw kid sat on the edge of an iron cot, handcuffed, leg-chained. "I'll try an' get back in time," he said. "But I reckon yuh really don't need no facts from me. The kid admits he's the son of Torch Hitchcock."

At that, Maverick Hitchcock's eyes fastened on the wrangler. "Shore, I'm Torch Hitchcock's son," he yelled. "Yuh better slope out o' this basin pronto. Torch will be a-comin' soon, hombre. An' then see how smart yuh feel with that hun'red-dollar reward in yore pocket an' all that hot air that these rubes are givin' yuh. Go on an' beat it, but I'll find yuh ag'in if it takes a hun'red years. Yuh don't scare me, jest because yuh beefed Joe Jennings."

Solo turned toward the door in disgust. "I'll ride Maverick's bronc," he said, and went outside, leaving Jake Riley and the constable staring at each other, wondering about the threat in Maverick Hitchcock's words.

In the street, Solo elbowed through a crowd of cheering cowmen, sprang into the saddle of the bronc that the Hitchcock kid had been riding, and spurred up the main street at a reckless pace. Several punchers tried to follow him, but he paid no heed to their yells.

The outlaw cayuse beneath him had speed. Inside of a minute, Solo had left his admirers far back in his dust, and was loping fast across the basin toward Horse Canby's spread.

Solo's route led through the troughs of low hills covered knee-deep in grass that had dried to a soft tan. It was a prosperous basin, where a small acreage would support a good-sized herd.

Horse Canby's business was raising the best Morgan bronies to be found in any Western State. His cabin nestled in a low vale through which ran a clear trout stream. Rows of blue spruce sheltered the corrals and barns, but the trees failed to hide an alarming fact from Solo upon the moment that he sighted the layout.

The wrangler reined up short, rose in the stirrups, and stared hard. There wasn't a cayuse to be seen in the neighborhood of the cabin. The oaken door was swinging open in the gentle wind. The chimney was smokeless, and even the corral bars were down.

Horse Canby apparently had flown the coop. He had gone with all his herd. Solo's bronc leaped out at the touch of steel, thundering down the slope to the ranch which the wrangler had called home for two years.

He suspected the worst before he arrived. Horse Canby had turned yellow. The veteran was fleeing from the certain revenge of "Torch" Hitchcock's wild bunch.

## CHAPTER III.

## HUNTED.

THERE was a note on the home-made table in the cabin. Solo read it with lips tight, eyes bitter with resentment:

Dear pard, I'm takin the hoss flesh to  
whar we nailed the grizly last winter. I  
love these broncs two much ter let Torch  
Hitchcock get em. If you think me low  
down, I reckon you wont jine me. But  
I aint realy, pard. I shore think lots  
of you. Thars two mares with colts in  
the cave. You know the place. Dont let  
em starv. I'm hopin and prayin that you  
bightail after me.

Affectionately Hoss

It was the sentiment about the Morgan herd and the two mares with the colts that hit Solo the hardest. Had Horse Canby merely said adios it would have been much better. But the explanation that the veteran was fleeing the basin only in order to save his cayuses was a bitter excuse for Solo to swallow.

He didn't want to believe it, for his judgment told him that Horse Canby was nothing but plain yellow. Yet that judgment was prejudiced by Solo's own accomplishments in the past four hours, and perhaps the plaudits of Rim Rock Basin had gone slightly to his head.

"An' he's the hombre that I respected fer two hull years!" he exclaimed wrathfully, choking back the lump that rose in his throat. "Him, Horse Canby, a white-livered hound, jest what Jake Riley called him. "Bah!" He crumpled the letter and hurled it into the cold fire-place. "Why didn't I find it out before? Why didn't I quit him flat? What have I been doin' hyar, workin' for him, all the time thinkin' that Horse Canby was once a two-fisted, gun-fighting, upstandin' hero."

He stamped across the room, kicked a chair flying, and stood before the supply cabinet, as if about to clear the shelves with a sweep of his hand. It was a kid's tantrum, not the conduct of a grown-up homine who had outshot the fastest draw in Arizona.

Aud suddenly Solo seemed to realize it, and in doing so, he noted that all the canned goods and grub sacks were gone.

He whirled, stared at the cabin room. Most of the blankets were missing from the bunks. He leaped to the chests and found them empty of wearing apparel. Exasperated, he was ready to suspect Horse of having stolen his duds, but he found them in a duffel bag behind the open door.

"Huh!" Solo grunted. "He packed up for me. He thought I might chase after him. That's a good laugh. He even thought that I'd still want to take orders from a danged——"

Solo caught himself. His head lifted and he sniffed suspiciously at the breeze eddying in the open front door. Was that the smell of smoke?

Of all dangers, ranchers fear range fire the most. Rustlers, cougars, drought, and disease are as nothing compared to the sudden spread of flames through grassy pastures which mean the life of stock throughout the winter months.

Solo sprang to the doorway, eyes focusing to the east, where the town of Rim Rock lay and from which direction the wind came. The entire sky was smudged with a drifting fog that dimmed the morning sun.

Billows of greenish-black smoke rolled up from the ranges, not only the ranges between Horse Canby's outfit and Rim Rock, but from spreads far to the north and far to

the south. The entire eastern side of the basin seemed to have caught flame, and the fire was rapidly sweeping toward Canby's holdings.

"Torch Hitchcock!" Solo exclaimed. "That's how he got his nickname—by setting fire to hide his raids."

And the words were hardly out of his mouth before the wrangler spied a band of riders beating their way ahead of the oncoming wall of smoke. His first thought was that the horsemen were the Hitchcock gang, and a sickening fear took hold of him. It was the kind of fear that had made Horse Canby run from certain death.

But now Solo saw the riders scattering north and south, and he realized that they were punchers from town, riding hard to protect their outfits. He picked out Jake Riley on a pinto, bent over the saddle pommel as he sped southwest toward his own ranch.

"They've left Rim Rock deserted!" Solo gasped. "What happened to Maverick? Why didn't they stand and fight the Hitchcock gang?"

Darting out of the doorway, he sprang to the saddle of the bronc that had brought him from town. Stuck with the steel, the cayuse roared down the ranch yard, through the open gate, and hit the long slope behind the bull pasture.

Solo shouted, tried to attract Jake Riley's attention, and did. He saw Jake wave at him and keep going. In two minutes of breakneck riding, Solo cut in on the route of the Flying Shoe boss.

"What's happened, Jake?" the wrangler shouted. "Is it the Hitchcock gang?"

Jake Riley was quirting and spurring like a man gone loco. "Don't foller me, Solo," he bellowed. "Beat

it! Get out o' the basin. Trouble is poppin'. The Hitchcock kid is loose. He's comin' fer yuh. Ride for yore life."

Solo swung his bronc along the flank of Jake's pounding pinto.

"Maverick is loose?" he exclaimed. "What do yuh mean? How did he get loose?"

"Don't talk ter me now," the Flying Shoe boss yelled back. "Every rancher in the basin left the trial to fight fire on his range. The hull basin is going up. The Hitchcock gang did it. They set fire to make the punchers leave town."

Solo spurred hard to keep up with Jake. "But how did Maverick get away?" he shouted. "Has the gang hit the town yet?"

"Hit town!" Jake Riley exclaimed. "The town is burnin'. The owl-hooters have twenty men. We seen 'em comin' jest afore it was too late. We turned Maverick loose. What else could we do? Could we stand an' fight while our homes burned? Get off my trail, Solo. I don't want none of yuh. Yuh beefed Joe Jennings, an' Torch Hitchcock swore he'd hang every rancher in the basin if we tried ter save yuh. Vamose, or I'll drill yuh, Solo."

And Solo Dale saw Jake Riley's hand drop to a gun butt, pull the weapon loose, and flip it into aim. The wrangler jerked bridle rein, amazed, and his horse jammed all four legs into a sliding halt.

Jake Riley sped away, and Solo stared after him, as if he were seeing a complete stranger. For Jake Riley had suddenly become no friend of Solo Dale. All the fine compliments that the Flying Shoe boss had voiced in town were forgotten. To Jake Riley, Solo represented a hair-raising danger that might cost him, Jake, his entire ranch and life.

It was several minutes before Solo realized the full meaning of Jake Riley's change of character. The Flying Shoe owner wasn't the only hombre in the basin who wanted none of him. Every single one of the ranchers was in peril if they sheltered Solo Dale from the Hitchcock gang.

In an open battle, the basin might make a stand against the owl-hooters, but not in a running fight with Torch Hitchcock setting fire to their spreads and compelling the ranchers to stay at home to defend their wives and children.

"So that's the way it is," Solo gritted, turning his eyes to the billowing smoke in the east. "I'm a hoodoo. My friends have turned me down flat, with a one-hundred-dollar reward in my pocket and the curse of Joe Jennings hanging over my head. I ain't wanted—not by Rim Rock Basin. But I shore am by Maverick Hitchcock an' his coyote pap."

To the north of Solo, a group of horsemen were sweeping down the slopes toward Horse Canby's cabin, two miles away. The wrangler could see them plainly, despite the smoky mist that was following close at their heels.

Luckily for him, the riders did not spy him and recognize him. In their lead rode a kid in a yellow silk shirt and a black ten-gallon hat.

"Maverick Hitchcock!" Solo growled. "Ain't he brave, now that he has his pap with him? Waal, yuh little skunk, some day yuh an' me might have a chance alone to argue things out."

Bending over the saddle pommel, he threw in his hooks, and headed south. Escape from the Hitchcock gang wouldn't be difficult for Solo, who knew every gully and vale in Rim Rock Basin.

And escape was his only choice. To remain and fight would be suicide, when every friend in the basin had turned against him. Only one man in the world wanted his comradeship, and that was Horse Canby.

And Solo Dale was soon to realize that old Horse Canby wasn't the yellow coyote he had thought him to be.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### OLD FOES.

**HORSE CANBY** had pulled out of the basin none too soon. As he herded his twenty head of fine Morgan stock into the walls of Buzzard's Nest Pass, he caught sight of smoke rising from the deep lowland behind him. He shuddered. For he knew much more about Torch Hitchcock's methods of attack than he was willing to tell.

The secret of Horse Canby's past was that he had once been a member of the wild bunch. There was an old reward of one thousand dollars still out for him in Montana. Horse had killed a man up there, and the memory still haunted him.

It had been a fair fight. He had come upon a half-breed beating a hobbled cayuse. Horse Canby had explosive feelings about the persecution of dumb animals, and those feelings had got the better of him on that day, twenty years ago.

He had grabbed the club from the half-breed to give him some of the medicine. Horse hadn't meant to hit so hard. That's how he explained to the jury. But the twelve men who sat in the courtroom didn't savvy how Horse felt about broncs. He must have seemed sort of loco to them, and they convicted him of murder in the first degree.

But the law made the mistake of locking the prisoner in a cell with

a hawk-faced desperado who had been arrested in a shooting case. That gunman had been Joe Jennings. And before the night was out, the members of the wild Hitchcock gang hit town with guns blazing. And when they left with Joe Jennings, they took Horse Canby along.

"Now Jennings is daid," Horse muttered fearfully as he drove his Morgans into the depths of the Buzzard's Nest. "Solo shot him. I can't believe it. Why, nobody could beat Jennings in a draw match, not even Torch Hitchcock. I've seen Jennings—"

Horse didn't finish. His broncs were clattering out of the narrow confines of the end of the pass, and two tough-jawed hombres reared up from behind boulders. Their lifting shotguns took deadly aim at Horse Canby's chest. He halted, big hazel eyes bulging, mouth hanging open, pale as a corpse. There was no fight in him. He was craven with fear.

"Yuh got me!" he gasped.

The owl-hooters grinned and came forward.

"Howdy, Mr. Canby," the scar-faced one with the bow legs said mockingly. "Yuh remind me of a gent I used ter know about fifteen years ago. His name was Broncho Simpson. Any relation o' yores?"

Horse shut his eyes, as if he were going to faint over his saddle pommel. "It's me," he admitted wearily. "Yuh know it's me. Yuh kin tell by the Morgan herd."

The second outlaw glanced at the thoroughbred cayuses trotting out to a grassy plateau beyond the Buzzard's Nest.

"They sartinly look like the critters that used ter belong ter Torch, about fifteen years ago," the owl-hooter chuckled. "It's a funny

thing, Mr. Canby, but a skunk once stole a herd like that from Torch. An' he did it after Torch had been good enough ter spring him from the calaboose on a murder charge. Yes, Torch clothed an' fed that gent fer two hull years an' gave him a place ter hide out."

Horse Canby's fists clenched, and a flame sprang into his eyes.

"Shore Torch did that fer me," he snarled. "An' I paid him fer it. I trained his entire remuda fer him, so he'd have fast cayuses ter raid an' kill. He never owned the Morgans in his herd. He stole 'em. An' when they weren't fast enough, he shot 'em."

The two outlaws grinned, and the scar-faced one chuckled:

"So that's why Broncho Simpson ran off with Torch's stock, eh? He couldn't stand the sight o' Torch shootin' worthless ol' crowbaits. But, Mr. Canby, that was a plenty loco thing for Broncho Simpson ter do, because Torch Hitchcock has been lookin' fer that double-crossin' skunk fer fifteen years. Mebbe yuh best swing down from that bronc an' wait ter tell the boss the story."

Horse Canby, alias "Broncho" Simpson, slowly climbed down from his saddle. What he had most feared had come upon him. There was no use hoping for mercy, no use trying to escape. For fifteen years, he had managed to keep one jump ahead of Torch Hitchcock, fleeing from State to State, taking the prize herd with him. But the very animals that he protected had been unfailing clews to his whereabouts.

Colts had been born, and Horse had branded them with unfamiliar signs, but he could not hide their parentage. Their strong chests and sleek hides and sturdy legs caused comment wherever they grazed.

It was comment that reached owl-hoot ears, that spread up and down the back trails, and soon brought gun-hung men to check up on the mysterious herd of thoroughbreds that a queer old hombre named Horse Canby refused to sell.

Down in Rim Rock Basin, Solo Dale never dreamed that Horse Canby might be captured while going through the Buzzard's Nest. Solo was certain that the entire Hitchcock gang was on the raid, and as he raced southward to the pine timber, he believed his old boss would be waiting for him up in the safety of the Big Stony Mountains.

No matter what Solo had thought about Horse's flight before, now he needed him badly. For the wrangler was homeless, without grub, and at the end of his string.

As he galloped down the dry ranges, the great fog of smoke blowing from the east soon covered his retreat. He did not slacken pace. The Hitchcocks were not the kind to give up without a search. So, when he reached the pine forest in the southwestern corner of the basin, he dismounted, unsaddled the bronc belonging to Maverick, and sent it galloping away.

Solo's own Morgan thoroughbred, a present from Horse Canby, was still tethered near the gully which the wrangler had used the night before. Leading the animal by the reins, he hiked up the defile as far as he could go, careful to leave no prints.

It was impossible to get the horse over the dry falls, so he chose a nest of high crags and threw the Morgan to ground. Tying it down with lariat, he made sure that it was protected by bare rock from any fire that might sweep up from the timber.

There was nothing more that he could do for the present. He sat down to think things out. He didn't aim to leave the basin without his bronc, and then there were the two mares and colts that Horse had left in the cave back of the cabin.

"I'll take them with me," Solo decided. "Horse must have been afraid that the colts couldn't stand the pace he was setting. I'm pullin' out o' this double-crossin' country, an' I'm goin' ter join up with Horse Canby. I should have had enough sense to listen to his letter. That hombre knows his stuff. He didn't desert me. He left me to find out things for myself," he added, scowling, "because, I reckon, he didn't want to hear me callin' him a yella skunk."

All afternoon, the grass fire raged through Rim Rock Basin, showering ashes upon Solo Dale's hiding place up in the cliffs. He caught a few winks of sleep, for he was dog-tired from staying up all the night before. When darkness fell, he roused himself, took a hitch in his belt, and started on foot down to the basin, where the smoke still hung heavy.

Hiking along through burned-out range, he often heard horsemen in the distance, and judged that they were the Hitchcock gang searching for him. He was plenty tuckered when he reached the cave where two fine Morgan mares and their bandy-legged colts were tied up.

Striking a match, he found an old saddle, bridle, and a bag of provisions. It seemed that Horse Canby had realized everything that was going to happen. Solo was plenty grateful for the grub, but what pleased him more was a second note from his old boss. It said:

Dear pard, I knew you wouldnt desert the mares. I cant take them with the big

herd. If you aim to jine me, slip out of the basin by the trail whar we found the cougar cubs. And keep under cover all the way to whar we killed the grizly last winter.

I'll be hungry to see you. Horse.

But it was going to be a long time before Solo Dale saw Horse Canby again.

Following the old bronc breeder's instructions, he struck out in the night for the secret trail which he and Horse used for cougar hunts. He picked up his own saddle mount on the way. In the dead of night, he passed down the basin, slipping right through the fingers of the searching outlaws.

It was a job to get the cayuses up the ledges and shale to the cliff rim. If the wind hadn't shifted to blow the smoke clouds away and allow starlight to show him the craggy trail, he never would have succeeded.

Dawn found him on the rim, resting the exhausted foals, while he gazed down at the blackened ranges of Rim Rock Basin. With an ache in his heart, he turned to the canyons and peaks of the Big Stony Mountains, seeking a cure for his loneliness in the meeting with Horse Canby.

"Me an' him kin find another range," Solo told himself. "We don't have ter worry none. Horse has been around plenty. He'll know a place."

But when Solo reached the valley where he and Horse had got themselves two fine bearskin rugs on the winter before, there was no sign of the Morgan herd. For two days, the wrangler waited, thinking that Horse had taken his time to hide his trail. On the third, Solo began to have worries.

With the dawn of the fourth day, he mounted his bronc and rode to-

ward Rim Rock Basin, halting at every outpoint in an effort to spy the Morgan herd. By night, he was nearing the Buzzard's Nest, so he kept on going in the dark.

The high pass was empty. Striking matches, he examined the floor, and determined that the Morgan herd had passed through some days before. He waited for dawn, tried to follow the trail, but it lost itself on volcanic rock. Still, the wrangler wouldn't give up. He spent a week scouting the brakes and canyons for some clew.

"Horse couldn't have tricked me," he concluded. "Something happened to him."

He went back to Rim Rock Basin again. The lowland was in ruins, half the homes burned, the town in ashes, and the ranges barren of grass. The dead carcasses of steers that had stampeded from fire were everywhere to be seen, but there wasn't a human being to be found anywhere.

He came across the beaten tracks of salvaged stock that had been driven toward the eastern passes, and decided that the survivors of the Hitchcock raid had moved to new valleys where winter fodder could be found.

Solo returned to the Big Stonies, to the two mares and their colts. Still hoping that Horse would appear, he spent a month caring for the animals.

His grub supply ran low, and for the second month, he lived on game that he brought down with a bow and arrow.

Finally he despaired of waiting any longer. There was only one conclusion to draw. Horse Canby had fallen into the hands of the wild bunch, had been murdered, and his Morgans stolen.

Solo's two colts were growing like

loco weed after warm rains, when he struck north to the Utah ranges. The young uns needed mash and a better diet than mountain hay. They nuzzled Solo with the eagerness of pups at every chance, and he came to talk to them as he would to a pard.

Horse Canby had taught him to love Morgans, but not until now did the wrangler realize how devoted he had become to them. They were his life, the only thing that mattered any more.

On sighting his first cow town, he tethered the Morgans in a hidden arroyo and rode alone to buy grub and feed. The memory of the Hitchcock raid was too recent for him to trust strangers.

Attired in blue denim pants and green jersey, he rode up the wagon-rutted main street like any ordinary cowhand from a near-by ranch. The only unusual thing about him was that he wore a Colt .45 in a greased holster at a gun-fighting slant on his right hip.

Trailing his spurs into a store, he pulled a list from his pocket and began ordering a batch of supplies that made the storekeeper lift his shaggy eyebrows.

"An' give me ten dollars' worth o' .45 cartridges—the best yuh've got," Solo finished. "I'm lookin' for a cheap pack horse. Do yuh know anybody that wants to make five bucks?" He paused, grinning. "What town is this, anyway?"

The storekeeper's mouth dropped open. "Yuh mean yuh don't know whar yuh aire?" he gasped. "Say, hombre, yuh must have come far. Yuh ain't lookin' fer nobody, aire yuh?"

Solo's eyes narrowed. "Nobody but a white-haired gent with a face like a horse. Have yuh seen any-

body like that around hyar? He would be riding a Morgan."

"A Morgan!" the storekeeper exclaimed, and he fell back from the counter. "Yuh mean Horse Canby!" he cried. "I know yuh, too. I heard all about that fight in Rim Rock Basin. We've all been told ter look out fer yuh. Yo're the hombre what killed Joe Jennings."

Solo stiffened, hand dropping to gun butt, shoulders tense.

"Who told yuh to look out for me?" he challenged.

"Don't!" the storekeeper yelled. "I'll fill yore order. Yuh don't even have ter pay fer it. I'll give yuh one o' my pack horses. I ain't done yuh no wrong. I was only thinkin' what happened ter Rim Rock Basin on account o' yuh."

"Yuh forget about Rim Rock Basin," Solo snapped. "Yuh also better forget that yuh ever saw me. I'll pay for my grub, an' I'll buy yore pack hoss. If yuh know anythin' about the Hitchcocks or Horse Canby, yuh better spill it quick."

"I don't know nothin'," the fellow whined. "Honest, I don't. I'd tell yuh, Mr. Dale. All I know is that the Hitchcocks rode through hyar, two weeks ago, lookin' for yuh."

So it was "Mr. Dale" now, instead of "younker," as it had always been before. Solo could not help a grin. But it was a grin that soon faded from his deep-burned face. The Hitchcocks were still searching for him, and his reputation was growing by leaps and bounds.

He watched the storekeeper pack his supplies in two boxes, followed him out the rear door, and studied a tolerably good-looking range mustang that had seen its best days as a roping mount.

"Eight bucks," Solo said, fixing the price for the mustang.

There was no argument. "Thank yuh, Mr. Dale. I'm much obliged ter yuh. I ain't goin' ter say anythin' about seein' yuh. Yuh won't be comin' back hyar ag'in, will yuh?"

Solo scowled as he rode off, leading the pack horse by a halter rope. That was the town of Lariat, and he left it behind as quickly as possible, traveling all afternoon and night.

His experience with the storekeeper scared him a little. Gosh, the man thought he was a tough gun fighter! And Solo knew that his speed on the draw was nothing to boast about.

Horse Canby had taught him everything that he knew. He'd better use those new boxes of .45s to practice. Sooner or later, Solo knew, he was going to bump into the Hitchcocks.

And the wrangler didn't mean to be caught out on a limb.

## CHAPTER V.

### RANGE WAR.

INSTEAD of proceeding northward, Solo turned west, crossed the Colorado River, and hit out for the lower corner of Nevada. He couldn't travel fast with the colts. He kept under cover as much as possible, avoiding towns and ranches.

The winter set in and forced him south to the warmer desert country. Grass grew scarce, and he worried constantly about his Morgans.

The wrangler was growing with them, filling out in the chest, getting muscular, hard as rock. He had always been big for his age. And now he had begun to think and act with the sureness of a man.

At times, he hungered for human companionship, and by early spring, he took his chance on riding in to a lonely ranch to learn the news of the civilized world.

He used the pack horse for the trip, leaving the Morgans in hiding, where they stood no chance of giving his identity away.

It was the Double Z spread, not far from Death Valley. He ran into the chunky foreman coming out of the ranch yard. He halted, and they exchanged howdies.

"I'm jest driftin' through the range," Solo explained.

"Lookin' fer work?" the foreman asked.

Solo hesitated. A bit of money would come in handy, but he didn't know what to do with the Morgans.

"Nope," the wrangler said, grinning. "I've got a job waitin' for me out yonder." He waved his hand to the east.

"Huh!" the foreman grunted suspiciously. "The range is plenty dry over there. Turn that crowbait that yo're ridin' inter the corral an' stay for supper."

The invitation was given grudgingly, but Solo accepted greedily, realizing that the foreman was only extending the courtesy of the cow country.

An hour later, a half dozen hands rode in, and he climbed down from the corral rails to join them at the pump to wash up. They nodded, but there was no conversation.

He was under suspicion. They didn't know if he was just a saddle tramp bumming a meal, or was looking for information about the Double Z cows.

Solo followed them into the mess shack, wearing his six-gun, and that was something he never should have done. For he was a stranger, and

it looked as if he were expecting trouble.

All during the meal, he caught the eyes of the outfit studying him. The chunky foreman at the head of the table told several stories about distant ranges, as if to draw Solo out. He had to say something, to explain his presence, to give some indication of his trade.

"That's fine apple pie," Solo said. "It's the best I've tasted in six months."

The cowhands looked up.

"Six months is a plumb long time ter separate yoreself from good pie," the foreman said with disarming casualness. "What's the matter? Did the apple crop fail in Utah, where yuh came from?"

Solo flushed. "I didn't say that I came from Utah," he retorted hastily.

"That's right, yuh didn't," the foreman said. "Excuse me, stranger. Mebbe I was thinking about that deputy what passed through hyar last week with the long-winded tale about them rustlers."

There was no mistaking the sly dig, and Solo tensed. "I'm a bronc-stomper, hombre," he snapped.

"Then yuh ought ter stomp yoreself a new hoss," the foreman retorted, and the cowhands at the table roared with laughter, for Solo's cayuse in the corral had all the earmarks of a tenderfoot's mount.

Solo sprang to his feet, furious with rage. He had lived by himself for so long that he had lost his sense of humor. The rigors of the trail had oppressed him, and it seemed a rank injustice that these men should make light of him when he asked for nothing but a little comradeship.

"I'll ride any bronc on yore spread, hombre," he snapped. "What's more, I'll run the legs off

any critter that yuh kin find in this State—that is, if yuh've got money to say I can't."

The foreman's hands were below the table. He sat motionless, his face a poker mask.

"I never try to beat a man at his own game, stranger," he replied. "Guns ain't my game, so I always keep 'em hung on the peg at the end o' the room when I sit down ter supper. They ain't there now, because a deputy rode through hyar last week, an' said that a hoss thief was in the neighborhood." He paused. "Where at is this fast cayuse that yuh said could run the legs off any bronc in our outfit?"

Solo took a deep breath. He was caught in a trap. He couldn't bluff his way out. If he didn't come clean, he might get arrested as a suspected horse thief. That would mean several days in the calaboose until the sheriff got tired of waiting for evidence to turn up.

The Morgans hidden in the arroyo would starve if Solo didn't tell about them, and if he did, the law would send out inquiries to find their owners.

"Foreman," he growled, "did yuh ever hear of Solo Dale?"

"Solo Dale!" The foreman's hands appeared above the table—empty hands. "Yuh mean that yo're him? Yo're the hombre what killed Joe Jennings?"

Wherever Solo went, the story had preceded him. It was as Joe Jennings had predicted. The wrangler had a reputation for guns. First the storekeeper in Laria, and now the Double Z foreman cringed before him.

It filled him with disgust. He was sick and tired of the entire business. He was no gun fighter. He had killed Jennings by sheer luck.

There were hundreds of men who could beat him to the draw, and yet, if he let the world know it, his life wouldn't be worth a cent. Joe Jennings had said that every barroom tough and saddle bum would be out to drill him for the privilege of wearing his crown.

Solo reached into his pocket, drew a silver dollar from it, and cast it on the table.

"That's for the meal," he snapped.

"If Torch Hitchcock an' his yella whelp happen along, tell 'em that I'm on their trail now."

And turning on his heel, he strode out of the mess shack, leaving the Double Z hands blinking at his back.

Solo Dale started back to Rim Rock Basin. It was spring. New grass was sprouting, and the colts scampered along the trails with flying tails and snorting nostrils.

He traveled swiftly, but it was a long trip ahead of him. He avoided the larger towns, but rode his Morgan bronc down the main street of the smaller villages, bought supplies when needed, and headed out again within the hour.

It was at Wolf Jaw that he burned his first powder. He never knew how he was identified. Perhaps his bronc gave him away. Perhaps word had gone before him of his coming.

He swung down at the hitch rail before a general store and started up to the plank sidewalk. As he did so, the doors of a saloon opened at the side of the store, and an unshaven, sawed-off hombre waddled out. The tough halted, stared at him, and let out a yell.

"Solo Dale!" the man shouted. "There's the cuss that ruined Rim Rock Basin."

Solo halted, shoulders hunching,

just as old Horse Canby had taught him.

"It's yore move, hombre," the wrangler challenged.

"I've been waitin' fer yuh, Dale," the tough snarled. "There ain't no law in this hyar town. Git out of it afore I run yuh out."

Solo felt little electric currents going through his veins. "I'm waitin', yuh cheap saloon bum," he replied. "Let 'er go!"

He saw the tough's hands flash downward to two low-hung guns, and strangely enough, he thought of Joe Jennings at that moment. He buckled, his right hand flashed to his hip, just as he had practiced for months.

His right wrist hit his thigh, and he caught his gun butt as his wrist bounced away from his thigh. His upwhipping barrel was beating the barroom tough's draw by a slim fraction.

He fired to wound his foe, but Solo's aim was not as good as his draw. His bullet caught the tough in the forehead and killed him instantly.

It was the sort of thing that had happened to Horse Canby twenty years before.

Solo turned, forked his bronc, and sped out of town. He was trembling with excitement. He wanted to get away from the scene as quickly as possible.

He didn't know that he had beefed a spotter for the Hitchcock gang, but he did know that his reputation would be greater than ever. And for the first time, Solo realized that his draw was by no means slow.

Upon returning to camp, he got the mares and colts going east. He was careful to hide his trail. He traveled all that night, and for a week he kept under cover.

He was getting close to wet-cattle

country, which had always been a favorite haunt of Torch Hitchcock. There, down the dry beds of creeks and rivers, owl-hooters drove cattle stolen on the northern ranges to crooked buyers on the Mexican side of the border.

He needed supplies again, particularly mash for the colts, but he didn't want to risk going into a town. After winding through a big grassy sink all one day, he decided to try buying feed at a ranch house. There still remained ten dollars in his pocket from the old reward money.

Tethering his broncs in a deep thicket, he rode his Morgan across the plain to where a cabin window cast a gleam in the night. At the ranch-yard gate, he dismounted and stood a moment in hesitation.

Horses stamped in the corral, a pig grunted from somewhere, and he could hear somebody practicing on a squeaky violin. He let himself through the bars, and started up to the ranch house.

Before he got there, a slight figure stepped out of a shadow and jabbed a shotgun into his ribs.

"Halt! Give the countersign," a young voice ordered.

Solo froze. What was this, anyway? The barrel of the shotgun was hard against him, and he could see a small white hand at the trigger guard, but he felt absolutely no fear. The dark figure before him was half a head smaller than he was, and there was something strange about the person. The voice had been that of a mere kid.

Solo's teeth flashed in the dark. "Hombre," he said coolly, "yuh've made a big mistake. I'm a stranger lookin' for some feed for my bronc. I don't know nothin' about countersigns." He chuckled. "Yuh ain't kiddin' me, are yuh?"

"Kidding you," the young voice replied indignantly. "You'll see if I'm kidding. Raise your arms and waltz into that barn to the tune of ma's violin." She referred to the squeaky music coming from the cabin.

"A girl!" Solo exclaimed. "You're a girl."

"Waltz into that barn over yonder," the captor snapped. "And don't make any mistakes, because the vigilantes are having a meeting there, Mr. Stranger."

Unwittingly, Solo Dale had walked into a range war that was to change the course of his entire life.

## CHAPTER VI.

### OWL-HOOT PLANS.

IT was the following morning that a beefy rider by the name of Hamilton P. Galloway left the low, grassy sink that was called Cotton-tail Pasture.

Mr. Galloway was in a sulphurous temper. He did not spare his snow-white bronc in the long ride through the deep dry gullies and over the red rock ridges that lay between his stamping grounds and the low flats of Gila River. Mr. Galloway was heading into the forbidden country of the wet-cattle trails.

Topping a last mountain range, he halted for a moment to wipe the sweat from his pink brow and study the forest of prickly pear below him.

There was nothing down there to excite the ordinary eye. It was a vast waste, a threat to horsemen who didn't know the sandy runways used by wild longhorn steers. But Hamilton P. Galloway knew at least one of the dangerous trails through the thorny brush to the bank of the Gila.

He took a long drink of water

from a canteen and spurred down the shale slope. Careful to make no mistake, he headed for a patch of tamarisk trees that stood sentinel at the edge of the prickly pear.

There was an arroyo behind the tamarisks, and Galloway prodded his bronc into its mouth. Ducking the thorny sweep of mesquite limbs that grew on the banks, he pressed on, turning this way and that with the winding defile.

The arroyo ended on a flat, but Galloway found an alleyway through the spiny growth. Sometimes the danger point of a branch pricked his leather chaps as he rode by.

The rancher didn't like this kind of riding. He usually wore bull-hide elbow guards and vest when he came this way, but he had been so wrought up that morning that he had forgotten them.

Twice, he halted, cupped his hands over his thick lips, and sent a shrill whistle echoing ahead of him.

Finally a tough-jawed hombre slipped out of the pear and onto the trail ahead of him.

"Howdy, Galloway," the gunman called. "What brings yuh out so early?"

"Whar's Torch?" Galloway demanded. "I've got ter see him right away."

"Torch must be at the camp on the river bank," the tough replied, scowling. "We brought some cattle down the trail yesterday, an' the boss is restin' them up for the last leg to Mexico. Yuh better keep a grip on yoreself, Galloway, because Torch is in an ugly temper."

"So am I," Galloway snorted, and he pressed on.

A half hour later, his bronc bore him out of the thorny brush to the sandy bank of the Gila River. A

big herd of stock was lying along the edge of the narrow current.

Galloway took no notice of the horsemen who trotted up and down the flank of the critters to prevent steers from dashing up the bank and into the mesquite. Then he turned to an adobe hut that stood on high ground beside a stout corral.

In the corral, about twenty Morgan horses were milling about, and a white-haired man was at work currying one of the animals. On top of the rails, two hombres sat watching him.

Galloway yelled at the pair on the rails, and they turned to see him approach. They were the Hitchcocks, Torch and his son, Maverick.

Torch was a big fellow, with the neck of a bull, thick-jowled, and unshaven. His son had grown considerably in the past six months, and looked like a younger edition of his father. His shaggy black hair needed cutting. He hadn't washed in weeks, and his snaggy teeth were already discolored from tobacco juice.

"What yuh doin' hyar, Galloway?" Torch called.

"Yeah, what yuh doin' hyar?" Maverick echoed.

Galloway halted before them, too wrought up to maintain his usual dignity.

"It's the small-fry ranchers in Cottontail Run, Torch," he said nervously. "They're hirin' gunmen agin' me. When I tell yuh who it is, yuh'll fall off them rails. Yuh promised ter perfect me, Torch. Yuh know that yuh did. Yuh said that if the small fry turned on me, yuh'd wipe 'em out."

Torch Hitchcock grinned and winked at his son. Then he asked the flustered rancher: "How do yuh know they're hirin' gunmen?"

Galloway shivered. "They held a meetin' at the Triangle Cross last night," he said nervously. "They're formin' a vigilante gang agin' me. I had a spy at the meetin', Torch. He told me that the small fry have written ter the governor askin' fer law ter come ter Cottontail Run an' put a stop ter the murders. He said that if the law don't come, then the small fry are goin' ter act as vigilantes ter clean up the sink. They're wise ter us, Torch. They suspect that yo're runnin' wet cattle down the Gila an' gettin' supplies from me."

Maverick Hitchcock spat disgustedly. "Let's clean 'em up, Torch," he suggested. "I'm sick an' tired o' this prickly-pear country. I wants ter go up north whar it ain't so hot in the summer."

Torch Hitchcock pulled the makings from his shirt pocket. "Listen ter me, Galloway," he growled. "I'm payin' yuh plenty fer what yo're doin' fer me. I said I'd knock them small-fry ranchers off one by one, until yuh could gobble up all the sink. That vigilante business ain't nothin' ter worry about. I've been through all that before. An' as fer them fools hirin' gunmen, why that's jest a good joke. Thar ain't a gun hand in this State that would lift a finger agin' me."

Galloway's eyes narrowed. "Thar is one, Torch," he said. "I didn't want yuh ter fly off the handle until I told yuh everythin'. But last night an hombre stumbled inter that vigilante meetin'. The small fry thought at first he was spyin' on them, an' they was goin' ter tar an' feather him. But Jim Allison's daughter saved him. She was the girl what caught him comin' inter the ranch yard. She seems ter have fell in love with him."

"Who is he?" Torch Hitchcock

interrupted with a burst of anger. "I ain't interested in no spoonin' affairs."

"Solo Dale," Hamilton P. Galloway replied.

Torch Hitchcock and his son grabbed at the rails upon which they were sitting. Their mouths hung open. For a moment, they didn't move. It must not have seemed possible to them that the lone wolf that they had hunted for months was now within their grasp.

At the insistence of Maverick, Torch had put a thousand-dollar bounty on Solo Dale's head. It was money that the outlaw would never pay, but it served to keep all the outlaw trails on the alert for the wrangler.

"Solo Dale!" Maverick suddenly shouted. "He's my bear meat, Torch. Yuh promised me."

Torch's jaws clicked shut. He prodded his son with a warning elbow, then looked slowly behind him at a white-haired hombre who was currying a Morgan.

That hombre was Horse Canby, who fifteen years ago had been the trainer of the Hitchcock remuda. Torch now kept him under guard night and day, forcing him to work like a slave, beating him, swearing at him. That was how Torch was getting his revenge against the man who had double-crossed him.

"Keep quiet, Mav," Torch whispered to his son. "Run up ter the river an' tell one o' the boys ter come back an' guard Horse. Me an' Galloway are goin' inter the house ter talk things over."

As Maverick bounded from the corral rails, Torch again cast a glance behind him to where Horse Canby was working. It didn't seem that the old brone breeder had heard anything. As usual, he was completely preoccupied with his

herd, gently combing a silken mane, muttering meaningless words into a sleek ear.

Torch turned back to Galloway. "Did yuh say that them small-fry ranchers had written ter the governor askin' fer law?" he inquired in a low tone.

"They wrote a week ago," Galloway replied guardedly. "But they ain't got a reply."

"Huh!" Torch grunted. "It was only two days ago that one o' my boys dry-gulched a deputy that was trackin' the cattle we stole. We took the deputy's badge an' papers along. Mebbe they might be of some use ter us, Galloway."

Galloway's eyes opened wide. "What do yuh mean, Torch?"

"It's a plan ter git Solo Dale away from them ranchers in Cottontail Run," Torch whispered. "I ain't goin' ter take the chance on him escapin' ag'in when we raid. We'll nail Dale first, then hit the sink." He got down from the corral as Maverick returned with a gunman to guard Horse Canby. "Come on in the house."

And the two Hitchcocks and Hamilton P. Galloway strode away from the pen where old Horse Canby went on combing out the mane of a Morgan, as if he had heard nothing.

## CHAPTER VII.

### TRAPPED.

**S**OLO DALE sat in the cozy living room of the Triangle Cross ranch house, talking with Jim Allison, a blue-eyed Texan who had settled in Arizona only two years before. Near them, a flaxen-haired girl busily dusted books and rearranged the tables, listening to every word they said, and sometimes sneaking a glance at the wrangler.

"I can't figure out why yuh ranchers want me here," Solo was saying. "I'm afraid that the same thing might happen that caused me to leave Rim Rock Basin. Once my identity gets out, Mr. Allison, the Hitchcocks are sure to turn up."

Jim Allison bit his lips. "We figured on that, Solo," he replied. "But we're pretty certain that Galloway is already tied up with the Hitchcocks. What's more, we figure that the Hitchcocks are behind all the murders in this sink. Five ranchers have been killed in the last year. They got egged into draw matches with strangers in town. After every killing, those strangers beat it. An' jest as soon as the ranchers were dead, Galloway up an' took their ranges."

Solo scowled. "It looks bad, don't it?" he confessed. "But how do yuh figure that the Hitchcocks are behind it?"

"That's what I'm cooin' to," Jim Allison replied. "I didn't want ter tell yuh until we ranchers could make sure that yuh was stayin'. We talked it all over. It's better ter have the wild bunch raid us new, when the range won't burn, than it is ter wait until the dry fall. We're waitin' for the law ter help us. I've written ter the governor ter send a deputy here ter check up on some mysterious doin's over on the Gila River bottoms. We've spied on Galloway, an' seen him takin' pack trains o' stuff over—"

The clop of hoofs outside the ranch house halted Jim Allison. He rose, walked to a window, and looked out.

"Who is it, dad?" Betty Allison asked. "I better tell mother to hurry up with lunch if it's the ranchers."

Solo saw Jim Allison start. "Glory be!" the Triangle Cross

owner cried. "It's that deputy who I was just talkin' about. Ain't this luck?"

As Allison went to the front door, Solo turned to Betty.

"Nice day, ain't it?" he inquired.

The girl faced him, eyes flashing. "That's the third time you've said that," she replied. "Can't you think of anything else? You don't act at all like Solo Dale. I'm beginning to have my doubts."

Unaccustomed to women, Solo was abashed. "I jest don't know how to talk to you," he admitted, flushing. "If it hadn't been for you, I wou'dn't have stayed here at all. Yuh see, after yuh asked the vigilantes not to tar an' feather me last night, I got to thinking that—waal, I jest got to thinking, that's all."

The entrance of two gun-hung hombres saved Betty Allison from a very embarrassing situation, and she fled from the room. Solo turned to meet the newcomers.

Their appearance startled him. Though one of the men wore a deputy's badge on his buckskin vest, he didn't look any more like a lawman than a tenderfoot. He was thin as a rail, with a sharp face and shifty eyes. "Gunman" was stamped all over him. And his partner was a husky gent with hulking shoulders and a protruding jaw.

"Shake hands with Solo Dale," Jim Allison sang out proudly. "Mebbe that name will make yuh jump."

"Solo Dale?" the thin deputy exclaimed, and he glanced at the husky fellow. "What would the governor say about that?" he asked his partner.

The big fellow scowled. "I dunno," he growled, studying Solo shrewdly.

Solo was not wearing his gun. He

had learned a bit of courtesy at the Double Z Ranch, back in Nevada, and had made it a point to shuck his cartridge belt upon entering the Allison home.

His holster now hung from a hat-rack near the front door, and for some strange reason, he felt the need of it. Both the deputy and the husky man were staring at his thighs.

"Sit down, boys!" Allison spoke up. "I got a lot of questions to ask, an' a heap of facts to spill. Ain't yuh goin' ter shake hands with Solo?"

The thin deputy's hand dropped to his gun butt, and he crouched like a fighting terrier. "Shake hands with him?" he cried, ripping his .45 loose. "That jasper is wanted for murder back in Utah."

Into Solo's mind flashed the vision of the gun fight in which he had killed a barroom tough. His spine went cold. He heard Jim Allison gasp, and a plate crashed to the floor in the kitchen at the rear of the house.

"That wasn't murder!" Solo cried out. "He drew first. Take that gun off me, hombre."

At that, the deputy began inching forward. "Put the handcuffs on him, pard," he spoke out of the corner of his mouth to the husky hombre. "If he makes one move, I'll drill him. We didn't come ter this sink ter help no ranchers. We come ter find Solo Dale an' take him back fer hanging."

Solo tensed as the big hombre jerked a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and began to slide around the room to get behind him.

"So yuh didn't come in reply to Jim Allison's letter to the governor, eh?" Solo suddenly said. "Yuh came to arrest me, for a shooting that took place in lower Utah. An'

this happens to be the State of Arizona."

"Wait a minute, deputy," Jim Allison called, suddenly seeing the point. "This is my home, Solo Dale is my guest, and I'll protect him from injustice. I don't like the sound of things."

At that moment, the husky man was behind Solo and reaching to snap the handcuff on Solo's right wrist. As the steel clicked to lock, the wrangler saw the thin deputy in front of him turn slightly to reply to Allison.

"Shut yore trap," the deputy snarled, "or I'll arrest yuh fer protectin' a criminal."

Before the deputy had finished, Solo sprang at him. It was the wrangler's only chance. Behind him, the husky man was not holding a gun. In front of Solo, the deputy was caught unawares.

Solo's left hand slapped the fake lawman's gun barrel aside, and he struck with his right fist. The blow sent the thin deputy head over heels into the front wall. He dropped his exploding gun as he landed, and Solo snatched it up.

He whirled to see the husky man who had been handcuffing him, and found the man leaping through the rear doorway to the kitchen.

"Keep the deputy covered, Allison," Solo shouted, and he plunged after the husky hombre.

In the kitchen, a girl screamed, and Solo was just in time to see the big tough vanishing through the back door. The wrangler did not halt. He suspected that there was something crooked about the arrest, and yet he couldn't tell what it was. Racing past Betty Allison and her mother, he sprang outside.

His eyes glimpsed the heels of the fugitive turning the corner of the ranch house.

*Crash!* Solo fired into the air.

"Halt!" he yelled, hoping to frighten the tough into surrender.

But when he turned the corner of the cabin, he saw the man vanishing around the front of the porch. At that moment, the glass of a side window of the living room broke out, and Solo spied a gun barrel stabbing through the opening.

He didn't know if it was held by the deputy or Allison. So he flattened against the wall of the building, and shouted desperately for the Triangle Cross owner to take care.

Jim Allison's voice called back: "Solo! Watch out for 'em. The deputy had a derringer. He plugged me. He's gone out the front."

Solo bounded to the front of the house, and was just in time to see the two fake lawmen galloping out of the ranch yard. They were turned in their saddles, guns aimed back. Solo threw himself to earth to avoid their whining lead. And the next moment the pair were gone into a coulee.

Jim Allison staggered out of the ranch house, holding his left side.

"They ain't deputies, Solo!" the Triangle Cross boss shouted. "It's a trick on the part o' Galloway. He must have found out about yuh. Don't let 'em git away."

Solo darted toward the corral, where his Morgan bronc was penned. He jerked open the gate, caught the animal with a quick dash, and grabbed the bridle hanging from its saddle horn. Working swiftly, he buckled the cheek strap, then proceeded to tighten the loose saddle cinch.

As he vaulted into the hull, he found Jim Allison at the corral gate and pointing down the sink. "Look, Solo!" Allison shouted. "It's the ranchers comin' ter our meeting. Wait fer 'em. They'll help yuh."

"Wait nothin'!" Solo replied, and he dug in his spurs.

Like an arrow from a bow, the Morgan shot out of the corral. Bent over the pommel, Solo left the ranch yard behind in no time at all. He feared that the two fugitives might disappear in the rocky hills to which they were heading through the coulee. But when he reached the wash, he sighted the riders a mile up its bottom.

Solo didn't know the lay of the land. Ahead of him, the two gun slingers sent to arrest him by Torch Hitchcock were striking west. They were riding Morgan broncs, trained by Horse Canby, and Solo couldn't gain ground. That puzzled him, for his own bronc could outstep any ordinary range cayuse.

All the way up the western slope of the sink, Solo kept hoping that the wind of the horses ahead of him would fail. He cast a glance behind him, and far down the slant he could see a dozen ranchers following him. But they were losing ground on him rapidly. At least, their broncs were not much good.

Now, starting into the country of red rock ridges, he lost sight of the fake lawmen. They vanished into a deep gully, and when Solo reached the place, he avoided it because of the possibilities of an ambush. Turning his bronc to the side, he loped around the defile, and came out on a wide, level table dotted with yucca and sage.

It was then that he got his big surprise.

The whine of a bullet, followed closely by the crack of a distant rifle, brought him to an abrupt halt. Turning in the saddle, he looked behind him. Riders were appearing out of brakes and arroyos.

They weren't the ranchers from the sink, whom Solo had left far

behind. There was no mistaking the horsemen. Solo had seen them once before in his life.

"Hitchcock's gang!" he exclaimed. "They were waiting for me in that gully that I avoided."

Panic seized him. He could fight one man, or two, but not an entire gang. He thought of the Cottontail Run ranchers riding up behind the Hitchcock gang, and he knew that those cowmen would be no match for the outlaws.

There was only one thing for him to do, and that was to flee. Anywhere. But he must get away. He must lead the raiders away with him, or the fate of Cottontail Run would be the same as Rim Rock Basin.

Solo's quirt rose and fell on his bronc's rump. As it sprang out, he realized that the raiders must be riding Horse Canby's Morgans. He jerked his gun, turned in the saddle, and emptied it at the oncoming pack. Their reply was a hail of screaming lead that made his cayuse leap out.

Solo unwittingly took the trail used by Hamilton P. Galloway, not many hours before, to reach the outlaw hide-out on Gila River. As the wrangler rode, his right wrist was clamped with one bracelet of the handcuffs which the husky tough had put on him. The bracelet for the left wrist dangled from the chain fastened to the other, and as it swung loose, it hampered Solo's actions.

## CHAPTER VIII. FIRE.

IT had been a deep love for Morgans that proved Horse Canby's undoing, and now it seemed to Solo Dale that the very broncs he had tended were going to be his death.

Spurring and quirting through the craggy hills, he could not shake off his foes.

He could look back and recognize sorrels and bays that led the other animals in the raider's outfit, and he remembered those broncs as having been the fastest in the herd. His own Morgan had been picked for speed, but it could not pull away.

Topping the last mountain range, he sighted vast flats of prickly pear before him, and his heart took hope. Down the shale slope, he raced, foolishly imagining that he might lose himself in the thorny growth.

He had heard stories of cowboys crashing through mesquite in pursuit of wild longhorns. What did he care if his shirt was ripped to ribbons, his shoulders slashed and torn? He had to escape.

At the edge of the dry, spiny brush, he found a sandy runway, and plunged into it. Ducking his head, he drove on, while low-hanging limbs raked his back like the claws of a wild cat. His bronc squealed in pain. He spurred it on, recklessly, hopelessly.

The first alley gave upon another, then a third, each seeming to be worse than the last. Turning right and left, plunging on, he neared the bank of the Gila River.

Behind him echoed the yells of the wolf pack. Bullets whined over the top of the mesquite, and he thought they were trying to drop him with chance shots.

And then it happened, with a swiftness that took his breath away. He stumbled upon one of the wider routes through the pear, and when he did, he let his Morgan take the trail with all its speed.

He was too excited to notice that there were old hoofprints on the sandy alley. He didn't even see the

rope that was stretched across its floor, from the bole of one mesquite to another.

He felt his bronc trip. Its head went down. Its rump came up, and Solo was hurled in an unlovely arc from the saddle. Whirling like a pinwheel, he hit the trail far ahead of his rolling bronc.

The sand saved him from death, but the shock of the fall stunned him. He skidded for five feet, grubbing up sand with his teeth, blinded, losing his gun.

He didn't see the figures of two hombres leaping out of the brush. They landed on him with chopping gun barrels. He threw up his arms to ward off the blows, and he felt them grab his wrists. There was the sharp cliff of locking steel. And he knew that they had fastened the second handcuff about his left wrist.

As the blur cleared before his eyes, he saw the ugly face of Maverick Hitchcock above him. There was another hombre kneeling beside him. It was an older coyote, who bore a striking resemblance to the young whelp. The second was Torch Hitchcock, who jammed a six-gun barrel into Solo's chest.

"We got yuh at last, Dale!" Torch snarled. "I don't know how yuh escaped from my two private deputies, but I figured thar was somethin' up when I heard all the shootin'."

Maverick Hitchcock was grinning from ear to ear. "Let me do the talkin', pap," the young coyote said. "He's all mine. Yuh promised me. I wants ter figure out jest what I'm goin' ter do."

Solo's head was spinning, and his breath came in gasps. He needed strength. Better for him to bide his time. He could hear the echo of distant shots, and then the pound

of horses sounded near. He saw riders appearing, and Torch looked away from him.

"We nailed him, boys!" Torch shouted. "Go round up the gang."

Solo listened to the first raiders call back: "Torch! Thar's a hull army o' Cottontail Run ranchers comin' through the hills after us. What'll we do?"

Torch Hitchcock sprang to his feet. "Yuh don't mean it?" he cried. "Let 'em come. Tell the outfit to hide in the pear. Yuh'll be able ter beef the hull works, if they ride down inter the mesquite. Snap inter it. Take every man yuh've got. I'll send the boys that's watchin' the cattle."

Maverick Hitchcock hadn't taken his eyes off Solo. "We better drag this skunk back ter the hide-out, Torch," he said.

"Make him walk," Torch snarled. "We ought ter put a knife in his heart right hyar, but I want ter show him an ol' friend o' his."

"Yuh mean the double-crossin' skunk what called himself Hoss Canby?" Maverick Hitchcock asked, chuckling. "That'll be good, Torch. Mebbe this smart Aleck don't know that his pard is alive an' kickin'."

With a sudden jerk, Solo Dale came to a sitting position, fists clenched. The news of Horse Canby hit him like cold water in the face, awakening him from his stupor, arousing his aching muscles to new strength, charging his mind with hope and suspicion.

"Horse Canby!" he ejaculated. "Yuh mean that Horse is—"

"Git up an' hike," Maverick Hitchcock snarled. "Yuh'll see him soon enough."

Solo's eyes dropped to his cuffed wrists. The gun barrels of Torch and Maverick prodded him. He

gritted his teeth, glowered at them, then slowly climbed to his feet.

He was certain that they were torturing him with that story about Horse Canby, but he had to find out. He turned down the sandy alleyway, and allowed himself to be prodded toward the bank of Gila River.

As he came out on the sandy bottom, his eyes found a big herd of cattle lying in the sun along the border of the sluggish current. To his left was an adobe hut, resting on high ground, but with its back close to the dry pear and mesquite. He turned toward it as Torch Hitchcock bellowed to the herders down by the river.

"We've got Dale, boys!" Torch said. "Drop yore work, all of yuh! There's a big fight waiting back in the pear. Them fool ranchers from Cottontail Run are headed this way. The gang is goin' ter give 'em a warm reception when they strike the mesquite."

Maverick Hitchcock's gun jabbed Solo. "Keep movin', yuh sneaky snake!" he said gloatingly. "Do yuh remember what I told yuh up at Rim Rock Basin? Yuh laughed at me. Now it's my turn. I don't know whether ter burn yuh at the stake or ter feed yuh ter the red ants."

Solo lifted his head. "Horse!" he shouted toward the adobe hut. "It's me, pard. Are yuh really there?"

"Shut up, or I'll wrap my barrel around yore skull," Maverick yelled.

Solo heard a cracked voice coming from the back of the adobe hut, where the prickly pear grew thick. "Solo!" the voice of Horse Canby called. "It's me, boy. Don't let 'em kill yuh. Run fer yore life."

Solo came to a halt, whirled, and faced Torch and Maverick, fight in his eyes.

"Yuh scum!" the wrangler cried out. "Let Horse Canby go. Kill me! Torture me! What happened in the Rim Rock is my fault. It ain't his. Yuh stole his Morgans. Ain't that enough fer yuh?"

Torch's and Maverick's guns clicked to cock. "Get on inter the hut," the older Hitchcock sneered. "It sounds like Broncho Simpson never told yuh all about himself. Yuh'll learn soon enough. Mebbe we'll let Simpson watch what we do ter yuh."

"Simpson?" Solo repeated. "I don't know no Simpson."

"Yuh'll meet him soon enough," Maverick chuckled. "Are yuh obeyin' orders, or do I have to put a bullet in yo're shoulder?"

Solo turned slowly. His wrists were cuffed. Maybe the Hitchcocks would be foolish enough to take the bracelets off. He'd wait. Better to play for time than to throw his life away.

The door of the adobe hut was open, and he stepped into a big room almost bare of furniture. Saddles, blankets, wearing apparel were scattered over the floor. There was a crude table loaded with unwashed breakfast dishes.

At one end of the room there was a door fastened with chains and crossbars, and Solo knew instantly that the room beyond was Horse Canby's prison.

"Horse!" Solo shouted. "Can't yuh get out?"

The Hitchcocks were behind him. "Shut yore trap, I told yuh!" Maverick raged, and the toe of his foot kicked Solo flying across the room.

As the wrangler fell, he twisted to avoid striking a heap of pots and pans before the fireplace. A blinding rage took possession of him. He sprang to his hands and knees. Be-

fore him stood Torch and Maverick, laughing uproariously.

About to dive at their feet in a mad impulse to die fighting, Solo suddenly caught himself. His nostrils dilated. His mind flashed back to Rim Rock Basin, where on a certain day six months before he had smelled smoke eddying with the wind into Horse Canby's cabin.

Now his ears caught the crackle of dry brush, and at that moment he noted that Torch Hitchcock had stiffened.

"Fire!" the outlaw shouted. "It's fire, Maverick. Where did it start?"

Solo watched Maverick Hitchcock's lips curl scornfully. "Yo're crazy, Torch," the whelp replied. "I don't smell nothin'. Mebbe Simpson is moldin' me some new bullets fer my .45."

"Moldin' bullets?" Torch Hitchcock cried wrathfully. "Do yuh mean that yuh gave him a lead mold an' matches?" He sprang to the door of Horse Canby's prison room, tore the chains loose, heaved the crossbars down, and plunged out of sight.

Solo Dale was as tense as a wolf about to spring. He had his hands on a frying pan that lay on the floor. Before him, Maverick Hitchcock stood with cocked six-gun, but the young outlaw was too interested in what Torch was doing to be suspicious.

"Yuh sneak!" Solo heard Torch Hitchcock shout in the prison room, and then the outlaw's six-gun crashed twice, and the scream of a wounded man lifted.

"Did yuh shoot him, Torch?" Maverick yelled.

Solo saw Torch come racing out of the prison room, and head to the front door. "He set fire ter the prickly pear out the back window!" Torch shouted in panic. "The hull

patch is catchin'. The fire will trap our hull gang in the brush."

And then he was gone out the front door. Solo saw Maverick Hitchcock's head jerk around to call something to his father. Before Maverick could speak, Solo leaped from the floor, flinging the iron frying pan before him.

The cooking utensil struck Maverick Hitchcock in the ear and knocked him off his balance. Solo's doubled hands rose. About the wrangler's wrists were the handcuffs—hard steel which crashed into Maverick's skull and floored him with a terrified howl.

Solo piled on top of him, reaching for the maverick's wavering gun barrel. He caught the weapon, jerked it from his foe's hand, and leaped to his feet.

"Horse!" Solo shouted, as the Hitchcock kid yelled for Torch and hid his head on the floor. "Horse, I'm heeled, pard. Come on!"

Horse Canby's voice replied from the prison room. "I'm shot, Solo! Look out fer 'em, pard. They can't stop the fire. The brush is catchin' fast, jest like the grass did in Rim Rock Basin."

Solo's eyes flashed to the front door, where the clump of Torch Hitchcock's boots sounded. The wrangler was twisting the butt of his stolen gun into his hands as Torch sprang into the room.

He saw the outlaw's six-gun swerve into aim at him. He didn't have time to take aim. He fired desperately at Torch's chest and ducked to the floor as the outlaw's weapon spouted flame.

His ears went deaf from the two crashes that were so close together that he couldn't tell who had triggered the first.

A bullet snatched away the lobe of his ear, and he saw that his own

lead had caught Torch Hitchcock dead center in the chest and thrown the outlaw backward. Solo watched Torch's big body curve downward.

The outlaw tried to shoot again, but he didn't seem able to thumb his gun hammer. There was a rattle in his throat as he crashed to the floor, rolled over, and lay still.

Solo held his position, smoking weapon in his right hand, eyes flicking to where Maverick lay huddled on the floor, too terrified to look up. Behind Solo sounded the scratch of nails and the dragging of boots. He jerked his head over his shoulder, and looked into the pain-racked face of Horse Canby. It was a face ten years older, pale and wrinkled.

"Solo, my boy!" Horse gasped. "Yuh killed him, pard?"

Solo whirled back to watch Maverick Hitchcock, but the coyote had not moved. The outlaw kid must have heard Horse, for he let out a wail of dread."

"Don't shoot me, Solo Dale!" Maverick screamed. "I ain't done nothin' ter yuh. Take me ter the law. I'll go with yuh like I did the last time."

"I'll have to tie him up, Horse," Solo gritted. "Don't move, pard. Wait for me."

Horse Canby's reply was lost in the roar of flames outside the adobe hut. Finding a lariat on the planks, Solo crawled to Maverick Hitchcock, drew his hands behind his back, and tied them securely. He trussed the coyote's legs, then turned to find his old boss propped up against the wall.

"How bad are yuh hit, Horse?" Solo asked breathlessly. "We've got ter get away from hyar. There's a coyote called Broncho Simpson somewhere about."

Horse Canby shook his head wea-

rily as his wrangler reached to unbutton his shirt.

"It's no use, pard," the old bronc breeder gasped. "Torch got me twice. Don't yuh mind about Broncho Simpson. He's burnin' up in that fire out yonder. Tell me what yuh did with the two mares an' colts, Solo. I loved them Morgans more than—"

Horse Canby didn't finish. His eyes closed tight, his head fell on his chest. He had fainted.

Solo knew death when he saw it. This was not it. He stretched Horse Canby out on a pile of blankets, found whisky for an antiseptic, and went to work on him.

There was a .45-caliber slug in Horse's left side, another under his right shoulder. It took Solo Dale three hours to get them out, and then he walked to the front door and outside to watch the smoke in the east.

What had been a thorny forest now was a smoldering flat of stumps and ashes. From far back in the swirling curtains of smoke came the shouts of horsemen, searching for something.

Solo listened tensely, and then he identified a voice.

"Jim Allison!" he exclaimed. "Those are the ranchers from Cottontail Run with him. They must have hidden up in the rocks outside the pear an' beefed the gang as the skunks ran out of the fire." He turned back to the hut. "Wait until I tell Horse about it!" he exclaimed.

Inside the hut, he found Horse Canby staring open-eyed at the ceiling, awake. Solo knelt beside him.

"Hello, pard," Solo said. "Yuh were askin' about the two mares an' the colts. Waal, I've got a new

range for them. Whenever yuh feel able, I'll take yuh up ter introduce yuh ter a lot of real friends."

A weary smile came to Horse Canby's lips. "I reckon that Torch couldn't kill me, after all, eh, pard?" he said. "It must be that the Morgans need me too much fer the Big Chief ter let me die. Would yuh mind takin' that book out o' my back pocket? I've carried it for six months, but it's beginnin' to prod me."

Solo lifted Horse Canby and

jerked a ragged book from the bronc breeder's pocket.

"What is it, Horse?" the wrangler asked.

"It's a pain in the neck fer yuh, Solo." Horse chuckled. "Look at it."

Solo did. It was the old arithmetic book that had been set aside one night six months before. Solo made a wry face.

"Horse," he said, "I should have shot you, instead o' Torch Hitchcock."



### BULLWHACKERS OF THE PLAINS

THE bullwhackers of the plains were as distinctive characters in their ways as were the buffalo hunters, the raftsmen of the Ohio, the Mississippi steamboatmen, or any of the other groups of men whose rough life and peculiar ways distinguished them from ordinary members of civilized society.

They had a language all their own. In appearance they were different to any other class of men. They were long-haired and unkempt, their feet incased in huge cowhide boots in bad weather, while they went barefoot when the weather was good.

They tramped alongside their patient teams, often eight or ten yoke to a wagon, brandishing the long heavy whip, that popped like a pistol, yelling at the oxen, or singing crude songs of the day.

Their animals were often named after some fancy of their own, like the famous musical mules of Shorty Masters.

There was one bullwhacker, known only as "Chris," who drove over the plains for years. He was a gambler, and his mind was always running on games of chance. So he had named his oxen after the various exciting amusements that had probably swallowed up all his earnings, for it is not on record that he ever got rich enough to retire and lead a lazy life. ♦

Those who were near by used to get great fun when they heard Chris urging his team along, calling each animal by name, "Gee, there, Faro! Wake up, Rondo! Now then, Keno! G'wan, you, Poker! Shake yerself, Monte!"

All this was richly sprinkled with that particular brand of profanity in which Chris, being an efficient bullwhacker, was eloquent. It was rich and expressive.

The oxen understood it much better than any human being could have done, and it never failed to have a quickening effect on their movements.



# Calamity Makes A Trade

By Lee Bond

Author of "Runt of the Flyin' A," etc.

DESPITE the snowstorm which struck with unexpected fury, everything seemed to be favoring the two wandering cowpokes. They had been high in the rugged fastness of the Catalina Mountains when the storm struck them. They had been more than uneasy at first, for Calvert's Post, the only possible shelter for many a mile, lay somewhere south and east, though neither of the two wandering punchers knew the exact location.

But they located it shortly after dark, which was, of course, purely

a matter of luck. It was snowing so hard the two cold-numbed riders could barely see the man who came hurrying from the corral with a lighted lantern.

"Light, boys, an' head for the post," the man with the bobbing lantern called cheerily. "Tough storm, ain't it? Don't worry about yore broncs. I'll see that they're took keer of immediate."

One of the punchers dismounted, groaning a little as his frost-nipped feet thumped into the fluffy snow.

"Gosh, Calamity, this shore is our lucky night!" the sawed-off, gray-

eyed puncher who had just dismounted called up to the hulking waddy who had made no move to dismount. "Swarm out o' that saddle, pard, an' we'll head fer the post, yonder!" The little puncher swung a numbed hand toward a blur of yellowish light that showed dimly through the falling snow.

"Yuh go on, Shorty," came a mournful, choked voice. "Go git in whar it's warm an' enjoy yoreself. But me, I'm done fer. I've took noo-mony, croup is chokin' my throat, my feet is froze, an' I'm snow blind."

"Shorty" Stevens snorted like a boogery bronc, limping closer to "Calamity" Boggs, who still sat his horse. If Calamity ever had a cheerful thought in his life, no one but himself knew about it.

Ordinarily, Shorty Stevens would have been amused at his big pard's groaning. But after riding through that storm for a few hours, Shorty's sense of humor was somewhat lacking. He heard the barn man gasp, and saw the lantern bobbing in closer.

"My gosh, feller, yuh must be in a bad way!" the fellow gasped, trying to peer up at Calamity Boggs through the snow. "But jist set tight, an' I'll call some o' the men from the post. They'll——"

"They'll hang the big moose, when they find out that he's only up to his usual bellyachin'!" Shorty Stevens cut in testily. "Calamity, git down from there an' come on."

Down through the snow and darkness came a deep groan, as if a man were in great agony. But Calamity was dismounting, muttering some dire predictions to the effect that he was too near gone to even stand on his feet.

But Calamity managed to stand without any great amount of

trouble. Nor did he seem to suffer a great deal when he started striding away toward the lights of the post. Shorty Stevens kept ahead of his big pard, not giving Calamity a chance to do any of his grumbling.

They arrived at the post, shoved open the heavy split-log door, and stepped into a long, well-lighted room that was snugly warm. Shorty pulled off his snow-crusted mackinaw, slapped snow from the brim of his gray Stetson, then strode over to where a small desk was located in a corner of the room.

Outside of where that one small corner desk stood, the trading post's main floor was occupied by a combination store and saloon. At one side, hewed log steps led steeply up to the second story, which was a sort of hotel.

There were rooms up there. Shorty Stevens was thinking of a room with a good, soft bed and a chance to get some real sleep as he stood at the desk.

Back in the saloon half of the big room were a number of men who had turned from the bar and were eying the two newcomers with grim intentness. Shorty Stevens felt a little uneasy, for those jaspers were all plenty hard-looking.

Shorty had a temper that made him sharp-tongued and scrappy. Gray eyes snapping, he lifted a chubby fist that was still blue from the outside cold and hit the scarred desk a hard wallop.

"Hey!" Shorty yelled. "Who owns this here shebang? My pard an' me crave rooms, to say nothin' o' some hot grub."

"Oh-h-h!" came a moan from directly behind Shorty. "Yo're jist mentionin' soft beds an' hot grub tuh torture me, make my last minutes miserable. I'm dyin', pard, an' will never——"

Calamity's voice broke off, for Shorty had whirled, eyes blazing.

Calamity was a big, powerfully built waddy, who looked anything but at the point of death. His keen black eyes were half closed, however, and his big, hard-jawed face was set in the gloomiest of expressions.

Shorty was about to bawl his pard out for being so danged gloomy, when he saw one of Calamity's eyelids flicker the least bit.

Shorty forgot his peevishness then and there, and his stubby hands drifted hastily toward the butts of the twin guns that were strapped to his saddle-warped thighs. That slight wink was a warning, and Shorty knew that some sort of danger was hovering.

Despite his eternal gloom and apparent clumsiness, Calamity Boggs was one of the keenest-minded men Shorty had ever known. An expert shot with either six-gun or rifle, Calamity was worse than bad medicine in any kind of mix-up. Calamity saw trouble of some sort now and had warned his pard with that slight drooping of one eyelid.

But before Shorty could ask a question, a small hombre came breezing up, thin face split in a wide grin, pale-blue eyes raking the two pards up and down.

"Howdy, boys!" the little hombre sang out. "Me, I'm John Calvert, owner o' this tradin' post. Want rooms an' grub, hey?"

Calvert was an odd-looking hombre. Shorty almost grinned at the much-too-large coat Calvert wore. And as if anxious to add to his ridiculous appearance, Calvert wore trousers that were almost skin tight and lacked several inches of being long enough. Still grinning, he shoved a dog-eared register toward Shorty, who hastily signed his name.

"Room No. 12," Calvert told him in his high, thin voice, then shoved the register toward Calamity. "Calamity Boggs!" John Calvert cackled, when the big waddy had signed. "Waal, jist ter help yuh out in havin' calamity, Mr. Boggs, I'm givin' yuh room No. 13."

"Huh?" Calamity gasped. "Yuh mean I'll have tuh stay in Room 13? Why— Oh, well, it don't matter nohow. I'm nigh daid; so—"

"So shut up!" Shorty Stevens snapped. "I'll bet yuh don't die afore we've ate half a steer apiece, nohow! Yuh big—"

*Bra-aa-ng!* Shorty's voice was drowned in the blasting roar of a Colt.

He heard Calamity Boggs grunt, turned just in time to see the big waddy toppling slowly sidewise, crimson staining one side of his face!

## II.

Calamity Boggs hit the rough flooring like a sack of meal. He lay there, quivering a little, unquestionably out cold.

Shorty Stevens had shucked both guns from their oiled holsters and whirled, slitted eyes raking the seven hard-looking men down the room. He had expected to see one of those hombres holding a smoking gun.

Shorty would have shot whoever happened to be holding a smoking weapon at the time, for he feared that his big, gloomy pard was actually done for.

But those men down the room seemed to be as badly surprised as Shorty was. The peppery little waddy could see that none of them held a gun in his hand. Another thing which Shorty's quick eyes noted was that there were no empty holsters in sight. Badly puzzled and

also badly worried, he whirled again, to look down at Calamity.

John Calvert, the operator of the trading post, was bending over Calamity, muttering something under his breath. Shorty holstered his guns, shivering in spite of himself as he saw crimson staining Calamity's curly black hair along one side.

"Is—is he done fer, Calvert?" Shorty managed to choke out at last.

"Nah!" came the harsh reply. "This jigger's head must be as hard as a pool ball. He's only creased."

Shorty Stevens failed to notice the anger and disappointment that was in the post owner's voice. Learning that his pard was not seriously hurt was such a relief that Shorty could think of little else just then.

"Git his feet, Calvert," Shorty said suddenly. "We'll pack him upstairs an' put him in that No. 13 room afore he wakes up."

But John Calvert seemed not to hear. Looking toward the back of the room he called out, "Comin', gents!" and went hurrying away.

Shorty figured that the men at the bar had called Calvert, and was wondering how he could possibly get Calamity up those steps when he heard a hoarse guffaw from down the room. Shorty turned sharply, sensing somehow that that laughter was directed at him. Nor was he mistaken.

"Waal, half-pint, why don't yuh tote yore pard on up the steps, huh?" a big, shaggy-looking hombre snarled.

The fellow came slogging forward, thick, bloated lips peeled back into a half grin. Shorty Stevens saw that the burly jasper's tawny eyes were slitted and watchful, and that the big, grimy hands swung mighty close to twin gun butts.

Shorty's temper flared instantly.

He poked out his blunt chin stubbornly.

"Jest what," he inquired flatly, "have yuh got to say about this, feller?"

The big man came on until he was standing very close to Calamity Boggs, who still lay as if he were out cold.

"Why, are yuh tryin' ter sass me, yuh runt?" the burly jasper sneered at Shorty. "If yuh are, I'll slap — Hey, what the—— Halp!"

The shaggy-looking hombre's voice ended in a yowl of terror. One moment he had been standing there, on the point of crowding Shorty Stevens into a gun play. But something had gone suddenly wrong.

The big hombre felt his ankles gripped in mighty hands, and was describing a clumsy arc through the air before he realized that Calamity Boggs, whom he had thought out cold from a head wound, had come to life. The tawny-eyed hombre landed several feet away, the force of his fall jarring the whole room.

From down at the bar came angry snarls, but Shorty Stevens paid those other hombres little attention. Calamity Boggs had come to his feet with the agility of a huge cat, heaving the tawny-eyed man up by the ankles as he rose.

Calamity stood there now, black eyes slitted and watchful, face set into a mask of cold fury that meant trouble for whoever horned in.

Shorty Stevens forgot his own anger and grinned, for not once in a blue moon did Calamity Boggs become peeved enough to forget his gloom.

"Go ahead, pard, an' work that yaller-eyed snake over!" Shorty cackled. "He looks sort o' dazed, but I reckon yuh kin prod him awake if yuh try."

"I'll do wuss than prod yuh, Buzz

Grover, if yuh don't behave!" Calamity snarled at the tawny-eyed jasper, who was now sitting up and glaring. "Or mebbe yuh'd like to crawl up onto them hoofs o' yores an' settle accounts right now."

Shorty blinked rapidly, looking first at Calamity then at the man Calamity had called "Buzz" Grover. That tawny-eyed gent had gone pale, and was showing every sign of having become very uneasy. He glanced over one shoulder at the men farther down the room, then looked back at Calamity, licking nervously at thick lips.

"I—I reckon I made a mistake, Calamity," Buzz Grover gulped as he came unsteadily to his feet.

He turned away quickly and went slogging to where the tough-looking fellows were bunched before the bar. Grover said something, and the hard-case jaspers at the bar began swearing uneasily.

"Say, what's it all about?" Shorty Stevens demanded, stepping close to Calamity. "How'd yuh happen to know that Grover coyote, pard?"

Calamity had no chance to answer, however, for John Calvert was hurrying up the room, pale eyes fairly glinting as he looked at Calamity and Shorty.

"Fer two cents," the trader snarled thinly, "I'd turn yuh two into the night. Think yuh kin come here an' start trouble with my customers, do yuh?"

"Say, yuh know danged well we never started a thing!" Shorty Stevens snapped. "Somebody shot at my pard an'—"

"An' give me my finishin' wound!" Calamity cut in mournfully. "My skull is busted, an' I kin feel death closin' in right now. But the signs has allus been agin' me, pard, so I reckon it ain't no surprise that I'm cashin' my chips."

"The way yuh tossed Buzz around wouldn't look like yuh was so bad off, Boggs," John Calvert growled suspiciously. "Yuh jumped him when he wa'n't lookin', otherwise yuh'd 'a' got yore needin's."

"Shore, I'm allus pickin' on some gent," Calamity sniffed. "But I'm a goner now, shore. This hyar wound got full o' dirt, an' I kin feel it beginnin' ter fester right—"

"Aw, pipe down!" Shorty Stevens cut in. "Calamity, we better—"

"We better git upstairs," Calamity said hastily. "Shorty, help me git up ter that awful No. 13 room. I can't last long, that's a cinch. But mebbe I kin rest a mite easy in muh last minutes, anyhow."

Shorty Stevens offered no argument to that, for once more he had seen that barely flickering movement of Calamity's eyelid, and knew that the big waddy was, despite his gloomy talk, aware of some keen danger.

### III.

Calamity reeled up the steps like a man who was about to tumble over at every step. But Shorty noticed that the waddy was mighty careful to always keep his face partially turned toward that sullen bunch of men who stood before the rough bar.

Shorty also noticed that Calamity's big right hand never strayed far from the butt of the single Colt he wore holstered low on his right hip.

Calvert clumped up the steps behind the two pards, muttering sullenly. The trader carried a smoky lamp, and kept glancing uneasily toward Buzz Grover and the others who stood before the bar. Not until he had shown the two punchers their rooms did Calvert seem to thaw out.

"I—I reckon yuh boys ain't ter blame fer what happened, a while ago, at that," he said as he placed the lamp on a rickety stand in the narrow, cold hallway. "But take my advice an' stay in yore rooms. Buzz Grover an' them six pard's o' his will start somethin' if they git a chance."

"Let 'em start somethin' if they feel lucky!" Shorty growled. "It was one o' them snakes that took a shot at Calamity."

"Nope, yo're wrong!" Calvert cried hastily. "I—I looked around in time ter see a gent jerk his head an' arm out o' the back door. The feller was holdin' a smokin' pistol, an' was a plumb stranger ter me."

"No ain't thet awful!" Calamity moaned. "I'm likely more than half daid right now, an' my passin' will be a mystery. I allus knowed I'd come to a turrible end. But bein' killed off mysterious an' havin' to die in a room numbered 13 is plumb horrible."

John Calvert looked again at Calamity with that mingling of anger and suspicion, then turned toward the head of the stairs. "There's a lamp an' a stove in each o' yore rooms," he flung back over one shoulder, then went bobbing swiftly down the steps.

"Now!" Shorty snapped, turning on Calamity hastily. "What's it all about. Yuh spotted trouble, the minute we stepped inside. How come?"

"Had a run-in with Buzz Grover once, a long time ago," Calamity grumbled. "Besides, he's an escaped convict that was slated fer a hangin' down in Yuma prison. But my awful luck had to—"

"Don't start yore bellyachin'!" Shorty growled. "Talk, Calamity, an' talk sense! Why did Buzz

Grover or one o' his men try to drill yuh?"

"'Cause that Calvert jasper told some o' them others to pot me," Calamity grunted. "He didn't like my looks an' jist wanted me shot. But I ain't surprised. Nobody ever likes me, pard, an' my awful luck keeps me nigh the grave."

"Dang yuh, talk sense!" Shorty ripped out peeishly. "Why would John Calvert want yuh shot?"

Calamity got no chance to answer just then, however, for there came the pound of boots as some one started up the steps. Calamity hastily pocketed the neckerchief with which he had been wiping crimson from his face, grabbed the lamp, and was through the door of Room 13 so swiftly that Shorty stood blinking. But a hiss from Calamity jarred Shorty into life, and the little waddy leaped through the door Calamity was holding open.

Calamity closed the door softly, then turned to survey the room in swift glances. There was a single iron bed, an old, rusty-looking dresser, and a small sheet-iron stove in the room.

There was wood and kindling near the stove, and since the room was chilly, Calamity hurried over, and soon had a fire going. But as he worked, his keen ears were tuned to catch the tramp of feet that sounded out in the hallway. A door rattled some place, then voices lifted briefly.

"Some gent come upstairs, lookin' fer somebody that was already in a room," Shorty Stevens grunted, frowning at Calamity. "But I've seen yuh listenin' fer sounds as yuh made the fire. What's the matter?"

"Wish I knew," Calamity answered tensely. "Shorty, there's somethin' afoot hyar. An' it's some-

thin' dirty, or Buzz Grover wouldn't be in on it. O' course, I'll git drilled afore long—even if I don't cash in from this awful wound."

Shorty was opening his mouth to hand out a hot retort to Calamity's groaning when there sounded a knock at the door. Calamity went across the room in catlike strides, eased himself down onto the bed, and motioned for Shorty to answer the door.

Shorty was fairly fuming, for this mystery and Calamity's conversation were getting him on the prod. The little waddy yanked the door open, and found himself facing a gnarled old man who blinked at him out of watery, faded eyes.

"I come up from the kitchen," the old fellow said mildly. "Mr. Calvert, he said yuh fellers would want yore grub fetched up hyar. I kin give yuh roast beef with taters or venison stew."

"Eat in our rooms?" Shorty Stevens fairly yelled. "Why, I'll go down there an' make that blasted trader wisht he'd never thought up no such insult."

"Wait!" Calamity called from the bed, and sat up slowly, as if he were actually weak.

Shorty turned, scowling. He meant to go on until he saw the look in Calamity's keen eyes. Shorty hesitated, then moved back into the room. Calamity motioned, and the old cook who had come to the door strode into the room.

"I'm some stove up an' likely about tuh draw my last breath," Calamity groaned. "But mebbe, pardner, yuh could tell me what's goin' on around this post."

The old cook started nervously, suddenly pale. He glanced uneasily over one shoulder, then turned back toward Calamity. The fellow began trembling violently, and Calam-

ity reached out one powerful hand, intending to give the cook a slight prod. But the old fellow leaped away, eyes wide.

"Yuh—yuh jaspers will git a mess o' lead ter chaw instead o' grub, if yuh don't clear out o' hyar fast as yuh kin!" he gasped hoarsely. "Sneak out a window an' high-tail it, afore it's too late."

Before either of the dumfounded cowboys could even think of a reply, the old cook had whirled and leaped through the door.

"What in little blue blazes got the matter with that grub spoiler?" Shorty Stevens gasped. "He acted downright loco, to me."

"It's jist my awful looks, that's all," Calamity groaned mournfully. "He likely seen that I couldn't be trusted, an'—"

*Bra-aa-ng!* The muffled roar of a gun cut Calamity's voice off short.

The shot had come from the big room below, and the two pards were on their feet, jumping toward the door, when a man's voice lifted in a scream of agony.

#### IV.

Despite the fact that he claimed to be in bad condition, Calamity Boggs moved with pantherish speed. He shot through the door and into the hallway well ahead of Shorty, though the little waddy had been closer to the door.

Calamity's big boots thumped the flooring three times, then he was at the head of the stairs, gazing down. Men were milling about excitedly somewhere below, and Calamity could hear harsh, bitter oaths.

"Plugged him too deep, I tell yuh!" John Calvert's voice was snarling. "Buzz, yo're clumsier than a ox."

Calamity heard no more just then,

for Shorty Stevens landed beside him with a noisy clatter of spurs and chugging boots.

"What's takin' place?" Shorty demanded. "Dang it, Calamity, I'm gittin' sick o' this foolishness. I'm goin' down there an' ast them snakes a few things."

Shorty stepped past his big pard, muttering angrily as he went down the hand-hewn steps. The tramping of feet had ceased in the room below, and when Shorty got to the bottom of the stairs where he could see the whole room, there seemed to be nothing amiss.

Buzz Grover and his six cronies stood before the bar, pretty much as they had before. John Calvert was behind the crude counter, looking a little pale as he shoved out bottles to Buzz and the rest.

Grover began glaring at Shorty, but John Calvert said something from the corner of his thin mouth that put a stop to Buzz's hostile actions.

Shorty bow-legged on to the crude bar, snapping gray eyes searching the cluttered floor. He saw an ominous red smudge on the grimy flooring, and stopped to gaze at it a moment. He went on to the bar then, watching Buzz Grover and the others narrowly.

"What happened down here?" Shorty asked bluntly. "Who was the gent that got plugged?"

"Likely the same feller that creased yore cheerful pard a while ago." Calvert tried to grin as he answered. "A stranger come rompin' in, actin' ugly. Buzz winged him, though, afore the jasper could pull anything funny. He was shore tough-lookin', too."

"I'll bet he was!" Shorty said sharply.

Calvert flushed, biting his thin lips to keep from hurling back a

retort. Shorty had just the same as told him bluntly that he was lying, and John Calvert was having a hard time keeping his temper in check.

Buzz Grover stiffened. The six slit-eyed, hard-faced hombres beside him were plainly waiting for orders.

Shorty saw that he had just about matched himself a fight and was calmly wondering how long it would take these jaspers to make a break, when John Calvert forced a shaky laugh and shoved out a bottle.

"Drink, Stevens!" he invited. "It's on the house. By the way, where's Boggs? Too sick to come down, was he?"

Shorty waved the liquor back, for he never used it. "Oh, I reckon Calamity will be all right," he answered carelessly, fishing tobacco and papers from his shirt pocket.

But Shorty was doing some mighty rapid thinking, despite his casual manner. He had not noticed that Calamity was not down in the room with him until now. He had been too busy with his own thoughts to notice that Calamity had not followed him down the steps.

Shorty was squirming inwardly, suddenly excited. When Calamity Boggs dropped from sight like that, there was usually some mighty smoky action before long. Shorty lighted his smoke, trying hard to figure out just what Calamity could be up to.

That the big puncher had not gone back to his room, Shorty would have bet his last dollar. Calamity go back and lie down when there was trouble in the air? Not much!

That big moose was around somewhere, Shorty told himself tensely, and likely enough finding out what all this mystery was about. Calam-

ity would show up pretty soon, and then—

Shorty's thoughts were jerked to a very rude halt. He had heard a voice, but had not realized that he was being spoken to. He realized now, however, for there was a vicious oath ringing in his ears, and he felt as if he were floating along through space.

But Shorty's flight was brief, and the landing was painful to say the least. He brought up in a bunch of chairs, dimly aware that he had been struck a terrific wallop on the ear.

Shorty's head swam sickeningly, and there was a black fog gathering before his dazed eyes. Through that black fog darted little red tongues of lightning that would not let him drift into the inviting gloom of unconsciousness.

He grunted, tried to sit up, then began snarling like a bobcat. He saw a form lurching toward him through the shock-fog that still clung to his brain, and he managed to gain his feet somehow. He saw that the man striding toward him was Buzz Grover, and heard the burly jasper snarling harsh oaths.

Shorty got his wobbly legs under him as best he could, balled his hands into hard fists, and lurched forward, striking out with all the strength he could muster.

But Shorty was still foggy from the blow that had floored him. He stumbled, missed the wild swing he launched at Buzz Grover's head, and tumbled to the floor. Hoarse laughter lifted, and Shorty groaned through locked teeth as a boot toe crashed into his unprotected face.

"All right, Buzz, give him plenty!" John Calvert yipped. "Yuh others come with me, an' we'll sashay upstairs an' settle with Boggs. These

two might ketch on to our game hyar, if we don't fix 'em permanent."

## V.

Buzz Grover never knew exactly what happened to him. He was enjoying himself immensely, for every time Shorty Stevens tried feebly to get up he booted and cuffed the little waddy unmercifully. Shorty's face was a crimson-splashed white mask, and his voice came in hoarse, choked sobs.

"Git nosey, will yuh?" Buzz snarled at him. "Waal, I'll have the pleasure o' dealin' yuh plenty grief afore I put a slug in yore carcass. I'll—"

Something hit Buzz Grover then —hit him so hard and so suddenly that he was off the floor and rocketing toward the bar before he could yell. Then he struck the bar head first, and struck it hard. He bounced to the floor in a shivering heap, trying to figure out what had happened.

Steely fingers fastened in his collar instantly, and he was yanked to his feet. He could see a man before him and was trying to say something when a huge fist landed on his chin, lifting him up and back. Buzz landed across the crude bar, out cold.

He did not know that Calamity Boggs stood there above him, big fists clenched, keen black eyes showing dangerous red glints. Calamity was white with anger, and looked far different from the mournful, good-humored cowpoke he usually was.

"Kick an' maul my pard, will yuh?" Calamity panted. "Waal, yuh murderin' snake, how do yuh like some o' the same?"

Calamity slapped Buzz Grover an open-handed blow that was about as gentle as a grizzly's caress. But

Grover gave no signs of having felt it, and Calamity realized for the first time that the fellow was out cold.

He left him dangling there across the bar, whirled, and strode hastily to where Shorty Stevens had sat up and was grinning wanly through a smear of crimson.

"How did yuh—git into the game?" Shorty gasped, still breathless from being kicked in the ribs. "Where'd yuh—come from?"

"Back door," Calamity gritted, and there was nothing slow or gloomy about his voice now. "I went out fer a pasear—went out the winder an' down the projectin' logs at the corner."

Shorty nodded, for talking was a painful proposition. Over their heads sounded the muffled thumping of boots. Calamity glanced toward the stairs, then began talking rapidly.

"Stagecoach out yonder in the barn, all spattered with red!" the big waddy snapped. "I—er—coaxed that stable keeper into tellin' me a few things."

"Stagecoach?" Shorty found talking easier under the goad of excitement. "What's up, Calamity?"

"Plenty!" the big waddy rapped. "The stage stopped hyar at dusk, aimin' to lay over all night, instead o' tryin' to make it through in the storm. The stage had three shotgun guards, the driver, and ten thousand dollars in gold!"

"Then—then these snakes aim to rob the stage?" Shorty gasped.

"They already have!" Calamity growled. "Them three guards was shot down cold right there in the barn while they set inside the coach waitin' fer hot grub John Calvert promised to send 'em. Buzz Grover an' Calvert done the shootin'!"

"Good gosh, that's murder!"

Shorty Stevens gasped, mopping his face with a soggy handkerchief. "Calamity, if we could— Say, them others will be back down here any minnit."

"They kept the driver alive, tryin' to make him write a note an' tell the stage company that he had skipped with the dinero after drillin' the guards hisself," Calamity went on grimly.

"That way," Shorty nodded, "the real robbers would have nothin' to fear from the law fer they would 'a' killed the driver an' hid his body."

"Yes," Calamity agreed, "but the driver refused. That's who they come upstairs an' got, a while ago. They brought him down hyar in this room an' shot him. I ketched the barn man draggin' him away from the back door."

"Whew!" Shorty Stevens whistled. "Yuh must 'a' twisted that barn tender plumb out o' joint to 'a' made him talk so free. But what in blazes are we goin' to do about it?"

"Do?" Calamity growled. "This hyar is a tradin' post, so we're makin' a trade. We're swappin' John Calvert an' them others hot lead fer their own mangy pelts."

"Keno!" Shorty snarled. "That suits me fine. An' from the sound o' them boots overhead it won't be long afore the tradin' starts."

"They're headin' fer the stairs," Calamity rumbled. "Hyar's what we'll do."

He spoke rapidly for a moment, Shorty nodding his head swiftly. Calamity's voice broke off as boots rattled at the head of the stairs, and the big waddy headed for a stack of beer barrels near the back door.

"O' course," he called over one shoulder, "this will be my finish, Shorty. This awful luck o' mine has

got me at last. I'll die horrible in the next few minutes, that's what!"

But even as he spoke, Calamity was softly closing the back door through which he had come like a cyclone to attack Buzz Grover. The big waddy crouched behind the beer kegs, grinning sourly. Nor was he any too soon.

John Calvert and the six tough hombres who had gone upstairs with him were plunging down into the big room now, all swearing angrily. Their swearing changed to howls of amazement when they saw Buzz Grover draped across the bar like a dead man. Shorty Stevens stood there, calmly rolling a cigarette, battered face wearing a forced grin.

"Say, how in thunder did this happen?" John Calvert snarled, glancing at Buzz Grover. "Yuh sawed-off little sidewinder, start talkin'!"

"How much o' that ten thousand dollars loot will yuh give me to talk?" Shorty asked impudently, still forcing himself to grin.

John Calvert and the others recoiled, and once again they were swearing. But the trading-post owner seemed to come to his senses then. He slithered aside, and his hands moved to where they could dive beneath his ill-fitting coat on mighty short notice.

"How—how'd yuh find out, Stevens?" he asked in a voice that was deadly calm. "Yuh may as well tell me, feller, 'cause yuh ain't leavin' this room alive. We'll drill yuh, then round up Boggs, an'——"

"Dang it, now I've gone an' bent my sight! But it don't matter, 'cause I'm a awful pore shot, anyway. Besides, these shells is all cankered an' likely wouldn't explode even if they was throwed in a hot fire."

That gloomy, mournful voice jerked John Calvert and the other six hard-case jaspers halfway around. They saw Calamity Boggs step slowly from behind the beer kegs, big hands swinging easily at his side. At the same moment, Shorty Stevens leaped, gaining one end of the bar.

John Calvert screamed an oath, and his hands dived beneath that baggy coat. "Down 'em!" he wailed. "Kill them two, or we'll all swing, boys! Smoke 'em plenty!"

As if controlled by the same set of muscles, six pairs of hands swooped, came up with flaming guns. John Calvert was already shooting—at the ceiling.

He had flashed a pair of big six-guns and brought them chopping down, intending to send twin slugs into Calamity Boggs. But Calamity's right hand twitched, and from the level of his hip came a spurt of flame.

John Calvert felt the lead tearing into his throat and fired. But he was already rocked so far back that his lead thumped into the ceiling.

He crashed into his six hirelings, confusing them for the moment. But those murderous rascals soon got clear of the thrashing body and began throwing lead.

Calamity Boggs went down, but kept shooting. Shorty Stevens, crouched at the end of the bar and thumbing lead from both guns, was yipping excitedly, for he saw two men buckle under his lead.

Then a slug ripped into Shorty's left shoulder, spinning him around, causing him to drop the gun from that hand. Another bullet blistered his cheek, and a third cut into the flesh of his thigh. Shorty dropped, gasping painfully. But, like Calamity, he kept shooting.

There were only three of John Calvert's hirelings left now, and those three were trying desperately to fight their way to the back door. But Calamity was there, calmly taking shots at pumping legs.

There were but two of the murderous gang left standing when the back door banged open and the post's cook poked a double-barreled shotgun into the smoke-filled room. The old shotgun roared, and the two remaining cutthroats froze in their tracks.

"Make another move, an' I'll shoot lower!" the cook warned. "An' yuh snakes that these two punchers has just wounded better behave. Boggs, yuh an' Stevens all right?"

"Nicked some, but still able to eat that beef an' taters yuh mentioned, amigo!" Shorty Stevens sang out cheerfully, as he got to his feet.

"I tried to git hyar sooner, but couldn't find no shells fer this gun," the cook explained. "I'll watch 'em, while yuh boys tie 'em."

"I'm done fer!" Calamity Boggs said hoarsely, feeling a deep flesh wound along his left thigh. "I must be shot through in at least ten places. When I start havin' fits, feller, onload thet other barrel o' yore shotgun into me so's I won't suffer so much. I—— Yuh would, huh?"

Calamity was up with the agility

of a huge cat, despite that painful wound in his thigh. His hot gun chopped down and roared. Buzz Grover, still draped across the bar, screamed an oath and dropped the six-gun he had so stealthily drawn when he thought no one was watching.

The burly killer hit the floor, swearing wildly as he wrung a bullet-gashed hand and stared into the cook's threatening shotgun.

"It's a good thing yuh ain't as near dead as yuh claim to be, Calamity," Shorty Stevens chuckled. "If yuh had been, that snake would 'a' swapped us some lead fer our own hides, afore we knowed what was happenin'."

"But I'm a goner, I tell yuh!" Calamity insisted mournfully. "Even if this wound don't finish me, the stage company'll swear I took their gold which I found hid in the barn. I'll swing fer murderin' them guards, that's what. The signs, pard, is shore agin' me."

There shore never was a gent like Calamity—alias hollerin' an' moanin' when there ain't nothin' the matter with him an' never sayin' nothin' when there's trouble poppin'. Watch fer the next ruckus him and Shorty Stevens gits inter. Yuh kin read all about it in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

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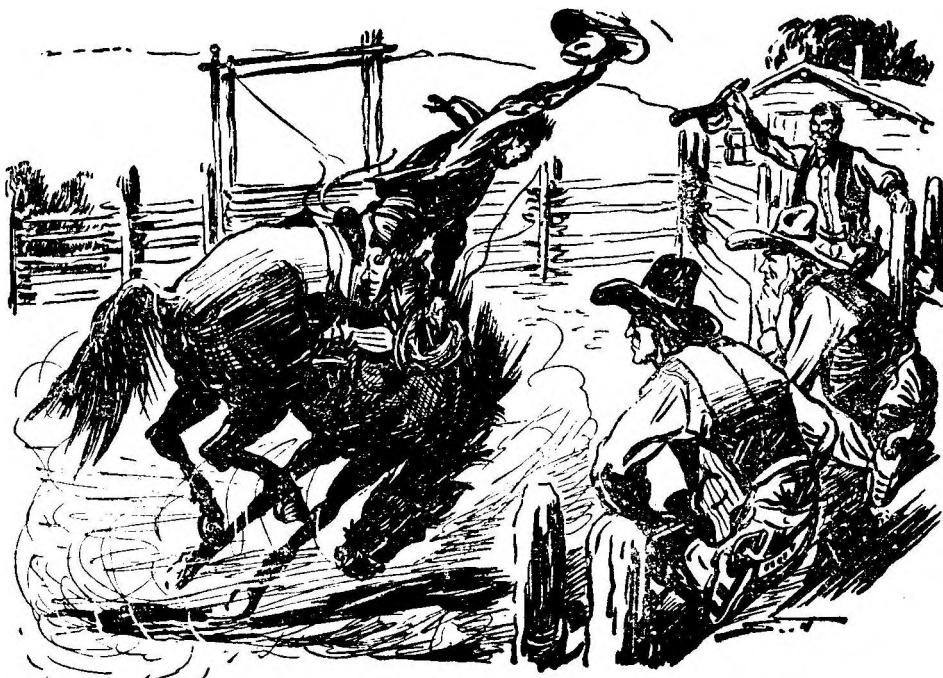
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# Horse Thief!

By Charles M. Martin

Author of "The Lazy Stranger In Longhorn," etc.

IT wasn't often that "Old Man" Joe Grimm had trouble on his spread. But he sensed the enmity between his two tophand buckaroos just about two minutes after he had hooked his high heels over the middle bar of the J Bar G breaking pen.

"Wild-horse" Frazer was getting ready to make a ride, while "Curly" Thomas stood by to rope the plunging outlaw if it should throw Wild-horse. "Rawhide" Brown was also perched on the top rail, chewing on a straw.

Rawhide was the ramrod of the J Bar G, and also the uncle of Wild-horse Frazer. It did not take a mind

reader to see that both men hated the curly-headed buckaroo who sat his sorrel roping horse with a knowing smile on his freckled face. Now the rider's good-natured grin vanished as he shouted at Wild-horse:

"Hey, Wild-hoss! You can't do that to a hoss like that Four-up-an'-four-down roan. You'll plumb ruin him for saddle work."

The tall buckaroo dangled the cruel Spanish curb bit in his left hand as he turned on Curly Thomas with a sneer.

"What's the reason I can't?" he growled. "So long as I'm ridin' the rough string on the J Bar G, I aim tuh ride a hoss any way I thinks

best. Right now, I'm usin' a curb on this yere killer."

Curly Thomas swiveled his blue eyes to the foreman. "You tell him, Rawhide," he pleaded. "The way tuh tame a hoss is with a hackamore."

The lanky foreman shrugged his stooped shoulders. "I ain't no bronc-stomper," he answered tartly. "Wild-hoss was a top hand with the rough string when you was jest a button, swampin' for the cook. Reckon he knows his business."

A light of desperation glowed in the blue eyes of the young buckaroo. Wild-horse Frazer was a veteran of thirty, while he was only twenty. Curly knew that both men hated him because he had beaten the older man for the hand-tooled saddle in the riding event at the last rodeo.

Six outfits had competed for the coveted prize after the shipping season. Wild-horse Frazer had clawed leather before he was thrown, but Curly Thomas had ridden his outlaw to a standstill.

The Old Man had promptly put him to work in the breaking pen at top-hand wages, and the young buckaroo had promised old Joe that he would earn his pay.

"What yuh say, Joe?"

The J Bar G owner twisted uneasily and tried to avoid the earnest blue eyes. He glanced at the face of his foreman, and flushed when he caught the wink that passed between Rawhide and Wild-horse Frazer. The foreman jerked his head and rasped an order before the Old Man could speak:

"Yo're the boss in the breakin' pen, Wild-hawss. Ride that killer any way yuh see fit."

Frazer sneered triumphantly at Curly and reached down to slip the bridle over the head of the outlaw snubbed low on the heavy post.

Then it was that old Joe Grimm broke a precedent of the range by going against the orders of his foreman.

"Since when you got so you has tuh use a Spanish curb to break a hoss?" he demanded. "I want them hosses tamed down fer saddle work, not broken fer plow hosses."

Wild-horse Frazer flushed with anger, but he turned his face away so that the Old Man could not see his resentment. The big roan bucker was fighting the bit between its jaws. Curly Thomas stepped down from his high saddle and jerked the bridle loose before Frazer knew that he was on the ground.

"I'll stomp him with a hack," the young peeler said quietly.

Frazer took a quick step forward and stopped just as suddenly. Then he shrugged his shoulders and walked over to the fence and sat down beside his uncle.

"He's yore hoss," he sneered nastily. "An' I hope he chops yore brains out with his front feet."

Old Joe Grimm started to protest, but he was too late. Curly Thomas vaulted to the scarred saddle and threw off the snubbing rope.

The big roan came uncorked with a scream of rage as it shot into the air with front hoofs clawing. Down came the vicious head, to be buried between knobby knees, and Curly Thomas was busy with his day's work as he rode straight up.

Heels flashing high in a cantle spank, the maddened fuzzy jolted down and started to sun its belly with three feet in the air at one time. Old Joe Grimm forgot his dignity and shouted like a cowhand.

"Row-de-dow! Write on him, cowboy!"

The young buckaroo grinned as both feet began to churn the blunted rowels along the range-roughened

coat from shoulders to flanks. The outlaw stopped sunfishing and began to fence-corner, with sickening lurches from side to side. Then it exploded in a series of running bucks that carried it across the pen like a charging bull.

It stopped at last directly in front of Rawhide and Wild-horse, sprawled its legs to keep from falling as the sweat dripped from its tangled coat. Curly spurred gently and rode to the snubbing post, where he slipped to the ground and snubbed down the drooping head. Then he stripped the riding gear and carried it to a rail near old Joe Grimm.

"Can I buy that hoss, ol' Joe?"

"He's yourn for two months' pay," the J Bar G owner answered, with a grin. "But it's got to be cash, Curly."

"I've got the money up in my war bag in the bunk house," the young buckaroo answered, with a chuckle. "I've been wantin' him ever since you bought him in that bunch from the Four-up-an'-four-down. I'll give you the dinero to-night, ol' Joe."

"He's too good a hawss for common work," Grimm answered gruffly. "I was goin' to tell Rawhide to take a hundred for him, pervidin' some gent wanted a top-string hawss for his personal use. Too bad to use a critter like that jest for work."

He turned away and mounted his own horse without looking at the foreman. Curly Thomas mounted his sorrel and led the roan outlaw to the holding corral behind the breaking pen. He returned with a squalling bay on the end of his rope, and Wild-horse Frazer was waiting to snub down the thrashing head.

"Steppin' high, ain't yuh, cowboy?" he sneered.

Curly grinned. "Not so far," he

answered happily. "But when I get Sunny tamed down good, with that new saddle bolted to his back, me an' him is goin' places. No hard feelin's, Wild-hawss."

The tall buckaroo grinned quickly and stuck out his hand. "Course not, Curly," he answered heartily. "I takes off my hat to a gent what kin step across a hunk of dynamite like that, an' ride both pieces when he comes apart. If I had a hundred bucks, I'd buy him my own self. Beats heck how some waddies kin save their ridin' pay."

Curly smiled happily. He had expected Wild-horse to be nasty and on the prod, and he was glad that Rawhide had mounted his horse to ride after the Old Man. He gripped the extended hand with a hearty grasp, and Wild-horse slapped him on the shoulder.

"I saved up two hundred," he confided. "Been wantin' to own that Sunny hawss an' take me a li'l' trip back in them Organ Mountains, an' now I can do both. There won't be enough breakin' for the both of us, once we works out this string, an' I figure she's yore job, because you've been yere the longest. I told ol' Joe I was takin' me a couple months off, come pay day."

"Sho!" Wild-horse answered regretfully. "We're goin' tuh miss you, Curly. But I know how it is when a gent gits to wonderin' what's on the other side of the hill."

He vaulted to the saddle and snugged his boots down in the oxbows while Curly threw off the snubbing rope. He made a showy ride around the pen while Curly mounted his roping horse and stood by to snare the pitching broomtail in case it threw its rider. His blue eyes contracted for a moment as a thought struck him.

"I might have been kilt," he mut-

tered. "Jest come to me that Wild-hawss didn't stand by tuh rope Sunny in ease that roan had piled me." Then he shrugged as a smile lighted up his tanned face. "Sho!" he muttered. "He jest forgot about it, when he got his mad up."

Wild-horse was finishing his ride with a flourish as he fanned the laid-back ears of the bay. He slid to the ground when the horse stopped bucking, and Curly made his cast and snubbed the drooping head to the post as his companion stripped the riding gear.

Wild-horse was waiting for him when he returned from the holding pen, and the two rode to the bunk house together. Curly made a dash for the wash basin as Wild-horse entered the bunk house, and a minute later, the two buckaroos were joking as they splashed the cold water over their dusty heads.

## II.

Curly Thomas was the first man away from the long dinner table, and he raced to the bunk house and reached under his bed for his old war bag. He pulled out a worn money belt from the bottom of the canvas bag and unfastened the buckles. Then he was staring at the soft leather with unbelieving eyes as his tanned face turned white.

"Gone!" he whispered tensely. "Two hundred bucks, all in tens, an' every dollar of it gone!"

He raced back to the cook shack with the belt in his hand. Fourteen pairs of eyes watched him curiously as he stamped up to Rawhide Brown and held out the empty money belt.

"I've been cleaned out, Rawhide!" he shouted excitedly. "I had two hundred ridin' pay saved in that belt, an' some sneakin' polecat done ransacked my war bag."

"You want tuh talk easy that a way, Curly," the foreman answered coldly. "So far as I knows, there ain't no thieves on the J Bar G."

The tall buckaroo glanced around at the circle of faces; whirled on his heel and bolted back to the bunk house, with a sob in his throat. He thrust the empty belt back in his bag, stared hard at a heel print in the dust at the head of his bunk.

Little piles of dust told him that it had been made within the last few minutes, and only one man in the outfit wore a Star studded in the heel of his right boot.

His blue eyes were blazing with anger as he sat on the edge of his bunk and clenched his strong brown hands. Then he shifted the bunk quickly, placed a one-pound tobacco tin over the heel mark, and threw his war bag over the tin.

His face was expressionless when he walked back to the cook shack, just as the other riders were loping across the flat for the afternoon's work. The foreman was waiting for him on the porch as he reached for his bridle reins.

"Too bad about that money, Curly," he began. "The Ol' Man had to leave for El Paso, an' he left word for me to sell that big roan for a hundred cash to some gent what wanted him for his personal hoss."

"I'll pay ol' Joe out of my pay," Curly answered quickly. "Take me two months tuh earn it, if I do without everything else."

"Sorry, Curly," Rawhide answered slowly, "but you heard what the Ol' Man said. I done sold the roan to another feller for cash."

The tall cowboy stepped back as the color drained from his smooth face. "You sold Sunny on me?" he whispered.

"Money talks nowadays," the foreman answered shortly. "An-

other feller wanted that roan as bad as you did, an' he paid me cash when he found out that you couldn't go through with yore deal."

Curly Thomas stared at the lanky foreman, swiveled his eyes around to Wild-horse Frazer, who was watching him from where he leaned against a rail of the porch. Curly drew a quick breath as the older buckaroo smiled triumphantly, and he leaped forward to face Wild-horse, with a roar of anger.

"You mean that you sold me out?" he shouted. "Was it you what bought that Sunny hoss right from under me because I had hard luck?"

Wild-horse shrugged carelessly. "Is it my fault because you don't know how to take care of yore dinero?" he asked. "When you couldn't go through with the deal, I knew that some gent would git that roan, an' I figured it might as well be me. So I dug down in my kitty an' give Rawhide the money. You can't win all the time, Curly."

"When's the Ol' Man comin' back?" Curly turned his back on Wild-horse and snapped the question at the foreman.

"Yo're jest a hand yere, an' it ain't none of yore business what the big augur does," Rawhide answered. "But because it won't do you no good, ol' Joe will be back in about three days. Now you git on down to the breakin' pen an' earn yore pay. You've been gittin' too big for yore breeches ever since you won that saddle at round-up by accident."

"Jest as you say, boss," Curly agreed quietly. "Like Wild-hoss said, a gent cain't win all the time. Let's go, pard!"

Wild-horse stared at him for a minute and then rose to his feet. He smiled at the foreman as he mounted

his horse, and Rawhide winked and rode out across the valley pasture.

Curly was leading a little sorrel into the breaking pen, and neither buckaroo spoke as they bolted the heavy hull to the twitching back and fastened the hackamore around the thrashing head. Curly leaped to the saddle, with the hack rope held loosely in his left hand.

"Let him come apart!" he yelled.

Wild-horse slipped snubbing rope and jumper-blind and leaped back as the sorrel climbed toward the sky with striking forelegs. The wild horse made three or four half-hearted bucks and quit cold. Curly slipped to the ground.

"Most of them fuzzies is about worked over," he remarked. "What one you want tuh ride this time?"

"Reckon I'll ride my own personal hoss," Wild-horse answered, with a grin. "Seein' that he belongs to me, I'll jest put that Spanish curb on him an' show that dang outlaw who's boss around here."

Curly Thomas reined in his horse and stared at the grinning buckaroo. "You can't do that," he whispered hoarsely. "It ain't fair, an' it would break his heart."

"Yeah? Well, you jest stand by an' watch me break his jaw," Wild-horse sneered. "You thought you was runnin' a blazer this mornin' when the Ol' Man sided you an' backed up yore play. Now she's my turn."

Curly Thomas slid from the saddle and faced Wild-horse with glinting eyes. "You can't do it, I tell yuh," he growled deep in his chest. "You heard ol' Joe say that he wanted that Four-up-an'-four-down hoss to go to a gent what would handle him right."

"Ol' Joe ain't yere right now, an' I've got a bill of sale in my pocket for that Sunny hoss," the lanky

buckaroo sneered. "So what, cowboy?"

"I'll give you my new saddle for him," Curly offered. "It's worth all of two hundred."

"You won't give me nothin'," Wild-horse sneered. "I've been wantin' to skin the hide offn that broomtail ever since the day he throwed me in that ridin' contest. He can't throw me with that Spanish curb, an' if he does, I'll shoot him, shore as heck."

"Git yore hands up!" Curly answered quietly. "I've been waitin' for Rawhide to git out of sight across that valley pasture, an' now me an' you is goin' tuh settle our differences. This mornin', you shook hands with me like a pard, an' all the time, you was hatchin' up this li'l play with Rawhide Brown. I'm comin', yuh sneakin' polecat!"

A grin of triumph spread across Wild-horse Frazer's long face as he jumped forward and lashed out with his left hand. Curly dodged the blow and sank his right hand to the wrist in his enemy's middle, and Wild-horse sat down with a bump as he gasped for breath.

Curly waited until the buckaroo climbed to his feet, after which he leaped in and jabbed with his left before Wild-horse could get set. Then his long right arm whistled up from his boot tops and caught Wild-horse full on the jaw.

For a moment, the lanky buckaroo hung suspended in air before crashing forward on his face, and Curly leaned forward to thrust his fingers in the right hip pocket of the unconscious man's overalls.

"Just like I thought," he muttered.

He examined the thin rolls of bills and stuck them in the pocket of his chaps. Then he mounted his sorrel and rode to the bunk house.

Making a blanket roll with a change of clothing tucked inside, he rode swiftly back to the holding pen and roped the roan outlaw. Five minutes later, he was loping toward the lava beds of Elephant Butte, leading the big roan.

### III.

Curly Thomas stretched his long arms above his head as he came out into the warm sunlight from the cave where he had hidden his bed-roll and provisions.

The big Four-up-and-four-down roan was grazing contentedly with the sorrel in the grassy little park tucked between ridges of lava-burned rock deep in the heart of the bad lands. The sorrel nickered a welcome as the cowboy strolled slowly toward them, but the roan rolled its eyes and shied.

"Easy, Sunny. Sho now," the cowboy whispered soothingly. "You an' me is goin' to be pards, ol' boy."

The big horse watched with rolling eyes as Curly Thomas worked his way hand over hand down the length of the rope. It snorted when the cowboy touched it, quieted down when the rough hands stroked its neck, and its ears pricked forward while the soft voice crooned horse talk.

Curly ran his hands over the high back and along the powerful withers, rested his weight close up near the shoulders, while his voice kept up that gentle monotone. The sorrel nudged its master affectionately, and the big roan wrinkled its nose as it carefully smelled the high-crowned Stetson and faded shirt.

Curly Thomas forgot time and place as he worked to gentle the savage bucker. He forgot all about dinner in his love for the savage outlaw that now whickered softly every

time he walked out of reach of the picket rope.

Late afternoon found the tall buckaroo sitting quietly on the roan's back while his hands wandered over the roughened coat, and the big stallion grazed contentedly beside the sorrel cutting horse. He slipped from the high back when the sun began to dip behind Elephant Butte, and his blue eyes wandered to the hidden entrance of the grassy park as he walked slowly back to the cave and built a little fire to prepare his supper.

Then he was back with the two horses, and when the dark shadows of night closed down over the little draw back in the bad lands, he turned his back and stared at the brush screen at the mouth of the park.

Soft velvety lips nuzzled his hat as warm breath blew gently on the back of his neck. Curly Thomas sighed with happiness as little shivers ran up and down his spine, and the same soft lips wandered over his fingers when he slowly put his hand to the back of the roan's neck.

That night, the tall buckaroo dreamed of great roan stallions sweeping swiftly across the high mountain, with Sunny carrying him on his back at the head of the herd.

After breakfast the following morning, he carried his heavy saddle down to the two horses and geared up the sorrel. The roan nickered a protest as he loped away; nickered a greeting of welcome when the sorrel cantered back and the tall cowboy slid to the ground.

Its back twitched when Curly laid the heavy saddle across its shoulders, and the cowboy made no attempt to cinch up the latigo while he kept up that low, crooning talk, with hands gentling the savage stallion that had been termed an outlaw.

After lunch, Curly tightened the cinch and eased his weight gently in the stirrup. The big roan hopped on its front feet, settled down when the cowboy called it by name.

Curly swung to the saddle and sat motionless as the great head went down between outspread knees. No knee lock on the saddle fenders, and the roan slowly raised its head and took a step forward.

The following morning, he again saddled the sorrel and rode around the park. Again the roan whinnied its protest at being left alone. It stood quiet when Curly turned the sorrel loose and placed the heavy saddle on its own back.

Now the cowboy pulled the picket pin and shortened the rope as he mounted. The roan moved forward, hesitated a moment before starting a swift lope that circled the park as the sorrel had done.

The next day, he bridled the roan and slipped the straight bit between the great yellow teeth. At first, the stallion did not like the cold metal, and Curly warmed the bit between his palms and tried again. The roan nudged him when he again slipped the bit between the teeth that could have broken the bones of a man with one savage snap.

The wind blew against his tanned face as the stallion romped across the grass like a colt, and Curly Thomas knew that his work was done. Sunny had not offered to buck, and the cowboy's face was hard when he thought of Wild-horse Frazer and his Spanish curb.

That night, he unrolled his blankets between the two horses and slept under the stars. Several times, he felt the warm breath of the stallion on his face, and each time, the great wild horse went back to grazing with little snorts of content.

Curly was up at the first sign of

light, and after cooking his simple breakfast, he rolled his blankets and packed up his belongings. Then he faced the screened mouth of the draw as he threw the heavy saddle on the tall roan and fiddled with the cinch. He spoke in a low drawl to the roan when the sensitive ears pricked forward and pointed toward the hidden entrance.

"Easy, Sunny. Easy, ol' boy."

The roan stamped its front feet as the sorrel nickered eagerly. Curly stepped away from the roan and elevated his hands when a group of horsemen rode through the mouth of the draw, with saddle guns across their knees.

"Keep them hands up there, Curly!" a bearded veteran shouted sternly. "Yo're under arrest for hoss-stealin'."

#### IV.

"Howdy, Sher'ff Tom," Curly answered quietly. "How come you to find me way back yere?"

"Had a good tracker," the sheriff answered gruffly. "You thought you could git away with a play like this, but you forgot that Wild-hoss knows every draw in these hills from trappin' fuzzies. He read yore sign like a book once he picked it up."

Wild-horse Frazer glared at the prisoner through one half-closed eye. A deputy sheriff covered Curly with his rifle as the sheriff swung down from the saddle and slapped the cowboy for concealed weapons. The lanky buckaroo growled a suggestion through bruised lips.

"Look him over good, sher'ff. He shook me down for a hundred in ten-dollar bills when he hit me with that club an' lit a shuck for the hills."

"Jest a minute, sher'ff," Curly said. "Do you keep anything you

find on me for evidence ontill after the trial?"

"That's right," Sheriff Tucker replied. "You seem mighty anxious tuh do a good long stretch in the pen."

He withdrew his right hand from Curly's chap pocket and stared at a roll of bills. Wild-horse gigged his forward and held out his hand.

"That's my money, sher'ff," he shouted eagerly. "A hundred dollars in tens."

"Might be it is," the sheriff answered gruffly. "But like this yere law shark done said, I've got to hold it for evidence ontill after the trial. You comin' peaceful, or will I have to put the cuffs on you, Curly?"

"Plumb peaceful, sher'ff," the cowboy answered, with a grin. "I give you my word on it, an' I ain't never broke my word so far."

"Yore word is good enough for me," the sheriff answered.

"Jest a minute," Wild-horse said savagely. "That's my hoss he's aimin' to ride, sher'ff."

"What if he is?" the sheriff answered irritably. "You put up that gun an' pull in yore horns. You swore out a warrant agin' him for hoss-stealin', an' it only makes yore case that much stronger if he rides back on the evidence. You git along there with Bob, an' remember that I'm the law yere in Dona Ana County."

"He's goin' to git throwed higher than Salvation Peak," Wild-horse sneered. "Wait till he tops that killer off!"

Curly Thomas smiled and swung up on the roan. The big stallion stood quietly while the three men waited for it to break in two, and the sheriff grunted as his keen eyes watched Wild-horse Frazer:

"Lead on, you two! We'll jest stop at th' J Bar G on the way back.

Might be ol' Joe Grimm has got back from El Paso."

The old J Bar G owner came out on the broad porch as the four men rode up to the ranch house. Rawhide Brown followed at his heels, leered sneeringly when he saw the prisoner on the stolen roan, with a lead rope on the sorrel.

"What did I tell yuh, boss?" he said to Grimm. "There's the hoss he stole, an' I knew all the time that Wild-hoss would track him down."

"Serious charges in cattle country, Curly," Joe Grimm accused sternly. "I never thought you'd turn out a hoss thief, son."

"Right now he's as good as plaitin' horsehair bridles for the towerists," Wild-horse sneered. "Like I done told you before, yuh can't always win."

"That goes two ways," Curly answered, with a grin. "My right fist is still swole up where I socked you on the jaw."

"You hit me with a club when my back was turned," Wild-horse answered savagely. "Then you rolled me for a hundred dollars in ten-dollar bills what I was packin' in my overalls pocket."

"That's right, boss," Rawhide put in. "Here's the money Wild-hoss paid me for that hoss, an' I gave him a bill of sale."

"I paid for that hoss, ol' Joe," Curly Thomas said quietly. "Paid for Sunny with money I had saved from my ridin' pay."

"Yo're a liar!" The lanky foreman glared at Curly, with his right hand on his gun. "There was fourteen men in the cook shack what heard you say you had been robbed of two hundred dollars an' couldn't pay for the hoss!"

"Jest a minute," Joe Grimm shouted. "Sheriff, you'd better see

to it that these fellers lays their hardware aside till we gits to the bottom of this augermant."

Wild-horse and Rawhide scowled when the sheriff lifted their guns. Curly Thomas reached in the saddle-bags behind his cantle and handed over his cartridge belt and gun.

The J Bar G owner stared thoughtfully at the three men. He spoke slowly to his foreman:

"How come you to sell the roan to Wild-hoss?"

"You said to sell him to some gent for his own pussonal hoss," Rawhide answered sulkily. "Wild-hoss has been top-hand buckaroo for ten years, an' I figured he knew his business."

"Yo're uncle to Wild-hoss, ain't yuh?" the sheriff asked.

"I shore am, an' that cow nurse yonder never saw the day he could whip Wild-hoss in a fair ruckus."

"I did whip him, an' I can do it ag'in," Curly answered angrily. "That Four-up-an'-four-down roan is the same one what piled Wild-hoss in the contest at round-up, an' I hit him with this fist when he tried to put a Spanish bit on Sunny. Take a look at them knuckles where his buckteeth stuck out too far, an' then look at that gap in his jaw where them same teeth is missin'."

Sheriff Tucker and Joe Grimm both looked and grinned. Wild-horse cleared his throat.

"I dug down in my war bag for my savin' to pay for that hoss," he blustered. "That jigger hit me with a club, an' when I come to, both the hoss an' my hundred dollars was gone."

"Kin we walk over to the bunk house, boss?"

Joe Grimm stared at Curly Thomas and nodded his head slowly.

Curly walked through the bunk-house door and pulled his bunk

aside. "I told Wild-horse that I had two hundred in my war bag," he said slowly. "He come in here while I was out back, washin' my face, and when I looked for the money, it was gone. But whoever took the money wore a star studded in the heel of his right boot."

Before the lanky buckaroo could move, Curly left the floor in a flying leap and hit him low on the legs. As the sheriff started to interfere, the cowboy dodged a savage kick and brought his right fist down to crash against the buckaroo's jaw.

Wild-horse folded up, and Curly raised the right boot so that all could see the star studded in the heel. Then he dropped the boot and kicked the tobacco can aside to show the imprint in the dust.

He raised his hands shoulder-high when he stared into the muzzle of the sheriff's gun.

"Jest a minute, sher'ff," he pleaded. "I want you to take that money out of yore pocket what you found on me. Look close an' see if every one of them ten-dollar bills ain't branded Four-up-an'-four-down."

The sheriff holstered his gun and reached into his pocket. He examined the bills carefully, and handed them to old Joe Grimm. The J Bar G owner smiled with understanding.

"That's part of the two hundred dollars I paid you last month, Curly," he said clearly. "I give Tom Todd a check for that bunch of Four-up-an'-four-down hosses, an' he give me that two hundred in change. We spoke about that marked brand on them bills at the time."

"Thanks, boss," Curly murmured gratefully. "Now would you mind lookin' at them bills Rawhide give you for Sunny?"

Joe Grimm dug down in his pocket. He glared at the lanky foreman as he held out the marked money.

"So you accepted money you knew was stole," he said slowly.

Rawhide Brown reached inside his vest for a shoulder hide-out, Curly Brown stepped forward quickly as his fist started from his right hip. The gun flew from the foreman's hand as the blow landed flush on his jaw, and Curly stepped back and blew on his skinned knuckles.

"Am I a hoss thief?" he asked the sheriff.

Sheriff Tucker leaned over and handcuffed the two unconscious men together. Then he rose slowly to his feet, reached inside his vest, and tore up the warrant charging Curly Thomas with the theft of one roan horse, sixteen hands high, branded Four-up-and-four-down.

"I'm takin' Wild-hoss in for robbery, an' Rawhide goes along as accessory before an' after the fact," he announced dryly. "If I ain't mistook, you left them tracks back in the bad lands, where Wild-hoss would find them!"

Curly stepped over to the roan and swung aboard. Old Joe Grimm shouted as he ran forward to block escape, "Where at you goin'?"

"Driftin'," Curly answered sadly. "Bein' accused of bein' a hawss thief—"

"Top-hand buckaroo, you mean." The Old Man grinned. "Seein' as I'm shy a good hoss tamer, the job is yores, with a raise in pay. Jest let me hear any ranny make a crack about you bein' a hoss thief. Take them jaspers to jail, sheriff. I'll be in, after dinner, an' swear to the warrants. Right now, I've got to watch this jigger to see that he don't start driftin'!"



# The Maverick Feud

A "Circle J" Novelette

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "Montana Medicine," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### ITCHIN' FER GUN TROUBLE.

EVEN before the roar of six-guns came to his ears, "Buck" Foster felt that trouble was somewhere close at hand. For nearly half an hour, the skin at the back of his neck had been itching for no good reason.

At first, Buck had slapped and cussed, thinking that a gnat or horsefly or some other insect had lighted for a feed on his leathery hide. But now he knew the feeling for what it was. He was heading right into trouble, and some inner sense was warning him of the fact.

"By ganny," he muttered to himself, touching the spurs to his

cayuse, "I got a feelin' in me bones that somethin's goin' ter bust loose, afore I'm many minutes older! Gid-dap, hoss! Shake—"

*Brang! Bang!* A burst of gunfire from farther up the canyon came to Buck's ears.

He roweled his cayuse smartly, and it broke into a hard gallop. For Buck Foster was always ready to go out of his way to look for trouble.

The canyon widened and branched off into several side canyons. Buck drew rein, puzzled, and listened.

The sound of shooting was clearer and louder. It didn't take Buck long now to pick out the right trail. He turned his cayuse into one of the side canyons and fed it the steel.

When he came to the scene of

battle, Buck reined in his cayuse and watched for a full minute. His brown eyes blazed under shaggy gray brows at what he saw. He tugged at the ends of his grizzled cowhorn mustache and muttered under his breath.

For the sight before him was one likely to arouse strong feelings in a gent of Buck Foster's disposition.

During most of his forty-odd years of life, Buck Foster had been something of an under dog. So his sympathies always went out to the under dog in a fight.

That was why Buck felt himself boiling with rage on seeing three hombres slinging lead at one solitary foeman, who had taken refuge from their attack behind a boulder at the base of the canyon wall.

Buck didn't know the right and wrong of this fight. It might be that the three hombres who were attacking the fourth man were law officers hunting down a desperado.

All Buck saw, at the moment, was the odds of three against one. And that settled him as to which side he should take. His gnarled right hand slid down to the six-gun in his holster. He let out a wild battle cry and charged forward.

The three men of the attacking party whirled at his approach and started slinging lead at him. One of them, a flashily dressed hombre wearing a white hat with a snake-skin band, emptied his gun at Buck and began to retreat toward his own cayuse, which was tied near by.

"Huh!" Buck grunted under his breath. "That dude ain't got no stummick fer a fight. The dressed-up coyote's pullin' his freight!" Buck raised his voice to a shout. "Come back here and fight, yuh yaller polecat!" he roared.

Now the man who had been besieged behind the boulder showed

himself and blazed away at his foes with fresh courage.

And Buck Foster emptied his gun and reloaded it again and again.

There was one thing about this puncher from Montana, Buck Foster. He might be a bit loud-mouthed at times and given to talking himself up. He also might be a little vain, and likewise a bit thick-headed. But when it came to horsemanship or handling cattle on range or trail or in the corral, there were few waddies who had anything on this same Buck Foster.

And at gun play, he was a wizard. He could shoot fast and straight. He had a draw like chain lightning, and he was a fighting fool as well.

So the three hombres who had aroused Buck's displeasure by their attack on the lone man behind the boulder found themselves up against a foe who had to be respected.

The white-hatted cowboy made his way out of the canyon, leaving his two companions to finish the fight.

They headed for the shelter of near-by boulders and tried to return Buck's fire, but he was slinging lead with such deadly speed and accurate aim that they were being smoked out of their hiding places.

In addition, the lone hombre they had been attacking got the range of their positions and began peppering them with hot lead. So that they, too, were forced to run for it.

Buck Foster held his fire and sat in his saddle, grinning from ear to ear. He reloaded the empty chambers of his gun, while he watched them race toward their mounts, swing themselves into their saddles, and gallop after the white-hatted hombre.

"Git along, yuh yaller coyotes!" he shouted after them. "Crawl inter yore dens and lick yore wounds!"

And don't be pickin' a fight with a cub, when that's an old he-wolf like yores truly, Buck Foster, around!"

Buck continued shouting insults after the retreating riders until they were out of sight. Then he went over to the boulder behind which the besieged hombre had taken refuge.

He found a young cow-puncher slumped down behind the rock. A wide, dark-red stain was spreading on his checkered black-and-yellow shirt. It looked as if he had collapsed from his wounds, once he saw that the battle was ended.

Near by was a hat—an old lemon-colored Stetson, with a high, peaked crown, much battered and riddled with bullet holes.

"Durned queer-lookin' sombrero, that," Buck remarked to himself as he picked it up and looked it over.

There was a brand burned on its side—the G-in-a-Box.

Buck laid the hat down again and turned his attention to its owner. He lifted the wounded hombre up, turned him around and looked in his face. He saw that it had strong features, with a tinge of pallor showing under its heavy tan.

As Buck looked the other man over, the latter opened his eyes and met the veteran Circle J waddy's gaze.

"Sa-ay, pardner, I got to thank yuh——" he began in a weak voice.

"Yuh don't owe me no thanks," Buck cut him short.

"Yuh saved me from bein' dry-gulched," said the younger man. "Those three jumped me an' started shootin' without warnin'. My hoss—I reckon they got him." His voice broke.

Buck gritted his teeth. His leathery face flushed a dark red. "The ornery skunks!" he muttered.

At a little distance, half hidden

by a group of boulders, he caught sight of a horse's outstretched hoofs. He went closer and found a handsome bay cayuse lying there dead.

Buck heard a sob behind him. The wounded stranger had followed him and was standing there with tears streaming down his cheeks.

"My—my pet bronc, Tex," he murmured brokenly. "They—they didn't have ter shoot *him*!"

There was an unusual softness in Buck Foster's voice, and a gentle light shone in his brown eyes as he laid a horny hand on the other's shoulder.

The younger man's outburst of feeling over the death of his cayuse showed Buck that this hombre and himself were brothers under the skin.

"Don't take it so hard, pard," Buck consoled the wounded stranger. "We kin let yuh have a good hoss from the Circle J string if yuh want it."

"But it won't be Tex!" the youth choked. "He—he was shore a pal!"

"I know how yuh feel, son," Buck said, and a tear trickled down his leathery cheek. "Here, pull yoreself together while I make yore pard a grave!"

The older ranny set to work. First, he took off the saddle and bridle of the dead horse. Then he gathered stones together and built a mound to cover the body, so that the coyotes and buzzards wouldn't be able to get at it.

While Buck worked, the wounded man stood leaning against a rock, looking on. He hadn't the strength to help with the task.

At last Buck finished and turned to him. "There yuh are, friend! I done the best I could fer yore pard."

"Thanks again!" murmured the stranger. He held out his hand. "I'm Earl Gadsby. Mebbe yuh've heard of me or my family."

Buck shook his head and stroked the ends of his gray mustache thoughtfully. "No, I'm a stranger in these parts."

The other shrugged. "Mebbe it's just as well. Thar ain't many round here willin' ter do a friendly turn to a Gadsby."

"Let me git yuh on my hoss, younker," Buck said, "and I'll hev that wound o' yores took care of. It ain't far to where I'm campin'."

"I'll be with yuh right away," Earl Gadsby answered.

He moved forward on tottering legs to the mound of loose rocks that covered his dead cayuse. There he dropped to his knees, bent over, and rested his forehead on the hard stone.

For a full minute, he remained there, as if in prayer. Then he dragged himself to his feet.

Earl Gadsby's body was racked with sobs as Buck led him away from the spot where his pard, Tex, was buried.

"Good-by, Tex," young Gadsby murmured.

Then he let Buck help him over to the waiting Circle J cayuse and lift him up into the saddle.

Holding the wounded youth in place, Buck mounted himself, carrying Gadsby's saddle and rigging slung behind him.

Then supporting the younger man in front of him, Buck headed his horse out of the side canyon and hit the trail for the camp where his boss, Billy West, and his saddle pard, Joe Scott, were waiting for him.

## CHAPTER II.

### NIGHT ATTACK.

IT was getting near chow time in the Circle J camp. Sing Lo, the little Chinese cook of the spread, had a good fire going, and he was

grilling a pair of thick juicy steaks.

Squatting on the ground close by, two young cow-punchers watched the chink's handling of the steaks with mouths that watered. Both had hungry looks on their faces.

"Um-mmm!" the red-headed waddy with the big beak nose and freckled face murmured. "Don't that smell good, Billy?"

The other waddy nodded. He was about the same age as the redhead, but there was an air of authority about him that made him appear older.

"It'll taste good, too, Joe," he said. "I hope Buck won't miss it."

The redhead, whose name was Joe Scott, grunted and made a face.

"Buck!" he exclaimed. "That ol' mosshorn don't never miss a meal. He should 'a' been here an hour ago ter help me with the hosses."

"Buck don't run away from work," said the ranny known as Billy, who was boss of the Circle J spread in the Bitterroot foothill country of Montana, but now was saddle-tramping in Arizona with his two waddies, Buck Foster and Joe Scott, and the chink cook, Sing Lo.

"No, Buck don't run away from work," Joe agreed. "But he's often plumb slow in catchin' up with it!"

A quiet smile played over Billy West's bronzed young face. It showed itself by a slight curving of the corners of his straight mouth and a twinkle in his gray eyes.

"Oh, well, have it yore own way, Joe," he said. "Yuh can't git me to argue with yuh like Buck does!"

Joe Scott suddenly sprang to his feet. "I reckon this is the ol' nuisance now," he exclaimed, moving toward the mouth of the draw in which the Circle J camp had been made.

Both waddies heard the *clip-clop* of a horse's hoofs, and a few min-

utes later, Buck Foster appeared, riding behind the wounded hombre he had rescued.

Billy West and Joe Scott exchanged a meaning glance and shook their heads.

"Looks like Buck's gettin' hisself in more trouble," the Circle J boss remarked.

"He don't look ter be in as much trouble as the jasper with him," the redhead said.

Billy and Joe went to meet Buck. Between them, they lifted young Earl Gadsby down from the saddle and carried him over to a place close to the fire.

The man's wounds by this time had taken toll of his strength. Neary all the color had drained out of his face. He seemed very weak and spent.

"Better see what yuh kin do fer him, Sing Lo," Billy advised.

The little Chinaman nodded. "Watchee steak. Anotheh two-thlee minute, Mistlee Billy!" he said.

"O. K. Joe here'll watch the steaks. He ain't took his eyes off 'em fer one second since they been on the fire."

And so, while Joe Scott kept the steaks turning and sizzling, Billy and Sing Lo bent over the wounded Earl Gadsby and set to work cleansing and dressing his injuries.

There was an ugly wound in the shoulder, and another in the neck. The Chinaman had some skill in simple medicine and could mix herb lotions that were remarkable in their healing effects.

Sing Lo always carried a number of these homemade herb mixtures with him in his camp supplies.

Now he cleansed young Gadsby's wounds skillfully and applied a healing lotion that soothed the pain and cooled the torn flesh. Next, he band-

aged the injuries with strips of clean white linen.

Then he placed the wounded youth in a sitting position, his back against a boulder.

"How you feel now?" he asked.

Gadsby's eyes opened, and he smiled faintly. "That's a lot easier, thanks."

"Me fixee you tonic," Sing Lo said. "Or maybe you likee little dlink of tanglefoot, hey?"

"I'll take the tonic," the wounded youth answered.

So Sing Lo poured out a black liquid from a bottle into a tin cup and put it to Gadsby's lips.

The young waddy made a face as he swallowed it, but he got it down.

"Mebbe the tanglefoot would 'a' been better than that stuff," he remarked with a faint smile.

"Lat velly good medicine. Makee stlong. Makee sleep. Makee wounds get well," the little Chinaman declared.

By this time, Joe Scott had the steaks off the fire and was dividing them up. A small portion of the supper was set aside for Gadsby, but he said he wasn't hungry just then. So they propped him up in his blankets a few feet away, while the rest of the party ate.

Between mouthfuls, Buck Foster told how he had found Earl Gadsby being attacked by the hombre in the white hat and his two companions.

Buck spoke quite highly of his own courage in beating off the attack. In fact, to hear him tell it, any one would have thought that Buck had licked about ten hombres single-handed.

They finished off their meal with some of the chink's homemade pie, made with dried apples, and they washed it down with hot coffee.

"Mebbe this young Gadsby gent could tell us why them skunks was so anxious ter git his scalp," Joe Scott suggested.

All three Circle J waddies looked over toward Gadsby as the redhead spoke. Then they saw that he had rolled over onto his side and was breathing heavily in sleep.

"Pore kid!" Buck Foster murmured. "He put up a game fight, and he was shore broke up over that little cayuse o' his."

By this time, the last trace of light had faded from the western sky. Overhead, stars were twinkling.

Sing Lo was busying himself with the pots and pans. Joe Scott had gone to take a final look at the Circle J horses, who were gathered in a rope corral farther back in the draw.

Buck Foster yawned and stretched his long arms high overhead.

"Awrrr!" He finished his yawn and closed his jaws with a snap. "I feel like some shut-eye. I reckon them skunks won't trouble us ter-night. If they do—"

"Do yuh think they follered yuh here?" Billy West asked.

Buck shook his head. "I reckon them jaspers ain't goin' ter trouble yores truly, Buck Foster, after the lesson I give 'em ter-day."

Billy's gray eyes held a serious expression, as the light from the fire played over his bronzed young face.

"It would depend on how bad they wanted ter git young Gadsby, here," he said. "If thar was a lot at stake—"

*Bang!* From somewhere in the blackness beyond the mouth of the draw, there came the flash of a gun, followed by a roar that echoed among the rocky walls.

*Clang!* There was a sound of a bullet striking metal.

Sing Lo let out a sudden squeal

and jumped three feet in the air, as the slug of the hidden gun slinger struck the tin plate he was cleaning and hurled it into a near-by clump of ocotilla.

"Quick, help me douse the fire. They got us targeted here!" Billy ordered.

Sing Lo helped Billy and Buck smother the camp fire with sand. Joe Scott came running forward.

*Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang!* Gun flashes from a dozen different positions showed that a strong force was attacking the Circle J camp.

"Git under cover and pick 'em off by the gun flashes!" Billy called out to his pards. "Sing Lo, git young Gadsby out o' the line o' fire! You and him keep under cover till this is over."

"Allee light, Mistlee Billy!" Sing Lo answered in a voice that was still shaky, for the little Chinaman had been scared out of a year's growth by the bullet that had knocked the plate out of his hands.

And now, Billy, Buck, and Joe were crouching low to the ground, partly sheltered by boulders and clumps of cactus and ocotilla, watching for the enemy's gun flashes to show again. They didn't have long to wait.

*Bang-bang! Crash!* A fresh burst of gunfire swept over the Circle J camp.

Some of the bullets smashed into Sing Lo's pots and pans. Others scattered the remains of the dead camp fire.

Slugs whizzed dangerously close to the Circle J waddies. It was lucky shooting, for the enemy were aiming chiefly by guesswork.

But now the Circle J waddies had located the gun flashes of their foes, and they blazed away in reply.

Once, Billy thought he had downed a man, for a loud cry fol-

lowed one of his shots. But he couldn't be sure.

For fully twenty minutes, both sides blazed away at each other there in the dark shadows of the draw. The stars overhead gave little help. Only the gun flashes served to show the positions of the attacking party.

Billy figured that there were at least ten men fighting against him and his pards, and he was wondering if the siege would last till daylight, and what would happen then in the face of such odds.

And then Billy suddenly noticed that the enemy were not returning the fire of the Circle J guns. He saw that Joe Scott had noticed this, too. But Buck Foster was so excited and so bent on wiping out his foes that he was blazing away wildly in the general direction of the enemy.

Billy grabbed the veteran's arm. "Hey, Buck, stop shootin'!"

"What's the matter with yuh, yuh young sage hound?" Buck demanded angrily. "Yuh made me miss that last shot! I'd just got the range o'—"

"The range o' what?" Billy interrupted.

"The range o' them buzzards that's been tryin' ter shoot us up."

"Them buzzards has flew the coop, long ago!" Joe Scott put in. "Yo're wastin' yore lead, ol'-timer!"

"What?" Buck exclaimed, peering ahead into the blackness. Then he gave a grunt of disgust. "Waal, I'll be a horned toad! The yaller skunks has gave up the fight."

"That's the way it looks!" Billy agreed. "But be careful. Mebbe they're layin' a trap fer us—waitin' fer us to show ourselves or make a light."

"They're jest the kind o' dry-

gulchin' snakes that'd do that," Buck growled.

They waited for fully half an hour, but there was no sign of life from the attacking party.

Then Billy gathered a heap of dry mesquite sticks. A few feet away from this, he set up a heap of blankets and a saddle with a hat on top of it to look like the figure of a cow-puncher. Then he set fire to the mesquite and ducked under cover while the dry wood blazed up.

But there was no sign of life from the place where the enemy had been hidden. No leaden hail swept over the dummy that was revealed by the fire.

Billy let the blaze die down.

"I reckon," he said to his companions, "we kin git us some more shut-eye now, but we better take turns keepin' watch through the night, in case thar's another attack."

"Whar's the chink?" Buck Foster asked. "He'd ought ter take his turn keepin' awake!"

"Yeah, an' he ain't as likely ter fall asleep on the job as you are, yuh ol' mosshorn!" Joe Scott put in.

"I ain't never fell asleep on night watch in me life!" Buck Foster declared.

"Never mind that now, you two," Billy said sharply, cutting short what might have developed into a long argument. "Find the chink! Mebbe he's hurt."

Joe Scott lighted a lantern. Billy and Buck made torches of mesquite sticks. Then all three searched for the little Chinaman.

After a while, they found him far back in the draw, with his head almost buried in the sand, like an ostrich, and his legs and body showing above ground.

Buck grabbed one leg, while Billy took the other, and together they

hauled him out and set him on his feet.

The little chink's flat yellow face was a sight as he stood there, blinking the sand out of his slant eyes. He was still trembling, and there was a sickly green tinge to his skin where it showed through the dirt and grit.

Billy shook him by the shoulder. "What's the matter, Sing Lo? Did yuh get hit?"

Buck Foster let out a roar. "How could he git hit, hidin' that a way?"

"Yuh never know," Billy said. "Mebbe a slug got him afore he hid himself. Did yuh git wounded, Sing Lo?" he added, looking the little Chinaman over from head to foot, but failing to find any bloodstain or other sign of a wound.

Sing Lo shook his head. "Velly nearly get kill' by bullet, Mistlee Billy," he explained in a voice that was still shaky. "Take dish light out of my hand. Thlee inch otheh way, and—"

"Don't think of that," Billy advised. "Where's the stranger?"

Sing Lo pointed to a boulder at a little distance. "Leave him oveh there."

The three waddies started toward the pile of blankets.

"By ganny," Buck exclaimed, "the chink must 'a' give that pore young fella a powerful strong sleepin' drink, if he ain't woke up yet!"

Billy reached the blankets first. He held his torch over them and stirred them with his foot. Then he turned to Buck and Joe, who were close behind him.

"Young Gadsby ain't here," he said.

They searched for another hour by torch and lantern light. Then they snatched a few hours' sleep,

taking turns at keeping watch against another attack.

With the coming of day, they renewed their search. But there was no sign of Earl Gadsby. The wounded stranger had disappeared.

### CHAPTER III.

#### A CALL ON THE SHERIFF.

IT was mid-morning when Billy West rode into the little desert cow town of Tulosa on his big chestnut horse, Danger. Overhead, the sun was high. Dogs were lying in the road, close to the edge of the wooden sidewalk, enjoying the warmth. Mexican children were playing and shouting in their shrill voices, in front of their adobe dwellings, their lithe, sun-brownèd little bodies twisting and dodging here and there as they frolicked.

The saloons were coming to life. Inside, bartenders were polishing glasses, while swampers were cleaning up floors and washing out spittoons, getting ready for another day's business.

In the center of the town, Billy found a strong adobe building with iron-barred windows, with the sign, "Sheriff," in Spanish and English on either side of the doorway.

The Circle J boss dismounted in front of this building and tied his cayuse to a hitching post.

While doing so, he cast a cautious glance over his shoulder, and he was surprised to find that two hombres on the other side of the street appeared to be watching him.

One of them, Billy noted, was long and lanky and lean-jawed, while the other was short and squat-built, with bowed legs and a gorilla face. Both appeared to be Americans, and both wore their guns thonged low on their hips. Two bad hombres, if Billy West was any judge of men!

In order to make sure that these two were watching him, Billy suddenly whirled right around and faced toward where they were standing. As he did so, they slipped out of sight into an alleyway between two buildings.

Billy then turned back toward the sheriff's office and pretended to be studying the sign. But he had his head turned slightly, so that he could keep watch on the opposite side of the street out of the corner of one eye.

He was rewarded by seeing the heads of the two watchers poked cautiously into view again. Billy now felt quite certain that these men were trailing him and keeping tabs on his doings. But as he was a stranger in town, he was puzzled to understand why they should go to the trouble.

He noticed that the door of the sheriff's office was slightly open. So he rapped on it with his knuckles and walked in.

A middle-aged man wearing a sheriff's star came forward to meet him. This hombre had a wrinkled, sour-looking face, with large sad eyes, and the expression of a blubbering child. The ends of a stringy black mustache drooped like the feathers of some bird of prey on either side of his loose-lipped mouth.

"Waal, stranger," he greeted Billy West, "has yuh come ter give yoreself up ter the law?"

The gray eyes of the Circle J boss widened with surprise.

"What d'yuh mean, sheriff?" he asked.

"I watched yuh come up here," the law officer answered. "And I seen the brand on yore hoss."

Billy shrugged his square shoulders. "What of it?" he asked. "It's the Circle J brand. Thar's nothin' wrong about that, is thar?"

"Yuh got a pard with red hair an' freckles an' a big nose, ain't yuh?" asked the sheriff.

"Seems ter me I have," Billy admitted.

"And yuh got another pal that's tall and lanky—an oldish fella with a long cowhorn mustache and a busted nose; an' he wears Angora chaps and a bearskin vest an' a black Stetson, huh?"

"Thet's a plumb clear description o' Buck Foster," Billy answered. "And I'm askin' yuh again—what of it?"

The sheriff nodded, and his sad face broke into a sour smile, as if he felt rather pleased with his own cleverness.

"Don't git sassy with me, young fella," he warned, shaking a long lean finger in Billy's face. "Yo're durned lucky I ain't clappin' yuh in jail right away!"

Now Billy West had a plumb level head on his shoulders in spite of his youth, but this last remark of the sheriff's got under his skin.

With a swift movement, he caught the law officer by the shoulders and pushed him back into his chair.

Then Billy pulled out his wallet and drew from it his papers. From these he selected his membership card in the Cattlemen's Association, and another card identifying him as authorized to serve as deputy sheriff by Sheriff Jim Hawks, of Twin Rivers, the little Montana cow town nearest to Billy's own Circle J Ranch.

"Hyar," he said, holding these cards before the eyes of the mournful-faced sheriff, "kin yuh read, hombre?"

The other nodded. His watery eyes scanned the words on the cards, then looked up at Billy with a puzzled expression.

"I dunno what ter make of it," he admitted.

"Are yuh satisfied I'm a ranch owner in good standin' with the Cattlemen's Association and the sheriff up where I live?" Billy asked, shaking the cards under the sad-looking law officer's nose.

"How do I know yo're the Billy West that's referred to on them cards?" asked the sheriff suspiciously. "Yuh might 'a' stole them."

So Billy had to get out his Cattlemen's Association membership certificate and show the doubting sheriff the photograph attached to it.

"Thar!" the Circle J boss said, pointing to the photograph. "See that photograph? Do yuh believe yet that I'm the West that's entitled ter carry them cards?"

The sheriff studied the photograph and then compared it with the features of his visitor.

"I reckon yo're West, all right," he admitted finally. "But yuh still got some explainin' ter do, afore I kin let yuh go."

"Explainin', huh?" Billy retorted. "Explainin' what?"

"One thing that needs explainin'," said the sheriff calmly, "is why you and yore two pards has hired out as gunmen ter fight fer the Gadsbys agin' the Perrons."

Billy shook his head. He was beginning to be amused by the suspicions of this gloomy-faced sheriff.

"Yuh got me wrong, mister, I'm no hired gunman. Neither are my pards," he stated firmly, gazing straight into the sheriff's watery eyes.

"I suppose yuh'll tell me yuh don't know thar's a feud on between the Gadsbys and the Perrons," said the sheriff, with a slight sneer.

Billy got a little annoyed with the man's thickheadedness. "Listen,

sheriff, once an' fer all, let me tell yuh that I'm a stranger here—from Montanner. I ain't a hired gunny, and I ain't ever heard of the feud yuh mention or any other."

The sheriff gave a weary sigh. "All I know is, West, that you an' yore two pals answer to the descriptions that's been given me of three gunmen that's been hired by the Gadsbys ter fight agin' the Perrons."

"Who give yuh the descriptions?" Billy asked.

"Who do yuh suppose?" asked the sheriff.

"A kind o' fancy-dressed jasper, wearin' a white hat?"

The sheriff looked surprised. "That's Cliff Perron, ol' Lafe Perron's son. And yet yuh say yuh never heard o' the feud between the Perrons and the Gadsbys!"

"No," Billy declared. "I never did!"

And he went on to tell the law officer just what had happened to Buck Foster that afternoon, and also of the attack on the Circle J camp during the night, and the disappearance of young Earl Gadsby.

But still the sheriff—whose name was Dan Lonigan—wasn't quite convinced.

He shook his head stubbornly and clamped his loose-lipped mouth firmly shut.

"Waal, this town ain't takin' sides in the feud atween the Perrons and the Gadsbys," he said. "Not while I'm sheriff here. So you an' yore pards better git out o' this town and stay out. And if I catch yuh here ag'in, I'll throw yuh in the lock-up!"

It was useless to try to argue further with the thick-headed sheriff.

"This ol' coot's worse than Buck Foster," Billy muttered under his

breath, as he turned toward the door.

He opened it wide and turned back for a final word with Sheriff Dan Lonigan.

"See here, sheriff——" he began.

Then he stopped.

*Zi-ing!* The cause of his sudden pause was a bullet which winged past his head, clipping the brim of his Stetson and burying itself in the adobe wall of the office. Chips of the plaster went flying in a dozen directions.

Billy whirled to face the open doorway and dropped to one knee. His hand swept down to his six-gun and whipped it from its leather in a lightning-swift draw.

For several seconds he knelt there, tense, alert, waiting for some further sign from the unseen enemy who had tried to shoot him down.

Across the street was an empty adobe shack—the one beside which two men had appeared to be watching him as he entered the sheriff's office.

"If that's the way the Perrons fight," Billy remarked to Dan Lonigan, "they must be a pretty low-down back-shootin' crowd."

"The Gadsbys ain't no better," the sheriff retorted. "That's why I don't want none o' their durned feud in this town. Now git out!"

Billy rose to his feet, but he was careful to keep away from the open doorway.

"Tell me one thing afore I leave," he said. "Where kin I find this Earl Gadsby?"

"He come inter town early this mornin' on foot. It must 'a' been a little after daybreak," the sheriff answered. "He got a cayuse at the livery, and I reckon he went out to his ranch."

"And whar's that?"

"It's 'bout eight miles northeast

o' here," was Dan Lonigan's answer. "Thar's a horseshoe valley that cuts into the mesa. The Gadsby spread's at the far end of the valley—right in the bend of the horseshoe. The brand's G-in-a-Box. Yuh can't miss it."

Billy thanked the sheriff and strode out. He went cautiously over to the adobe shack, approaching it from an angle so that he could not be fired on without the attacker showing himself.

But when he got to the building, it was empty, and there was no sign of the two hombres who had been watching Billy.

He crossed back to the hitching post where he had left Danger and untied the horse's reins.

"Waal, Danger hoss," he whispered in the big chestnut's velvety ear as he prepared to mount, "we seem to have struck a nest o' back-shootin' polecats in these Perrons. Now, let's take a look-see what this G-in-a-Box spread looks like."

He touched Danger gently with the spurs and sent him out of town at an easy fox trot.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### THE G-IN-A-BOX.

IT wasn't hard to find the Gadsby ranch. It lay as described by the sheriff, right at the end of the horseshoe valley.

As Billy rode up to the group of buildings, he was struck by their neglected and damaged appearance. The place looked run down. The buildings were in need of paint, and showed many bullet marks. One small outbuilding had been burned, and only its charred walls remained standing.

"It looks ter me, Danger hoss," Billy murmured to his mount, "as if

this hyar G-in-a-Box spread has seen plenty o' trouble."

He caught glimpses of a few scrawny cattle herded by Mexicans farther back in the draws and canyons. But there was no sign of life at the ranch buildings.

Billy rode up to the main building and shouted:

"Hello, the house!"

It was a long, low adobe building with an almost flat roof supported by heavy beams, the ends of which jutted out from the sides of the house.

Promptly in response to Billy's call, a shuttered window was opened slightly, and a pair of hands holding a shotgun appeared.

The owner of the hands could not be seen. But Billy felt a strange sensation course along his spine as he noted how small they were. A moment later, his suspicion was confirmed as a voice called out to him.

"What's yore business here, cowboy?"

It was a woman's voice!

Billy took off his big beaverskin Stetson and bowed courteously.

"Beg pardon, ma'am," he said. "But I was lookin' fer a gent by the name of Earl Gadsby."

"And what d'yuh want of Earl Gadsby?"

"If yuh'd tell him Billy West—from Montanner—would like to have a word with him, I'd be plumb obliged, ma'am!"

The shotgun was withdrawn and the shutters were closed. In less than a minute, they were reopened, and the woman's head was thrust out. The shotgun was nowhere in sight.

She was gray-haired with fine, delicate features, bronzed by the Southwestern sun. She wore a checkered gingham house dress that covered her from neck to heels.

Billy detected a decided likeness between her and young Earl Gadsby.

"Light and enter, stranger!" she said in a friendly tone, and disappeared from the window.

A moment later, she flung open the door and extended a brown hand in greeting to the young Circle J boss.

"My son told me how you an' yore pards did him a good turn yesterday," she said. "He's restin' now, but he'll be right glad to see yuh."

Billy went inside. On a cot set against the wall, he caught sight of Earl Gadsby.

The latter was sitting up, and he smiled in welcome at the visitor.

"So yuh found out where I was," young Gadsby said.

"Yes. But how did yuh git away from us last night?" Billy asked.

A faint smile showed at the corners of Gadsby's mouth. "I hid on a ledge quite a ways up the cliff—where yuh wouldn't think of lookin' fer a gent who'd been wounded."

"I'm sure yuh weren't on a ledge in that draw when we left there this mornin'," Billy declared positively.

"Yuh forgot that one of yuh might 'a' fallen asleep while keepin' watch," Earl Gadsby said. "That was the time I slipped away and hoofed it inter town."

"Was it the old ranny who fell asleep or the redhead?"

Earl Gadsby shook his head. "I ain't tellin'." Then he added, his face taking on a more serious expression: "Take my advice, cowboy, and don't git yoreself in no more trouble on account of us Gadsbys!"

"What d'yuh mean?" Billy asked.

"I heard in town that the Perrons have spread the report that you an' yore pards are gunmen hired by the

Gadsbys. I reckon yuh'd best pull yore freight out o' these parts."

Billy West shook his head. His gray eyes took on a steely glint, and his jaw set firmly.

"I ain't in the habit of runnin' away from danger," he told Earl Gadsby.

"Yeah, but this ain't yore feud," the other pointed out. "You've no quarrel with the Perrons."

"A couple of their men tried ter kill me," Billy said. "I reckon that's cause enough fer a quarrel, ain't it?"

A faint smile played over Earl Gadsby's face.

"Mebbe yuh better know a little more about this durned feud afore yuh horn in on it," he suggested.

Billy straddled a chair and laid his hat down on a table. "Waal, what is the feud all about, anyway?"

"It started fifty years ago," Earl Gadsby explained. "The Perrons and the Gadsbys were two of the first families to settle in these parts. But they quarreled, and what d'yuh suppose it was all about?"

Billy shook his head. "I give up!"

"It was a plumb foolish thing," Earl Gadsby went on.

"These feud quarrels generally are," Billy remarked.

"Yes," young Gadsby agreed, "and this particular one was about as foolish as they come. It was all over four maverick calves that had strayed onto Gadsby range and had the Gadsbys' G-in-a-Box brand slapped on their ornery hides."

"They was really the Perrons' calves?" Billy asked.

"By rights, they belonged to the Perrons. But they was skipped in spring round-up and when they was found on our range, our waddies took 'em fer Gadsby stock and branded 'em accordin'."

"And what happened then?"

"Waal, the Perrons seen the calves with the G-in-a-Box brand, and some o' their punchers claimed they recognized the critters. The case was took to the Cattlemen's Association. But they ruled agin' the Perrons. They said it was range law that a critter belonged to the spread whose brand it carried."

"Thet's good range law," Billy West said.

"It's perfectly good range law. But the Perrons got sore. There was fights between their men and ours. Thar must 'a' been twenty or more killed in the next couple o' years—all over them four ornery mavericks."

"And the feud kept up?"

"That feud's been carried on atween the two families fer nigh on fifty years. But I reckon it won't last much longer."

"Why not?"

"Because," Earl Gadsby explained in a solemn tone, "the Gadsbys are pretty nigh licked. Only mother there and me's left. And the Perrons are still strong and powerful. There's ol' man Perron, and his son Cliff. And there's two cousins o' Cliff's—George and Chris Perron."

"And there's that Sally Perron, Cliff's sister," Mrs. Gadsby put in.

"She ain't responsible fer the feud," Cliff said, and Billy West noticed that his pale face flushed, and that a tender expression came into his eyes at mention of the girl's name.

"Mebbe not," Mrs. Gadsby admitted in an acid tone. "But she's one o' the Perrons, and they're a bad lot!"

And Mrs. Gadsby's eyes flashed fire as she spoke of her hated enemies.

Earl Gadsby lowered his voice and spoke so that only Billy could hear what he said next.

"Don't mind what mother says about Sally. She ain't like the rest o' the Perrons."

Billy nodded. He noticed a strange gentleness in Earl Gadsby's voice when he spoke of the girl.

"Yes, pard," the Circle J boss said, also in a lowered tone. "I understand. What kin I do to help yuh?"

"Fer one thing," Earl Gadsby explained, "I hear that old Lafe Perron has hired gunmen to carry on the feud for him, because he believes the Gadsbys have hired gunmen."

"Meanin' me an' Buck an' Joe, eh?" Billy asked, a slight smile curving his mouth.

"That's just who he thinks our hired gunnies are," Earl Gadsby replied.

Billy West was silent for a few moments. His bronzed forehead was wrinkled in thought. Finally he got to his feet, picked up his hat, and held out his hand to Earl Gadsby.

"Take good care o' yoreself, pard," he advised. "I think I kin find a way out o' this trouble."

He took his leave of Mrs. Gadsby and went out to where he had left Danger.

The big chestnut pawed the ground impatiently and whinnied in greeting as its master came over and stroked its velvety neck.

"What did yuh say, Danger hoss?" Billy asked.

Danger whinnied again.

"Where are we goin' now? Is that what yuh want ter know?" Billy pretended to be carrying on a conversation with Danger—a favorite game between the two. "I'll tell yuh!"

He leaned forward and put his lips to Danger's ear.

"You an' me, Danger hoss, is goin' ter make a call on Lafe Perron

an' see what the ol' curly wolf has got ter say fer himself."

Danger bobbed his fine head up and down two or three times as if he understood perfectly. Then he whickered softly and began pawing at the ground.

"It'll be a plumb interestin' visit, Danger hoss," Billy told his mount. "It may be a bit dangerous, too."

With the last words, the Circle J boss swung into the saddle and rode out of the valley where the G-in-a-Box spread was situated.

## CHAPTER V.

### A GUNMAN FOR HIRE.

**B**ILLY WEST had learned in town that the Perron ranch lay to the westward, among a group of hills, and he headed in that direction. The country was typical Southwest desert range—sandy soil overgrown with sage and cactus. Here and there a mesa or a group of low-lying hills broke the level of the desert, and it was toward one of these ranges that Billy headed.

A ride of about half an hour brought him in among the hills, and he soon caught sight of a cluster of adobe ranch buildings perched on one of the slopes.

"Reckon that must be the Perron ranch, Danger hoss," Billy remarked, and the horse pricked up his ears and bobbed his head up and down, as if agreeing with his master.

The Circle J boss started for the trail that led up to the ranch. But he had hardly turned Danger's head in that direction when he caught the sound of hoofbeats of hard-ridden horses behind him.

A moment later, from around a bend in the trail, a horse and rider appeared.

Straight toward Billy West they came at breakneck speed. Billy's

heart jumped into his throat as he saw that the rider was a girl.

She was in mortal terror. Her eyes were big with fear. Her breath came in gasps. Her cayuse was foam-sleeked and blowing. It had been ridden hard and wouldn't last much longer.

The girl came on, urging her fagged horse to greater efforts. She seemed blinded by panic, for she was almost on top of Billy and Danger before she saw them. She had to rein in suddenly, pulling her mount back on its haunches. And then a sharp cry escaped her:

"Oh, Earl! I'm so glad to see you. I—"

She stopped, staring, wide-eyed, at Billy West, as she realized the mistake she had made. "I—I'm sorry," she faltered. "I thought you were— But this man—this half-breed—has been following me. He must know I'm carrying money for my father. I'm afraid—"

Billy gallantly swept off his hat. "Yuh don't need ter be afraid o' that snake any more, ma'am," he assured her.

With a quick motion, he maneuvered Danger so that the big chestnut was between the girl and the oncoming horseman.

The latter reined in just in time to avoid crashing into the Circle J boss and his mount.

This hombre who had been riding after the girl was a half-breed of rather dandified appearance. He had a small waxed mustache, with the ends sticking straight out. On his head was a large high-crowned sombrero, ornamented with a lot of gold tassels and bits of braid and ribbon. Over a purple silk shirt, he wore an embroidered short jacket.

Around his waist was wound a wide crimson sash, and his trousers were the bell-bottomed kind favored

by the Mexicans. He carried two guns in holsters slung low on either hip, and the hilt of a knife showed above the folds of the sash.

He dragged his cayuse onto its haunches as he found Billy West and Danger facing him.

"Señor!" the half-breed exclaimed in a tone of surprise. "Why do you stop me?"

"This lady"—Billy indicated the girl, who sat her panting cayuse about a dozen yards behind Danger—"says yuh were annoyin' her."

"Eet ees not so!" the breed denied, showing his white teeth.

"Yuh mean this young lady ain't tellin' the truth?" Billy asked, his voice stern.

"Eet ees not so!" the dandified hombre repeated.

As he spoke, his hand moved toward the hilt of the knife that stuck out from his sash. At such short range, this was a surer and deadlier weapon than a six-gun.

There was a flash of steel as the blade was whipped out of its sheath. Then—

*Bang!* A roar, a flash of flame.

The Circle J boss had seen the attempt to draw and throw the knife. His own right hand had swept down to his gun with the speed of light. He had fired—once. And that was enough.

With a howl of pain, the half-breed dropped the knife. It fell with a sharp *clang*. And the man seized his shattered right forearm with his left hand in an effort to stanch the wound which Billy's well-aimed bullet had ripped through it.

While he was engaged with nursing his wound, Billy rode close up to him and took away both his guns.

"Git out o' here now, yuh snake!" rasped the Circle J boss, his gray eyes flashing fire. "Vamose pronto! Pull yore freight, hombre, or I'll let

daylight through more than yore arm!"

All the fight had gone out of the breed now. His face was ashen under its tan. Even his pointed mustache with its carefully waxed ends seemed to have lost its stiffness.

"Vamose, hombre!" Billy repeated sternly.

The other backed his cayuse away, turned it, and dug in the spurs. The animal bounded away like an arrow shot from a bow. In a few seconds, he was around the jutting point of rock and out of sight.

Billy turned to the girl. She rode to meet him.

"I want to thank you, sir," she said, in a quiet, firm voice.

"Plumb glad to 'a' been here to help," Billy answered. "Who is the fella anyway. Do yuh know?"

"I reckon he's one o' the hands that's been hired by dad's new foreman," she said. "I don't like the looks of them."

"Is yore dad's name Lafe Perron?"

The girl's eyes widened in surprise. "How did yuh know?"

"I didn't. I just knew thar was a rancher of that name hereabouts."

"Yes, I'm Sally Perron," the girl said, with a trace of pride in her tone.

Billy studied the girl for a brief moment. She rode straight in the saddle, a slim, boyish figure in flannel shirt open at the throat, blue neckerchief, riding skirt and boots. A cluster of jet-black curls showed under the brim of her Stetson. She had dark, flashing eyes and a small, firm mouth and chin.

The girl was attractive. There was no question of that. But she was also proud and self-willed.

"I was ridin' this way ter pay a visit to yore dad," Billy said, when

his quick mental portrait of the girl was complete.

"I'm shore he'll be right glad ter meet yuh," said the girl. "I'm ridin' up to the ranch. I'll tell him how yuh helped me."

"I'm from Montanner," the Circle J boss explained. "And the name's West—Billy West!"

"Yo're a long ways off yore range, aren't yuh, Mr. West?"

"Looks that way, miss," Billy said. "But yuh might say that Arizona's my winter range."

"Meanin' that yuh always come south in the winter?"

"That's right." And then Billy asked the question that was uppermost in his mind. "How come yore dad lets his foreman hire sich hombres as that one I just had the pleasure of puttin' a bullet in?"

He watched the girl's face while he put the question to her. He saw the muscles of the jaw tighten. The dark eyes flashed.

"They're not the right kind of men," she admitted. "I asked dad not to have them around. They'll only make trouble for us. But dad won't listen to reason."

"Thar was some talk in town about hirin' gunmen fer a feud," Billy said, by way of leading her on to tell more.

But the girl only tossed her head and said: "That's somethin' I can't discuss with a stranger, Mr. West. I—yuh must excuse me—but I don't feel I know yuh well enough to talk about that just yet."

Billy shrugged his square shoulders. He changed the subject with a quiet smile on his bronzed face. "Speakin' o' hosses, miss," he remarked, "that's a plumb smart little animal yo're ridin'."

Sally Perron's face brightened at once. "Yes," she agreed, stroking the neck of her black cow pony

lightly, "this is my little Coaly hoss." Her eyes turned admiringly on Danger. "Yore hoss is a beauty, too," she added, and there was real admiration in her voice.

"Yes, Danger's a good pal o' mine. Raised him myself from a colt."

"Danger!" the girl repeated the name. "Why do yuh call him that?"

"'Cause he's plumb dangerous to certain hombres," Billy explained. "He's a one-man hoss!"

They went on talking about horses for the rest of the ride up the trail leading to the cluster of buildings that made up the Perron ranch.

Billy noticed, as he came closer, that this ranch was much more prosperous-looking than the run-down G-in-a-Box. A herd of good-looking cattle was grazing farther down the valley. The buildings did not have the appearance of neglect that he had noticed at the Gadsby ranch.

A cow-puncher was working at the corral, fixing broken poles. Two others had a calf tied down and were doctoring a sore place on its hide with a black ointment.

But around the door of the bunk house, there were other hands who were just sitting around, smoking and talking, and playing cards.

Billy counted five of these hombres. All of them were dressed Mexican fashion, in bell-bottomed trousers, short jackets and sashes, and wore high-crowned sombreros. They were swarthy-skinned, evil-faced fellows of much the same type as the one Billy had stopped from robbing Sally Perron.

A middle-aged man came walking across the ranch yard—a straight, active cowman with gray hair and mustache and goatee beard.

Billy noticed the likeness between him and Sally Perron. Both had

the same fine straight features, the same large dark eyes, the same mouth and chin. This must be old Lafe Perron, Sally's father.

A moment later, Billy's guess was confirmed, for Sally Perron rode up to the rancher, slid out of the saddle, and spoke to him quickly. Then she turned to Billy West.

"Dad," she said, "I want yuh to meet Billy West, from Montanner. He was coming to see you, and he stopped Manuel from takin' that money from me. I—I reckon Manuel won't dare show his face here again."

Old Lafe Perron stepped forward with hand outstretched. "I'm plumb glad to know yuh, West. Many thanks fer puttin' a slug in that fell'a Manuel. He got what was comin' to him."

Billy shook hands with the rancher.

"I only did what any one would a' done, seein' a gal bein' pestered by an ornery breed," Billy said.

Lafe Perron looked at the Circle J boss inquiringly. "My daughter tells me yuh was on yore way to visit me. I don't quite place yuh. What kin I do for yuh?"

Billy's bronzed young face took on a more serious expression. He stepped closer to Lafe Perron and lowered his voice.

"I heard yuh were hirin' gunmen to carry on yore feud agin' the Gadsbys, Mr. Perron," he said in a tone that Sally Perron would not be able to hear. "I'm wonderin' if yuh could use me!"

## CHAPTER VI.

### A PLAN GOES WRONG.

A STARTLED expression came into the dark eyes of old Lafe Perron. He stared at Billy West blankly. It was easy to see that he

was puzzled and a little alarmed by the Circle J boss's question.

Billy guessed that Lafe Perron wasn't anxious to get the reputation of hiring gunmen. The fact that a stranger from Montana had heard the report and had come looking for a gun-slinger's job had rather unnerved the rancher.

Lafe Perron cleared his throat, but when he spoke, there was a tremor in his voice.

"Who—who told yuh that?" he demanded.

Billy shrugged his shoulders carelessly. "It's all over town," he answered.

"But the Gadsbys are hirin' gunmen, too," Lafe Perron argued, as if trying to justify his own actions. "They started it—not me."

"Yo're anxious to end this feud, aren't yuh?"

"It can't last much longer," Lafe declared. "The Perrons have the upper hand now. The Gadsbys are licked."

"What yuh got agin' the Gadsbys?"

Lafe Perron cast a swift glance at his daughter. The girl was engaged in making friends with Danger, stroking the chestnut's velvety neck and talking to it as if it were a human being.

And Danger was responding in his usual way, with any one he liked, whinnying softly and bobbing his head up and down or shaking it from side to side as if answering. For Danger didn't mind being petted by a stranger, although he would let no one but his master ride him.

"Come inside," Lafe said to Billy. "I want to talk to yuh."

He led the way to the long, low, whitewashed adobe ranch house. Pushing the door open, he motioned to Billy to enter first.

The Circle J boss obeyed, and Lafe Perron followed him inside, closing the door behind him.

Billy took in the room in a swift glance. It was well furnished. Some fine bearskin rugs were scattered on the floor. Colorful Navajo blankets were scattered here and there by way of decoration.

But Billy was forced to cut short his study of the room's furnishings, for the figure of a man suddenly rose up to face him. This man had been sitting in a deep bullhide-seated chair and had got up as Billy came in.

He was a young cow-puncher and quite handsome. Billy detected a resemblance both to old Lafe Perron and his daughter, Sally, and he concluded that this must be the son, Cliff Perron.

This belief was further confirmed by a fine white hat which was hanging on a corner of the chair in which the young waddy sat.

Billy recalled Buck Foster's account of the hombre in the fancy clothes and white hat who had been one of a party of three trying to kill Earl Gadsby—and probably would have succeeded only for Buck's timely arrival on the scene.

And now Lafe Perron himself confirmed Billy's suspicions. "Meet my son, Cliff," the rancher said. "This is a gent named West, from Montanner."

Cliff Perron thrust out his hand. "Glad to know yuh, West!"

Billy did not take the proffered hand. He pretended not to see it. The fact that Lafe Perron was saying something to Cliff gave Billy an excuse to turn away from the younger Perron.

"West here," Lafe Perron was explaining to his son, "wants ter come in with us on this Gadsby business."

"I feel sure I kin get this Gadsby

feud cleared up in twenty-four hours," Billy declared, and he looked as if he believed it.

"How will yuh go about it?" asked the elder Perron.

"I'll work alone," Billy answered. "I don't want these half-breed murderers and gallows rats I see around here workin' with me. I don't pal with varmints!"

Father and son exchanged a swift glance.

"Yuh talk big, hombre," Cliff Perron said, stroking a silky black mustache in which he seemed to take great pride.

"Yo're mistaken, Mr. Cliff," Billy answered firmly. "Yuh don't know me. If yuh did, yuh'd know I ain't given to talkin' big."

The Circle J boss fixed the dandified young rancher sternly with his gray eyes.

Cliff Perron tried to meet Billy's gaze, but after a few seconds, he quailed before its searching quality. For the Montanan seemed to look right through him and read his thoughts.

Billy meanwhile was sizing young Cliff Perron up. He was too handsome, the Circle J boss decided. Also, he was a bit of a weakling. He hadn't the strength of character that showed itself in the faces of his father and his sister.

Turning again to the older man, Billy went back to the subject they had been discussing.

"Well, Mr. Perron, yuh've heard what my terms are. I'm to work alone, and I don't want yore gun-slingin' crew of breeds. What's yore answer?"

"Yuh say yuh kin put an end to the feud," old Lafe Perron said slowly. "How do yuh propose to go about it?"

"That's my business. Yuh'll find out soon enough."

"Are yuh sure yuh can get rid of the Gadsbys—get them right out of this part of the country?"

"I said I'd end this feud," Billy answered. "That's as far as I kin explain right now."

"It's not enough," Lafe Perron declared.

"Yuh don't trust me?" Billy asked.

"I never saw yuh in my life before to-day," Lafe reminded Billy.

"Who would yuh sooner trust—me or those half-breeds I see hangin' around the bunk house?" the Circle J boss demanded.

"That ain't the question," Lafe said. "I'll trust them to wipe out any gunmen the Gadsbys hire. That's enough fer me. But you say—"

He stopped as a sound of hoof-beats pounding on the hard ground outside came to his ears.

"I bet that's Degan and Warren now," Cliff Perron put in.

There was a creak of saddle leather and a jingling of bits outside. Men were dismounting from their horses.

There was a rap on the door. Then it was flung open, and two figures appeared on the threshold.

"Hello, Degan, hello, Warren!" Cliff Perron greeted the newcomers.

Degan and Warren entered. Degan was long and lanky, with a cold, gray killer's eyes, and a thin, lantern-jawed, leathery face. Warren was short and squat and very bow-legged, with long arms and a brutish face, every line of which told of its owner's cruelty.

Billy West recognized them at once as the two gunmen who had been watching him from across the street when he visited the sheriff in Tulsa. He felt sure that one of them had fired the shot that had narrowly missed killing him, as he

stood in the doorway of the jail building.

"What's new, Degan?" Cliff Perron asked the tall hombre.

"Nothin's new," Degan answered gruffly.

And now, Lafe Perron had a question to ask.

"Hyar's a gent calls himself West, claimin' he's from Montanner," he said, pointing to the Circle J boss. "Either of yuh ever seen him before?"

Degan and Warren glanced swiftly at Billy West. A sharp exclamation broke from both of them at the same instant.

"Sure," Degan said. "He's one o' the gunmen the Gadsbys have hired. We scouted his camp and seen him with his two pard—"

"Yeah, he was with the old coot with the cowhorn mustache and the redhead," Warren added.

A sharp command came from old Lafe Perron. "Hold him here, men! Don't let him get away! He's a spy for the Gadsbys! Don't—"

Degan and Warren didn't wait to hear any more. They reached for their guns and started slinging lead right away.

*Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang!* The two gunmen sent a hail of leaden death at the Circle J boss.

The room was filled with gun smoke and the walls shook with the thunder of the heavy .45s.

With the swiftness of a darting lizard, Billy moved to dodge the first burst of gunfire. He had been caught unawares.

He dropped to his knees, and the bullets passed over his head, burying themselves in the furniture or biting great chunks out of the adobe-plastered walls.

An instant later, Billy was on his feet again. His smooth-handled

Colt, trusty weapon of many gun fights, was in his right hand.

Degan and Warren were reloading. There was a brief lull in the firing.

Now they spied Billy in his new position. He was standing behind the chair that had Cliff Perron's white hat on it.

They brought up their guns for a new volley. But now, the Circle J boss was ready for them—and he let them have it.

Through the haze of gun smoke, Billy saw the ugly brutish face of the squat gunman, Warren, suddenly contort into a fearful grimace. Then he dropped to the floor, while a great crimson stain spread across the front of his shirt.

In almost the same second, the lanky Degan uttered a horrible cry, the guns dropped from his hands, and he clutched desperately at his bullet-torn throat.

Billy flashed a glance around him. He saw Cliff Perron cowering in a corner, white-faced, terror showing in his large dark eyes.

Old Lafe Perron, looking thunderstruck at the defeat of his hired gunmen, was tugging clumsily at his own Colt.

But Billy wasn't going to trade bullets with Lafe Perron.

Instead, the Circle J boss made for the door, flung it open, and darted outside.

And then he found himself facing an even greater peril. For the half-breed gunmen from the bunk house had heard the shooting in the ranch house and had come to see what it was all about.

As Billy stepped outside and closed the door behind him, he found himself facing a half circle of snarling, wolfish faces of men who were hired for a job of murder. He

knew that he could expect no mercy from such scoundrels.

Halfway across the ranch yard, he saw Sally Perron. The girl was still holding Danger's bridle reins and appeared to be talking to the big chestnut. But now her attention was caught by the scene at the ranch-house door.

A villainous-looking half-breed, who appeared to be the leader of the crew, stepped forward and faced Billy. He was a tall, hideous, swarthy-skinned *mestizo*, with white fanglike teeth that always showed in an evil smile, and eyes that held smoldering fires of murder in their depths.

"Señor, ect ees well that you surrender. Ect ees no use for you to make further fight. We have you at our mercy!" he said in a confident tone, and he waved his hand toward the men behind him.

Billy's eyes swept the ring of evil faces, saw the steady gun muzzles pointing at him. He was facing certain death.

But he met the gunman leader's gaze boldly. "Who are *yuh*?" he demanded.

"I, my friend," said the man, "am known as Señor Muerte—Señor Death!"

Billy shrugged his shoulders and started to raise his hands.

"I reckon you win this trick, Señor Death!" he said coolly.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A PARD HELPS OUT.

IT wasn't the first time in his life that Billy West had been in a situation where his life hung on a hair. One false move, he knew, would bring a storm of lead crashing into his body, cutting him to pieces. He had no chance to dodge or duck. And there was no mercy in the ring

of evil faces that hemmed him in.

A pleased smirk came over the face of the fellow who called himself "Señor Death."

"Ect ces well, my friend," he murmured. "You show wisdom!"

He nodded to one of his men. "Take hees guns and tie heem up, José," he ordered.

The man took a step forward. Then he paused and whirled as the sound of hoofbeats came to his ears.

The others turned, too, as a thunderbolt of horseflesh suddenly hurled itself into their midst.

A fresh gleam of hope came to Billy West as he saw that Sally Perron had let Danger loose and that his favorite horse was charging in among his enemies, scattering them right and left, lashing and striking with his hoofs.

Some of the gunmen fired wildly. Others barely escaped being crushed to death by those murderous hoofs. The whole crew of gun slingers headed by Señor Death was thrown into panic. They suddenly lost all interest in the Circle J boss and thought only of saving their own lives.

It took only a few seconds to throw the gunmen into confusion. And Billy West acted swiftly.

"Good hoss, Danger!" he exclaimed.

The big chestnut was at his side at once. He sprang into the saddle, whirled Danger about and touched him with the spurs.

A loud shout went up. Then the voice of Señor Muerte rang out in a sharp command:

"Stop heem! Shoot heem down! Shoot the horse! Stop heem!"

The gunmen were recovering from their panic. Guns began to blaze.

*Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang!*

Billy felt a slug burn past his ear. Another grazed Danger's flank.

"Git goin', Danger hoss!" Billy urged, touching the big chestnut harder than usual with the spurs. "Run fer yore life, boy! Those skunks are gunnin' for yuh."

Danger responded with a burst of speed, legs stretching out, body low to the ground.

It was a magnificent effort. The big chestnut went racing out of the ranch yard and down the trail to the flats below. There wasn't a horse at the ranch that could catch him, even if the pursuers were mounted and ready to ride.

A few more bullets were fired, but none of them came near their mark. Soon Billy was out of range of both six-guns and rifles. He had escaped from the trap with the help of his faithful pard, Danger.

Almost an hour later, when Billy rode into the Circle J camp, he found Buck Foster and Joe Scott on the point of saddling up their cayuses and riding to town to find out what had become of him.

"By heifers, Billy!" Buck exclaimed on seeing his boss. "We thought yuh'd been dry-gulched or somethin'."

"Yeah, Billy," Joe Scott added, his freckled face wearing a disappointed expression, "yuh might 'a' let us in on the fun!"

Billy dismounted and ran his fingers gently over the place where a bullet had grazed along Danger's flank, leaving a long raw welt.

"If yuh think it's fun ter have yore best hoss shot under yuh," he said, "yo're welcome ter try it. I didn't find it funny."

Sing Lo came up at this moment, a smile of welcome on his flat, yellow face.

"How do, Mistlee Billy?" he greeted his boss. "You likee cup coffee? Somet'ing to eat, maybe?"

"It'd shore go down good, Sing Lo," Billy said. "I'm plumb tuckered out."

"So be," the little Chinaman murmured, and set about preparing hot coffee and making sandwiches.

Meanwhile, Billy was cleansing and dressing some slight scratches he had got in the gun fighting. None of these was serious.

Joe Scott helped him to bandage the wounds, while Buck Foster looked on and gave the redhead advice as to how the job ought to be done.

The late afternoon wore on into evening, and the sun began to sink behind the hills to the west. By this time, Billy felt rested and ready to go on with his task of breaking up the feud between the Gadsbys and the Perrons. His wounds still had a little sting in them, but they were all slight.

Sing Lo prepared and served a tasty supper for the hungry waddies, and they ate heartily.

When they had finished, Buck Foster rubbed his horny hands across the lower part of his bearskin vest and gave a grunt of satisfaction.

"By ganny, chink, yuh shore done a good job o' pot-wrastlin', that time!" he declared.

Sing Lo nodded, his face wreathed in smiles at the compliment. "So be, Mistlee Buck," he murmured.

Darkness had now settled down on the Circle J camp. The fire threw odd-shaped dancing shadows of the Circle J waddies and the little Chinaman on the cliff wall.

And then, while Sing Lo busied himself with his pots and pans and dishes, the three Circle J waddies talked over the events of the day, but without getting far toward solv-

ing the problem of the war between the Gadsbys and the Perrons.

At ten o'clock, all three were ready to turn in and roll themselves in their blankets for a night's sleep.

Joe Scott decided to take a look around the camp before settling down to his slumbers. He looked over the horses, then swept the walls of the draw with his keen eyes.

When he returned to the camp fire, he drew Billy to one side and whispered in his ear.

"Don't make any sign," he warned. "But take a look at that clump of ocotilla down at the mouth of the draw."

Billy turned carelessly and gazed in the direction Joe had mentioned.

"Some one's skulkin' down there," the Circle J boss said in a low tone. "I kin see his hat move a little."

"He's got a hoss hidden farther back in the brush," Joe whispered.

"How about tryin' some Injun stuff after Buck's asleep?" Billy suggested, and the redhead nodded, his blue eyes dancing with mischief.

So the two younger waddies rolled themselves in their blankets under the shadow of a boulder a little distance away from the fire.

Buck Foster settled himself in his soogans, where he would get the warmth from the dying camp fire, and in less than five minutes, Billy and Joe heard loud snores coming from his battered nose.

They waited a few minutes longer, then slipped out of their blankets and began creeping along carefully toward the mouth of the draw. They kept in the shadows of the cliff wall and moved with the silence and stealth of Indians.

When they came close to the clump of ocotilla which sheltered the skulker, they paused and looked again. The figure was still there, partly hidden by the brush. And

farther back, both could see the vague outline of a horse.

For this was near the entrance of the draw, and the moonlight showed objects by its ghostly light, while the rest of the draw, except around the dying camp fire, was in total darkness.

"D'yuh think I could git behind that boulder and rope the critter?" Joe whispered to Billy. "I brought my maguey along."

"It might give him a surprise—and mebbe a lesson," Billy agreed.

"Watch me!" Joe said and slipped away in the blackness.

Billy crouched in the shelter of the cliff, his eyes peering at the silent figure of the watcher. All he could see was the hat and shoulders of the person who was keeping this night watch over the Circle J camp.

Then Billy saw Joe suddenly rise up from behind a rock. Joe's noose swished through the air, opened, settled around the shoulders of the skulker, and drew tight.

"Yip-peee!" A wild cowboy yell broke from the redhead's throat as he saw that he had made a good throw.

He began to drag on the rope and to pull his prisoner through the ocotilla clump.

Billy rushed forward a dozen steps. Then he stopped still, and his nerves were chilled with horror as another cry came, as if in answer to Joe Scott's yell.

But this was a different kind of call. It was shrill and full of terror and anguish. A woman's voice! In spite of its strained tone, Billy knew whose it was.

He rushed toward the rock where Joe Scott stood.

"Stop pullin' on that rope, Joe!" he ordered sharply. "That—that's a gal yuh've caught. It's Sally Perron!"

"What?" Joe Scott gave a gasp of amazement.

Billy went floundering into the brush. "Help me to find her, dog-gone it! She may be hurt!"

And then a slight figure suddenly sprang up in front of the Circle J boss.

"No, Mr. West, I'm not hurt." Now it was unmistakably the voice of Sally Perron speaking. "I'm just a bit scratched up. I—I'm quite all right!"

Billy felt relieved. "It's mighty good of yuh ter be so sporting about it," he told the girl. "We thought it was some gunman spyan' on our camp, and Joe Scott here figured on givin' him a surprise."

A rippling laugh broke from the girl. Billy admired the way she was taking the rough handling she had received.

"Well, you certainly gave me a surprise," she said.

"I'm plumb sorry, Miss Sally," Billy said. "But yuh must admit we had no reason to expect yuh. What are yuh doin' here?"

In the dim moonlight that filtered in at the mouth of the draw, Billy could sense rather than see that the girl's face changed expression. And when she spoke again, her voice was unsteady.

"It's about Earl Gadsby. There's a plot on foot to—to murder him! That's what it amounts to. Cold-blooded murder. Nothing else!"

"Tell me about it," Billy prompted. "But first let's go to the fire."

He led her back into the draw and spread out a blanket near the fire for her to sit on. Then he threw on more wood and let it blaze up.

As the firelight shone on her face, he saw that it was scratched by the brambles through which she had been dragged.

Joe Scott now came forward, hat in hand, and stood in front of the girl.

"I'm mighty sorry, Miss——" he began.

But Sally Perron cut him short with a light laugh. "Don't say another word about it. I had no business hiding out there. Here, cowboy!" She thrust out her slim brown hand. "Let's shake an' be pards!"

Joe's big freckled paw closed over the girl's hand.

"That's durned fine of yuh, miss, to take it that a way," he murmured.

Billy West now turned around from his task of building up the fire.

"You two gittin' acquainted, huh?"

"Yes, and we're gettin' along fine!" said the girl.

"This is Joe Scott, one o' my best hands," Billy introduced the redhead. "Yuh kin talk freely in front of Joe. Now," he added in a more serious tone, "tell us about this plot to murder Earl Gadsby!"

"It was my father's plot," Sally Perron explained, "or else it was that half-breed gunman who calls himself Señor Death, who suggested the plan. And my brother, Cliff, is in it, too."

"What do they intend to do?" Billy asked.

"Cliff has challenged Earl Gadsby to fight him, man to man, at day-break, to settle the feud between the two families. If Earl wins, the Perrons are to withdraw from this part of the country. If Cliff wins, the Gadsbys are to get out." The girl's voice had fallen to a low, vibrant whisper.

"Sounds fair enough," Billy said. "Yore brother, Cliff, don't seem ter have much stomach fer gun fightin' so far as I kin see."

"He hasn't," Sally Perron admitted.

"Then it's Cliff that's more likely to git killed than Gadsby," Joe Scott put in.

"But Cliff won't be in the fight at all," Sally Perron explained.

"Then how—" Billy began.

"Some one else will be dressed in his clothes. They're very showy, yuh know—white hat and everything—and—" Her voice broke. A sob shook her slim body. "Earl will be killed! I know it!"

"Who's going to wear your brother's clothes and take his place?" Billy asked, but he had already guessed the answer.

Sally Perron's voice was little more than a whisper as she answered:

"The gunman—Señor Death!"

### CHAPTER VIII.

#### SEÑOR DEATH FIGHTS A DUEL.

THE first gray streaks of dawn were showing in the eastern sky when a small group of horsemen slipped away from the Perron ranch. In their midst was the savage-faced, swarthy gunman known as "Señor Death."

But now, instead of being dressed in the short, embroidered jacket, high-crowned sombrero, wide sash and bell-bottom trousers that he usually wore, Señor Death was attired in a flashy cow-puncher outfit, and on his head rested a fine white Stetson with a snakeskin band.

Knee to knee with the disguised Señor Death, rode old Lafe Perron, and he was giving his gunman final instructions.

"Make it a fair fight, but shoot to kill," said the rancher, his face grim. "Earl Gadsby's death'll mean the end o' this feud. With him out

o' the way, the Perrons'll control the whole country roundabout here."

The gunman turned his swarthy face toward Lafe Perron, showing white fang-shaped teeth in his terrible smile. "Si, Señor Perron! Eet ees well!" he murmured.

"Yuh won't fail?"

For answer, the gunman drew from his holsters a pair of fine, well-oiled .45s with carved wood handles which showed many notches.

"These, señor," he said, showing the guns to Lafe Perron, "they have never fail' me!"

They rode on in silence until they came in sight of the box canyon where the gun battle was to be fought.

"Mebbe Earl Gadsby won't show up," suggested the rider on the other side of Lafe Perron—a man in the costume of a Mexican, but whose voice showed him to be Cliff Perron.

"Then we'll go to his ranch and rout him out of bed," Lafe Perron said, with savage determination.

He turned to the half-breed gunmen—six in number—who made up the rest of the party.

"Ride ahead a little and see if there's anybody there in the canyon waitin' fer us!" he ordered. "Let me know!"

The gunmen roweled their little desert ponies and raced on ahead. They scouted the entrance of the canyon, which was to be the scene of the strange duel which old Lafe had planned.

Then they wheeled their cayuses about and came tearing back, racing in a cloud of flying sand.

"Yes, señor," one of them called out, as he came within hearing distance, "he ees there, waiting for us!"

"Good!" Lafe Perron's dark eyes were smoldering. He stroked his grayish goatee beard nervously. "Yuh ain't afraid, hombre, are yuh?"

he asked, turning suddenly to the swarthy gunman at his side.

"Me? Afraid?" exclaimed Señor Death. Again his fanglike white teeth showed in a smile that was half a snarl. "I am afraid of no man. I have fought in thirty duels, señor, and I have always keel' my man!"

Lafe Perron seemed satisfied. "I reckon yuh won't disappoint me," he said gruffly. "If I was younger, I'd fight young Gadsby myself. And if *you* had the real spirit of the Perrons," he went on, turning to his son, "you'd fight this duel!"

Cliff Perron mumbled something under his breath, but his father did not hear what he said.

Another few minutes of riding brought them to the canyon. There the gray light that filtered in between the steep cliff walls showed the figure of a man and a horse near a clump of gnarled mesquite trees.

Now the man's voice rang out, echoing strangely around the canyon walls. Old Lafe recognized the voice as Earl Gadsby's.

"Stay where yuh are—all of yuh except Cliff Perron. This is a personal matter between me an' him. Let him come here, an' we'll settle it the way we agreed!"

There was no trace of fear in the voice of the speaker. He seemed eager to get the fight started.

Old Lafe Perron flashed an angry glance at his cowardly son. Then he whispered to Señor Death:

"You are ready? Yo're sure yuh kin outshoot him?"

The gunman in the white sombrero nodded. "Si, señor! I keel heem—sure!"

Señor Death roweled his cayuse. The spirited animal sprang forward, breaking into a gallop.

The other gunmen spurred their mounts to follow their leader. Lafe

Perron and his son brought up the rear.

The whole party rode into the canyon. But when they did so, they could see no one in sight. The man and horse had vanished. And then the voice of Earl Gadsby rang out again:

"This was to be a duel, Lafe Perron! If yore son ain't afraid, let him fight the way we agreed—man against man! It was yore idea!"

"The fight shall be as agreed," said Lafe Perron with dignity.

He gave low-voiced orders to the hired gunmen. They drew back, leaving the fancy-garbed Señor Death alone, on foot.

And then the figure of Señor Death's opponent stepped out of the shadows of the mesquites.

He advanced with slow, steady steps until he stood about fifty paces from the white-hatted gunman.

"Now," he called out, "Mr. Perron when yuh give the word, we'll start firin' as we walk toward each other—and may the best man win!"

There was a moment of silence—a pause in which men held their breath, and it seemed as if their hearts had stopped beating. Death hung in the air. The dawn showed objects in a ghostly gray light.

Lafe Perron looked over the scene. A feeling of pity swept over him as he saw the courageous young figure standing there, waiting for the word to go for his guns.

But Lafe Perron had gone too far to draw back now. The fight would be as fair as he could make it. Señor Death would face the guns of his rival and risk his life. But the chances were all in his favor.

With an effort, Lafe Perron cleared his throat and gave the word:

"Fill yore hands, gents!"

In the seconds that followed, old

Lafe Perron saw such gun play as he had never seen in his life before.

The hands of both fighters swept down to their holsters and came up with guns spitting leaden death.

There was hardly a split second of difference in the time that it took the two men to whip out their Colts. But that fraction was in favor of Señor Death's opponent.

*Bang-bang! Bang!* They fired at each other.

Watching them with his heart beating in his throat, old Lafe Perron saw his hired gunman, the unconquerable Señor Death, suddenly break at the knees and sink to the ground.

His opponent swayed a little, as if dizzy. He, too, had been hit, but his first split-second advantage in the draw had enabled him to get in the first shot.

Suddenly, Lafe Perron felt some one clutching his arm. He looked around. It was his son, Cliff, white-faced and trembling.

Cliff was pointing at the figure of the victor in this strange, terrible duel.

"That—that ain't Earl Gadsby!" he said in a shaky voice. "It—it's that gunman—West!"

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE FEUD ENDS.

CLIFF PERRON was right. It was the young Circle J boss who had fought the duel with Señor Death and downed him.

Acting on Sally Perron's information, the three Circle J waddies had lain in wait for Earl Gadsby as he rode away from his ranch shortly before daybreak.

They had roped the young waddy off his horse and made him prisoner. Then they had told him of the plot to have Señor Death kill

him and had persuaded him to fall in with their plans.

Billy had taken Earl Gadsby's old lemon-colored hat and black-checked yellow shirt so as to make himself look as much like the other as possible.

At this moment, young Gadsby was held prisoner by Buck Foster and Joe Scott behind a boulder. He had used his voice to fool the Perrons into thinking that it was he taking part in the duel.

And the trick had worked.

There was a moment of grim silence as Cliff Perron made his startling announcement. The echoes carried his words round the walls of the canyon and brought them back to him.

"Quick!" Cliff shouted. "Don't let him get away! It's a trick! He's killed yore leader! Shoot him down!"

The words seemed to bring the crew of gunmen to life. They shouted excitedly to one another, pointing to the white-hatted form of Señor Death as it lay there on the ground.

Then they sent their cayuses charging forward. Their guns were out and spitting lead. A hail of bullets swept toward the stern figure of the victor, as he stood his ground defiantly.

Billy West crouched low. He had reloaded his guns and was ready for this new attack. The gunmen's slugs, aimed too high, swept harmlessly over his head.

"Come on, Buck! Come on, Joe!" he shouted.

And out from behind the boulder that loomed to the right of the mesquites, there suddenly charged two fighting rannies who had been itching to get into action ever since the battle started.

"Yip-peee!" Joe Scott let loose a

wild cowboy yell and brought his guns into aim.

"Lead an' smoke from Circle J!" roared Buck Foster, and he poured a volley of lead into the oncoming half-breeds.

A few feet behind Buck appeared a third figure—a young waddy without hat or shirt, and with bandages on his neck and shoulder.

It was Earl Gadsby getting into the battle at last. It had only been by sheer force that the Circle J waddies had made him fall in with their plan. And now he was eager to do his part of the fighting.

*Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang!*  
The canyon walls echoed with the roar of six-guns.

One of the gunmen was shot out of his saddle and went crashing to earth. A second dropped a moment later. His cayuse got panicky and raced away. For a moment, the man's right foot was caught in the stirrup and held there. He was dragged for a short distance and then left behind as his boot heel came free—a limp, mangled figure, still in death.

Cliff Perron, in his Mexican garb, had ridden into the fray with the hired gunmen. But when he saw four determined men instead of one and then two of his own hired fighters put out of the battle in the first few seconds, he whirled his cayuse and tried to escape.

The next instant, a slug from Joe's gun dropped a third of Lafe Perron's hired fighters.

And that was the end.

The other three hired gunmen wanted no more fighting when they saw three of their companions lying dead on the ground, and Cliff Perron running away.

They turned and fled in haste, jabbering in Spanish and spurring

their cayuses as if a thousand devils were after them.

Buck and Joe made a quick dash for their horses which were hidden back in the brush. Billy gave a signal whistle, and Danger came trotting out to him.

The Circle J boss had one foot in Danger's stirrup, when Earl Gadsby suddenly rushed up to him and seized his arm.

"The ol' wolf himself is holed up in that gully yonder!" Gadsby told Billy, his voice throbbing with excitement. "I saw him ride in thar."

"Yuh mean Lafe Perron?" Billy asked.

Young Gadsby nodded. "Yes, Lafe Perron!"

Buck and Joe were at Billy's side.

"Let's be ridin', Billy!" the older waddy cried out. "What we waitin' fer? Ain't we goin' ter smoke up them gunnies?"

"No, we're goin' after their boss," Billy answered, and he gave a few brief instructions to his saddle pards.

Billy then swung into Danger's saddle and led the way to the place which Earl Gadsby had pointed out.

It was a small gully that cut into the cliff close to the entrance of the larger canyon.

The three Montana rannies lined up their cayuses across the mouth of the gully, and Billy West gave a sharp order.

"Yo're cornered, Lafe Perron! Come out with yore hands up! All yore hired gun hands have run away! Better give up, Lafe!"

There was a crashing in the underbrush. Then a horse and rider came out in the open.

It was old Lafe Perron, his hands raised in sign of surrender!

In the gray dawnlight, he looked very old and broken in spirit. Yet he faced his captors defiantly.

"The feud between the Perrons and the Gadsbys is over," Billy West told him sternly. "It was a foolish feud anyhow. All feuds are!"

Billy paused, as if half expecting Lafe to make some answer, but the grim-faced old rancher kept silent.

"Yuh staked yore chances on the fight ter-night between yore own gunman and Earl—"

"And yuh cheated!" Lafe Perron cut in savagely.

"No," Billy interrupted coldly. "I only made the odds fair by takin' Earl's place. He was no match fer yore gunman, and you knew it!"

Lafe Perron's only answer was a glance of savage hate, as Earl Gadsby joined the group that had him hemmed in the gully.

"This feud," Billy went on, "started over a foolish matter of four mavericks. There's been maybe fifty or a hundred men killed over that stupid old quarrel."

"I didn't start the feud," Lafe Perron reminded the Circle J boss.

A faint smile curved the corners of Billy's mouth.

"No, but yo're finishin' it!"

"What d'yuh mean?"

"We'll give yuh the four best beefs in the G-in-a-Box herd," Billy said. "Then yuh sign yore ranch over to yore daughter and pull yore freight with that white-livered son of yores who don't like the smell of gun smoke."

Old Lafe hung his head. The

cowardly character of his son, Cliff, was a sore point with him.

"But what'll the gal do with the ranch?" he asked. "She can't carry on the feud!"

Billy's smile broadened as he turned to Earl Gadsby. "You tell him, pard!" he prompted.

Earl Gadsby stammered. His face flushed red under its tan. But he finally cleared his throat and managed to speak.

"It's—it's this a way, Mr. Perron," he explained. "Yuh see, yore daughter, Sally, and I—we're plumb fond of each other. And we plan ter git married and unite the two families and end this fool feud fer good an'—"

A roar of rage and indignation, followed by a burst of blistering language from old Lafe, cut Earl Gadsby's speech short.

But Billy and the others were firm with the ranicky old he-wolf. And it wasn't more than a month later that the maverick feud of fifty years ended in just the way Earl Gadsby had said it would.

Reckon thet's jest about the first time thet Circle J has acted as matchmakers. Howsomever, it was a plumb fine match—an' a plumb fine job fer the first adventure o' the saddle pards on this year's trip ter the Southwest. The Montanans will find plenty of excitement in Arizona before spring comes. Watch fer the story o' their next adventure in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.





# Gun Fog In Sundown Gap

A "Shorty Masters" Story

By Allan R. Bosworth

Author of "Snipes on the 7D," etc.

**A** HARD-RIDDEN cayuse drummed hoofs in sudden clatter against the alkali. "Shorty" Masters, hearing the noise above the slow rumble of his wagon wheels, awoke from a half doze and jerked leather.

The "Sextet from Lucia"—so called because all six mules were offspring of a mare named Lucy—came to a halt gladly. All the morning, they had been following a dim, winding trail, snaking the three heavy wagons after them.

Now the mules scented danger.

They shot inquisitive ears toward a break in the gray-green mesquites.

The sawed-off, bow-legged waddy shifted the reins to his left hand and made ready to go for the black-butted .45 in its tied-down holster.

"Mebbe it's Willie Wetherbee," Shorty hoped aloud. "But it don't sound like Willie's Tumbleweed hoss."

The mule Skinner's cowboy pard, better known as the "Sonora Kid" than by the name of Wetherbee, should be meeting Shorty on the trail. But the rider wasn't the

Sonora Kid. He burst suddenly into view, whirled his deep-chested roan, and headed for the wagons.

The horseman was thin-faced and wiry, with black eyes shifting under the brim of a dirty Stetson. He reined in the roan with unnecessary violence, and glared at Shorty with a scowl.

"What's yore name, freighter?" he demanded suddenly.

An angry flush swept up to drown Shorty's freckles, but he kept his voice calm.

"I might ask *you* the same, stranger," he said. "But if yuh are jest itchin' to know, why, I don't mind confidin' that I'm Shorty Masters, M.D."

"M.D.?" repeated the horseman. "I'm lookin' fer a freighter, not a sawbones."

"The 'M.D.' stands fer 'Mule Driver.'"

The rider came closer, shifty eyes roving over the whole freight outfit. A snarl tinged his voice.

"Yuh'd better not git smart, Masters. I was sent out here to meet yuh and do yuh a favor. Haulin' bob wire to Brandon's place, ain't yuh?"

"Some," admitted Shorty. "What about it?"

"Jest this. I work fer an hombre that runs cattle between Brandon's Bar B spread and the Rio. We don't like bob wire, savvy? In fact, we're plumb hostile to any kind o' fence. My boss sent me out to give yuh a little friendly tip. Turn around and take the wire back to town, before we wrap it around yore neck!"

Shorty's gray eyes narrowed, and his hand hovered over the holstered six-gun. The thin-faced rider was equally ready to draw his .45.

"And if I don't turn back?" the mule Skinner asked.

"Yuh won't git past Sundown Gap, over yonder," threatened the rider, pointing to a break in the ragged hills. "That's what Ike Foss told me to tell yuh. Mebbe you've heard of Ike Foss. He's a purty bad hombre when he's riled. He's a ring-tailed panther, and—"

The horseman broke off suddenly. Shorty Masters was looking beyond him. Shorty's lips were moving as if in signal to somebody who had approached, unseen and unheard.

The rider whirled quickly, expecting to find a man behind him. Instead, there were only the silent mesquites. Then he heard Shorty's taunting laugh and turned, to look into the muzzle of the freighter's .45.

"That's one of the oldest tricks in the world, I reckon," the mule Skinner jeered. "Well, yuh can reach now, and keep reachin'. Yuh see, a sawed-off hombre like me can draw a gun mighty quick. You tall fellers have to reach too far."

The man's voice dropped to a whine. "I was jest tellin' yuh what Ike Foss said. Myself, I wasn't cravin' trouble."

Shorty waved the gun for emphasis. "All right. I heard yuh. Now listen to me. When I take a job of haulin' freight, I *haul* it. Savvy? Yuh can go back and tell Ike Foss that he may be a ring-tailed panther, but that yuh jest met a wolf with a bob-wire tail. Vamose!"

*Braang!* The freighter jerked trigger.

A heavy slug whistled a tune of sudden death in the rider's ear. He whirled the roan cayuse and took to the mesquites.

*Braang! Br-raang!* Shorty fired twice more.

Fragments of bark from a gnarled mesquite stung the horseman's face as he ducked under a limb. Then he had vanished, and there was only

the hammering of the horse's hoofs down through the hard-baked flat.

Shorty listened, with a mirthless grin. He had heard of Ike Foss, border bad man. The situation was far from being funny.

"So, we don't git past Sundown Gap, eh?" he addressed the Sextet from Lucia. "And I figured we'd hit that break in the hills along about five o'clock. Let's git movin', and pray fer Willie to show up."

He slipped fresh cartridges into the chamber of his six-gun, holstered the gun, and shook the reins over the mules. Once more, the heavy wagons rumbled forward.

They jogged and clattered over the rough trail. Shorty looked back anxiously at the middle wagon.

Besides the barbed wire for Brandon's ranch, he was hauling a load of thin crates marked "Handle with care." These were destined for Brandon's saloon in the raw range town of Tarantula, forty miles to the west of the Bar B territory.

For half an hour, the wagons crawled westward, toward the gap in the distant blue hills. Then Shorty saw a cloud of dust breezing along the trail, coming toward him. He strained his eyes upon it, and finally made out a flashy sorrel horse and a tall rider.

The freighter grinned with satisfaction. This was Willie Wetherbee, the Sonora Kid.

Trouble seemed to be Willie's middle name. His reputation for coolness in a fight, and for swift accuracy with a smoking six-gun, had spread all over the Pecos country and the Big Bend of Texas.

Wetherbee kept the sorrel Tumbleweed in an easy lope until he was alongside the mules. Then he halted and flashed a smile at his pard.

"Yuh shore must be drivin' slow," he accused. "I figured on meetin'

yuh at least four miles farther down the trail, or up there in Sundown Gap. That's where Brandon's range begins—right in the pass between the hills."

"I thought so," Shorty answered, "because there was a gent on a roan hoss who come bustin' through the chaparral to tell me that it'll be jest too bad if I try to take the wire past that gap."

The Sonora Kid's eyes narrowed. "One of Ike Foss's gang, eh? Listen, Shorty. Brandon is at the ranch, and he sent me out to tell yuh he jest has to have that bob wire to-night. I don't savvy why, but he shore seems worked up."

"Dawg-gone a man that's in two businesses at the same time!" flared Shorty. "Ride back and tell him I'm haulin' a whole waggin full of lookin'-glass fer his saloon in Tarantula. If I drive any faster on this trail, I'll shore bust them mirrors. Ask him which he'd rather have—the wire in a hurry, or the mirrors in good shape?"

## II.

Wetherbee turned the sorrel back down the trail, and Shorty resumed his snail's pace over the rough road which had been used only for herds of Bar B steers being driven to the railroad.

The wagons dipped down into the alkali flat, jolted over gullies washed by the sudden rains of early fall, and climbed toward the ragged hills.

Sundown Gap stood out boldly against the blue afternoon sky. It was well named; Shorty saw the sun dropping straight toward the split in the hills.

"Stick 'em up, Masters!"

The mule driver gasped and made a move to go for his gun. Flame spat and thunder roared from a

thick clump of cat's-claw that bordered the trail.

*Braang!*

Shorty's Stetson flew off his head, a ragged hole in its crown. He clamped his jaw shut and elevated his hands. This time, they had the drop on him.

Two men rose from the cat's-claw. Shorty recognized one as the thin-faced hombre he had sent fleeing in a hail of lead, an hour before. The other was a burly, villainous-looking man with bushy black eyebrows and thick lips. Ike Foss!

"What's the idee o' this?" Shorty demanded hotly. "What I'm haulin' ain't none o' yore business."

Foss's gun jammed into his ribs as the big man came close to the wagon. There was a snarl on his heavy face, and the bushy eyebrows crawled together.

"I ought to kill yuh, freighter!" Foss rumbled. "I come all the way down here with Pete Jarvis, jest to save yore worthless hide. Yuh didn't believe Pete. Well, yuh better believe me. Savvy? If yuh try to go past the top of the hill in Sundown Gap, you're goin' to run into a lot o' gun fog, and die with lead pizen!"

The freighter glared back at Foss. "Anybody can talk big, with a gun on the other man," he retorted. "I'm tellin' yuh what I told Jarvis—when I contract to haul a load of freight, I'm goin' to haul it!"

"Have it yore own way. Jest don't say I didn't warn yuh. I've got a whole gang, and yuh don't stand a chanet. There ain't nobody at Brandon's ranch to help yuh, either. Nobody but Brandon."

"Well, I've got some help, too," answered Shorty. When it came to slinging lead, the Sonora Kid was equal to several ordinary men. "I've got my own gang."

Foss glanced back along the trail. Under his breath, the freighter was adding "a gang o' mules." He sized up Ike Foss as being a coward at heart, and was sure the big man would never attack if the odds were not in his favor.

"Yuh cain't bluff me. Yuh ain't got nobody with yuh," the man with the gun said.

He climbed up on the hub of the front wheel, and Shorty caught the odor of whisky on his breath. Foss jerked the freighter's .45 out of its holster.

"Come on, Pete!" he called to the thin-faced man as he stepped back to the ground. "We've got some more work to do—got to see that Brandon don't git no bob wire from some other place before mornin'. Adios, mule prodder! Remember, we're camped over on the other side of Sundown Gap, and yuh'd better not try to come on through."

The two men stamped into the chaparral.

Shorty heard the creak of saddle leather as they mounted horses that had been concealed there. Then hoofs pounded off into the mesquites.

The freighter frowned and scratched his head. For the life of him, he could not figure out the mystery attached to the delivery of barbed wire to the Bar B.

Wetherbee had said Brandon was insistent on getting it; Foss seemed equally determined that it should not be unloaded on the ranch.

"I give up!" Shorty told himself finally. "Looks to me like a lot o' bull-headed nonsense. The wire could be delivered to-morrer jest as well. But no hombre is goin' to tell me and my mules that we cain't drive onto another hombre's property with a load of freight fer him. Giddap, Tschaikowsky!"

The mules, all named for famous composers, took up the trace-chain slack once more. Shorty glanced at the lowering sun. He'd have to travel faster if he made the Bar B by nightfall. And now he was unarmed. He wouldn't stand a chance with Foss's gang unless the Sonora Kid returned. Then it would be one gun against a dozen, perhaps.

There was a tinkling crash behind him as the wagons lurched into a gully that was rougher than it looked. Shorty muttered an exclamation of dismay, and wrapped the reins around the brake handle while he climbed back to the middle wagon for an inspection.

"Jest like I thought," he said. "They didn't pack these mirrors any too well. I've shore busted one—and I reckon they cost a lot."

He ripped open the crate that had slipped. The rays of the sun fell on the mirror and reflected squarely into his eyes. He winced and turned around, for the moment blinded.

Down the trail ahead of him, two horsemen were coming in a hurry. Shorty squinted at them, remembering his empty holster.

"Who's comin'?" he shouted. "Stand back, there, both of yuh!"

"What's the matter, Shorty? Yuh gone loco?"

The freighter grinned as his eyes cleared. He knew that voice, and now he could see again.

It was the Sonora Kid, and with him was Jerry Brandon. The Bar B owner—a heavy-set, square-shouldered man of middle age—wore a worried frown.

"I got a flash from this here lookin'-glass—right in my eyes," Shorty explained. "Couldn't see who yuh was. And I jest had another visit, a minute ago. Ike Foss hisself, with the same hombre that dropped in on me, a while back."

"Shorty, I've got to have that bob wire—pronto!" the ranchman announced. "Yuh've got to whip up yore mules and make some time."

The freighter jerked a thumb toward the broken crate. "I've busted one glass on this here road," he protested. "If I drive any faster, the whole shebang is goin' to run the risk of bein' busted."

"Never mind!" Brandon gestured impatiently. "I'll stand the loss. I can buy more mirrors to put behind the bar and take the place of the ones Foss's gang shot up when they raided the place, the other night. But if I don't have some bob wire strung over part of the Bar B boundary before mornin', I lose my lease."

Shorty stared. "Yuh mean——"

"I mean that I've been so busy tryin' to run that dang saloon and the ranch, too, that I dawg-goned near lost the ranch. It's leased, and accordin' to the lease, I've got to fence it. This was the last day. In the mornin', the owner is goin' to ride down here. And if there ain't no wire up, I lose the range. The owner is plumb anxious to have the lease contract busted, anyway, because Foss has offered more dinero. Now d'ye savvy? Let's git goin'!"

Shorty leaped to the ground and ran to the front wagon. He understood Brandon's hurry now. He clambered to the seat, grabbed his long black-snake whip, and cracked it within an inch of the flattened ears of Chopin and Mozart, the lead mules.

"Giddap!" he shouted. "Brandon, I see yuh've got two guns. Let me borry one of 'em. Foss says we don't go past Sundown Gap, and I've got a hunch we're goin' to run into plenty trouble in the hills."

The Bar B owner rode near and handed over a .45.

Shorty jammed it into his holster. Another thunderous crack of the whip over the Sextet sent them from a lumbering trot to a back-humping, harness-slinging gallop.

"Ike Foss sent word that he was a ring-tailed panther," Shorty called to Willie Wetherbee, who rode on one side of the team and scanned the chaparral. "Furthermore, he was goin' to wrap the bob wire around my neck if I kept goin' with it."

"What did yuh tell him?" asked the Sonora Kid.

"Yuh know the old song?" answered Shorty. "The one that goes like this:

"Whoop! I'm a wolf.  
Whoop! I'm a whale.  
Whoop! I'm a wolf  
With a bob-wire tail."

### III.

The Sextet from Lucia dropped into a trot as they climbed into Sundown Gap.

Shorty Masters, the floppy brim of his Stetson pulled low to shade his eyes against the glare, motioned for the Sonora Kid and Brandon to fall behind the wagons.

Ike Foss's men would be watching to see if the freighter dared cross that boundary that marked Bar B range. And Shorty had no doubt that they would rush him with blazing guns.

"Odds are against us in more'n one way," he muttered grimly as he squinted through the narrow pass. "Jest like generals always try to maneuver fer a position with the sun at their backs. Shucks! We couldn't see how to shoot. Mebbe we ought to wait till after the sun goes down."

*Zzzzit!* That was a rifle bullet.

It dropped short in a manner that showed it had been fired from a great

distance, kicked up a puff of white alkali dust, and fell spent under the wagons.

*Crack!* The distance-dulled shot came dimly to his ears above the clatter of harness and the thud of hoofs.

Shorty suddenly pulled rein.

"That was jest a warnin'," he announced aloud. "How far are we from the range line where yore pasture begins?"

Brandon pointed to a small pile of rocks on the right side of Sundown Gap.

"That's the property line—straight across the pass from them rocks," he said. "What yuh stoppin' for? Let 'em come! We ain't afraid of 'em."

Shorty snorted. "I should say not. But I've got an idea. We've got to use some strategy. How many hombres yuh figure Foss has got in his bunch?"

"About a dozen, I reckon."

"All right. Pile off yore hosses, both of yuh, and do like I tell yuh! We'll stop right here, short of yore range line, till we're ready. Then, when we move, we'll move across the line real fast and stop. I'll show yuh what we ought to do."

The Sonora Kid and the Bar B owner climbed to the ground and looked at Shorty, with puzzled frowns. The mule skinner stepped to higher ground at one side of the pass and looked at the hill.

"There's some mesquite on each side," he grunted with satisfaction. "The scheme will work purty slick. Let's see, now. We'll need about a hundred yards of bob wire!"

He went back to the rear of the wagons, where the Sonora Kid and Brandon were still concealed from the view of Foss's gang. There was a spool of the spiked wire handy, and Shorty had wire cutters.

"Willie, you take one end o' this wire and go sneakin' over on the right. Brandon, take the other end and go over to the left. Move down the hill till yuh are a hundred yards or so on yore land. Savvy? Then find a tree where yuh can string the wire real quick. And have yore guns ready."

From the second wagon, Shorty dragged three of the flat crates containing the big mirrors that were meant for the wall behind Bob Brandon's bar. He ripped the crates open, carried one mirror at a time down the road and into Bar B territory, and leaned them against boulders, faces toward the rock.

*Zzzzit! Crack!*

Foss's men meant business with that shot. From their concealed position down in the mesquites of the flat, they could see the piles of rock that marked the range line, and they knew the freighter was on Bar B property.

The bullet glanced off a boulder. Shorty knew from the interval between its arrival and the noise of the gun that the gang was a half mile away.

"Reckon we're ready to start," he told his two companions. "Now, when I give the yell, hoist that bob wire about neck-high to a man on a hoss, cinch it to a couple o' trees, and start slingin' lead. I'll take care o' the rest."

The Sonora Kid shook his head. "I ain't lettin' yuh stay here in the middle o' the road where they'll shoot yuh down," he protested.

"Take the wire, and do like I tell yuh!" Shorty grinned. "They won't be shootin' very straight. I'll see to that. Go on, before they start rushin' in us!"

The tall waddy and the ranch owner looked to the six-guns in their holsters, seized the ends of the

barbed wire, and scrambled into the brush and rocks of the hillsides.

Shorty went back to his mules. All was quiet in the dusty mesquites of the flat below. Ike Foss was waiting for his next move.

"That hombre ain't no ring-tailed panther," Shorty told himself. "He's a yaller skunk. He's shore hopin' I won't come across the line and call his bluff. Well, we'll show him, mules!"

He watched the strand of wire. The slack went out of it as it writhed and stretched toward the hills, whipping little swirls of dust from the road and dragging down across the Bar B line. The Sonora Kid lifted his end over the pile of rocks that marked the range, and moved on into the brush.

Shorty took the reins off the brake handle, and the mules walked slowly down the slant. Now they reached the pasture boundary—crossed it and—

*Braang!* Somebody down in Ike Foss's camp fired a signal.

Dust boiled up from the mesquites; yells floated faintly to Shorty's ears. The gang was in the saddle!

They came streaking into the trail, out of the dusty chaparral. Shorty counted swiftly. One—four—seven—nine—

"Thirteen of 'em!" grunted the mule skinner. "Well, that's shore goin' to be unlucky fer somebody."

The wagons were across the boundary, now. Fifty yards ahead of the lead mules, the barbed wire lay across the road, almost hidden in the dust. Foss and his men would never see it. Foss and his men thought they were charging a lone, unarmed mule driver.

*Braang! Braang!*

"Yip-eee! Kill the mule prod-  
der!"

Shots rang out. The yells grew clearer. Thirteen horses drummed the hard road with stabbing hoofs.

Shorty jerked his hat down farther over his eyes and loosened the .45 in his tied-down holster.

Quarter of a mile away, now.

The sawed-off mule Skinner lifted one of the big mirrors and lugged it over to the center of the road. He turned the other two around, leaning them against the boulders so that they faced the road at an angle.

For an instant, he looked at himself in a glass that was taller than he.

"Yuh look kind o' pale around the gills," he muttered. "But yuh ain't runnin' out—savvy?"

*Braang! Braang! Br-raang!*

Lead spurted dust at his feet. He leaped to the shelter of a huge rock. The mirror in the middle of the road was lying flat, with lead spattering dangerously near it.

Two hundred yards now.

Shorty stared in amazement as he watched the charge, every muscle tense.

Some of the outlaws swayed in their saddles as they rode, yelling like madmen. They had taken too much of the liquor they carried away when they robbed Brandon's saloon, the freighter decided. That was liquid courage; it might not last.

*Braang!* He fired once as they came within range.

A horse went down, screaming, rolling over a rider who struggled frantically in a futile attempt to get clear. Shorty had hit the horse by accident.

*Braang! Braang!*

Shorty leaped to the center of the road. A bullet nicked at his jumper sleeve as he stooped over. He lifted the mirror, and saw the big flash of reflected sunlight dart down the road.

#### IV.

The little freighter swung the mirror from left to right, up and down. Across the faces of the line of advancing men the ray of light shot, dazzling their eyes, blinding them for a few seconds—just as if they had looked squarely into the setting sun.

"Let 'er go!" yelled Shorty.

The wire whipped up from the road, glistening bright and new in the sunlight and in the beam from the mirror.

*Br-raang! Boom! Crash!*

A heavy .45 slug shattered the glass, boring a round hole with tiny cracks running from it. The bullet went between Shorty's bowed legs, and the shock took the mirror out of his hands. There was another tinkling crash as it fell and broke on the ground.

*Braang!* The freighter jerked his .45 from its holster and triggered.

"That's more bad luck fer somebody," he muttered. "And there it is!"

Yells of surprise and pain came from the lips of the line of riders. Shorty saw a half dozen of them go down in a heap as the barbed wire stretched taut and caught them at their necks.

*Braang! Br-room! Bang!*

Now a storm of lead poured in from two sides as the Sonora Kid and Bob Brandon turned flaming six-guns on the crowd of outlaws. Riderless horses plunged on under the wire and clattered past the freight wagons.

*Braang!*

Shorty leaped to one side, intending to seize one of the remaining mirrors and blind the attackers again. But two outlaws ducked under the wire and charged him as he stood beside the tall glass.

The freighter whipped up his gun and let it roar. He himself was half blinded by the sun, and the shot was not true.

It struck a burly man in his left shoulder and spun him out of his saddle into the dirt. He was up again in a flash, roaring like a mad bull as he charged. It was Ike Foss.

*Braang! Braang!*

Shorty's gun clicked on an empty shell, after the shot that brought down the other rider. Foss was coming on, staggering, lurching forward behind a flaming gun, dazed by the fall and unsteady with stolen liquor.

The freighter leaped behind the boulder that supported the mirror, snatching cartridges from his belt as he ran. He had to have time to reload. Other outlaws were down now, but they were scrambling to their feet, yelling with pain from the barbs that gashed their chests and throats.

*Braang! Boom!*

The Sonora Kid and Brandon closed in from the opposite sides of the road, pouring hot lead into the unhorsed men.

Shorty had no time to see the effect of their bullets. His hands were full.

"Yuh yeller coyote!" shrieked Foss. "I'll git yuh! I'll git yuh!"

His gun came up. He fired, his face distorted in a mask of fury and pain.

*Braang!*

Glass showered over the boulder.

Foss fired again as Shorty leaped out into the open, his gun ready once more.

The big man paid no attention to him. He was blazing away again—at his own reflection in the mirror!

Shorty gasped with surprise as he took in the situation. Then, choking back an impulse to laugh, he sprang toward the dazed, lurching outlaw

and brought down the barrel of the heavy .45 behind Foss's ear.

The big man slumped to the ground, as limp as a half-emptied feed sack. Shorty whirled, ready to meet a new attack in the mouth of the pass. But the outlaw guns were silent, and only moans of pain broke the quiet of Sundown Gap.

Four men had their hands in the air; the others were unable to rise. Willie Wetherbee and Bob Brandon slid down the rocky slant, guns on the surrendering men. The breeze whipped away fog from smoking guns, and the battle was over.

Ike Foss stirred and tried to rise. Shorty kicked the gun out of his limp fingers.

"Yuh shore had a swell time shootin' at yoreself," the freighter jeered. "And all that wire yuh was goin' to wrap around my neck—yuh got it in yore own neck."

Foss was silent, rubbing the bruise behind his ear. Brandon and the Sonora Kid herded the prisoners toward the wagons.

"That was shore a smart trick, Shorty," drawled Willie. "I reckon we will still have time to help Brandon string a little wire to-night so's he can meet the terms of his lease."

"He won't have to," Shorty retorted. "The wire is already strung. Yuh can ask any of these hombres that stuck their chins over it. But there is plenty mirrors busted, and it shore meant bad luck fer the ring-tailed panther and his gang."

When yuh see three freight wagons in the Big Bend country o' the Rio, it's plumb apt ter be Shorty Masters an' his musical mules. An' what mules! An' what a mule skinner! They make a combination any high-toned music composer kin be proud ter have his name tied ter. Watch fer 'em ter be back pronto in another thrillin' story in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



# Bitter Creek Ablaze

By Philip F. Deere

Author of "The Bitter Creek Rodeo," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

TEX CARNOCIEN, FOREST RANGER.

**L**ONG-HAIRED old "Hassayamp" Crowfoot reeled in his saddle, grabbed frantically at the horn, and hung on for dear life, as his slat-ribbed gray brone started up the steep, wooded slope. He peered groggily through the thick tree branches up at the distant ranger station on Sabre Peak.

"I got to make it," he muttered thickly, running his tongue over bruised and lacerated lips. "If I fall off my hoss, I'll lay here and die, afore they'd ever find me. Giddap, Coyote-bait! Giddap, old brone!"

Hassayamp's gray head, battered and crimson-stained, rolled helplessly on his shoulders. Slumping

forward, he again almost fell off his cayuse, as the range-hardened cow pony struggled up a steep turn in the mountain trail.

Beaten almost to a pulp by rowdies at Harrigan's Hawk Nest dive, old Hassayamp was in a bad way. His features were swollen almost beyond recognition. His nose, broken by a blow from a rifle butt, made a twisted, red blob on his face. Two teeth were missing, kicked out by heavy hobnailed shoes.

The long, silvery hair of the old plainsman, torn out of his head in spots by cruel hands, flowed down over a slashed and discolored fringed deerskin shirt.

Gulping cold, biting air into his lungs, the old scout fought off the sickening weakness and once more

lifted his eyes to the ranger-station buildings.

Hassayamp felt his strength going, and knew he could not fight it off much longer. It was torture to be able to see a place of safety so close, and yet so far out of his reach. It would take two hours toiling ride along this steep, winding trail to get even within shouting distance of the lookout post. Hassayamp knew he would never make it.

The washboard-ribbed gray horse entered a dense growth of spruce and fir, blotting out the sight of the forest-service buildings. The zigzag path skirted the rim of a hundred-foot precipice and crossed a perilous natural stone bridge before Hassayamp again caught sight of the ranger station.

Even his faded, bleary, bloodshot eyes could make out the scene of activity up there where his young friend, "Tex" Carnochen of the Curlicue S, was ranger in charge. Hassayamp reflected bitterly that the gay festivities would probably make them forget him. Before they even thought to look for him, he would die of exposure or be killed by prowling wolves.

Rigs and saddled horses lined the hitch racks of the forest-service post, and more kept arriving from the towns of Navajo and Junction City. The broad porch and the pine-shaded yard were crowded with moving men and women.

The Bitter Creek Ranger Station was to be dedicated by a wedding—an affair that marked the ending of the murderous Holmes-Carnochen feud and the uniting of the two most powerful families in the whole region. Tex Carnochen was marrying Eleanor Holmes.

Hassayamp's body sank lower and lower in his saddle. The skinny gray mustang stood on the top of the

ridge, head hanging down, foam-flecked barrel heaving. Then it slowly began the descent into a rocky gorge below.

As the cayuse's steel-shod hoofs slid and slipped on greasy soapstone, old Hassayamp Crowfoot slid forward on the gray's neck, seemed to cling there for a moment, and then fell unconscious in a service-berry clump.

In the big living room of the Bitter Creek Ranger Station, a young man and a girl stood beside a window, looking out over the jumbled wilderness of jagged ridges and criss-crossing canyons of Bitter Creek National Forest.

The curly-haired, bronzed, khaki-clad young hombre was Tex Carnochen, the first ranger to be appointed in the newly created forest reserve. The golden-haired, blue-eyed girl in bridal veil and pure white wedding clothes was Eleanor Holmes.

"Oh, Tex, this is grand," said Eleanor, glancing around the home-like room with its massive beamed ceiling, bearskin rugs on the floor, fireplace almost big enough to take a whole tree, hunting trophies, deer antlers, and guns on the wall.

A stuffed mountain lion crouched in one corner. A big rough-hewn table was piled high with books. A row of windows opened out on a panorama of craggy forested slopes, mottled gray rim rock, towering cliffs, and cloistered aisles of cool, green trees.

"It's sure a dandy home to bring a bride to," admitted Tex. "It was lucky I got the appointment to this ranger's job. Why don't the parson come? I'd like to git this weddin' over with."

"Old Hassayamp Crowfoot's not

here," said Eleanor. "He promised me he'd come."

Their talk was interrupted by the appearance of the preacher, followed by the guests. Tex and Eleanor stood up together. The parson approached them, Bible in hand. Suddenly there was an interruption.

A man appeared on the stairway, that led up to the glass lookout cage, on the roof of the building.

"Tex!" he yelled. "Somethin's happened to old Hassayamp! I jist spotted him with my field glasses. He fell offn his hoss, and he's layin' still beside the road."

"Don't bother me!" growled Tex. "I'm bein' married!"

"But I ain't told yuh all," insisted the forest-service lookout. "My glasses brung Hassayamp up so close I could see his face. He was in a turrible shape, bare head, face all battered and stained and his deer-skin clothes ripped half offn him. Looks like murder."

"Go back to yore post," said Tex curtly. "I'll send a guard to git Hassayamp. I ain't lettin' nothin' interfere with my weddin'. It's been put off too many times fer me to take any chances now."

"But, Tex," cried Eleanor, "if Hassayamp is dying, we've got to go to him. He likes both of us. He's been almost like a father to us. It won't take long."

Wedding guests jumped to their feet in excitement, as Eleanor drew away from Tex's side and turned her back on the minister.

"Dad, I want to go to Hassayamp's side at once!" she burst out, addressing a short, stocky, freckle-faced old cattleman, "Ringy" Holmes, owner of the Skillet Ranch.

Ringy's freckles seemed to get bigger and redder as he stamped over to his daughter at a bowlegged, pigeon-toed gait.

"But you cain't stop the weddin'," he grumbled. "The preacher's ready and all the folks are waitin'!"

"Let the gal have her way," came in a hoarse croak from old Clem Carnochen, Tex's father and owner of the Curlicue S.

Pain-racked and bullet-riddled from feud wars with the Holmes clan, gray-haired Clem Carnochen was a living dead man. Even his voice had been almost destroyed by a bullet that had pierced his throat.

Livid scars marred his face. Both his legs had been paralyzed by gunfire, so that he could not walk, but had to crawl around on crutches and be lifted into the saddle of his horse. Yet the old fire of a dare-devil spirit still burned in his hollow eyes.

The wedding party broke up in confusion. Tex saw that the only way out was to yield, and he was soon on the trail with Eleanor and a dozen riders, including Doc Amundson.

They found Hassayamp unconscious where he had fallen. Doc Amundson examined the old plainsman and shook his head.

"Bad!" he growled. "Very bad! Looks like a fracture of the skull, a broken nose, and severe shock. We got to git him to the house, as fast as we can."

Tex and Eleanor rode on each side of the beloved old pioneer trailblazer all the way back to the ranger station. The guests were all gathered in the yard, friends and relatives of both families, including Sheriff Milt Andrews.

Tex waited until Hassayamp had been put to bed, before he went out on the wide veranda and called all the crowd to assemble again.

"Friends, a serious crime has been done," said Tex. "It's on Federal property and as the ranger in charge I got to handle it. I'll run down the

skunks that beat Hassayamp and make 'em pay fer it. But first I figger to be married. The weddin's got to go on; I've waited fer it too long, to risk any more delays."

Again the lookout in the glass house interrupted Tex.

"Big gang of riders comin', headed fer the ranger station!" shouted the fire lookout. "They're all armed with rifles and six-guns! Looks like trouble!"

## CHAPTER II.

### "BUZZ-SAW" KITZMILLER.

TEX tried to stop the rush that followed the forest guard's announcement. But no one paid any heed to his shouts. The Skillet and Curlicue S cowboys, once the bitterest enemies, joined in the rush out onto the road, up which the armed intruders were coming.

"Dang the luck!" growled Tex. "Why did all this have to happen on my weddin' day?"

He heard the *thump-thump* of crutches behind him and turned to see his crippled old dad buckling a gunbelt around his waist.

"If them fellers is lookin' fer trouble, we'll give it to 'em," cried Clem in his croaking voice. "Mebbe I have got one foot in the grave, but there ain't nothin' wrong with my gun hand or my eye, neither."

"You rip-roarin' old fire eater," chuckled Tex, throwing an arm around his dad's shoulder. "You'll never be satisfied in heaven. It'll be too blamed peaceful fer yuh. Fergit yore guns. This is a U. S. forest reserve, and I'm a Federal officer. I cain't go slingin' lead like I used to. I got to give these trouble-makers, that's comin', chin music instead of a six-gun song."

On the sloping road below the ranger station appeared a motley crew of fully twenty noisy men.

Rifles bristled as they came riding up and halted a short distance from the Curlicue S and Skillet waddies.

A huge black-bearded man in lumber jacket and hobnailed boots spurred in front of the others and lifted a big arm for attention.

"Name's Buzz-saw Kitzmiller," shouted the newcomer, "of the Kitzmiller Lumber Co. These other fellers all live in the forest here, too. We want ter see the ranger in charge!"

Inwardly fuming with impatience and growing anger, Tex Carnochen stepped forward to face "Buzz-saw" Kitzmiller and his followers.

"I'm the Bitter Creek forest ranger!" snapped Tex. "What do you want?"

"I want to know why you sent these armed cowboys out to meet us?" roared Buzz-saw. "Are yuh scairt of us mountain folks?"

A rumble of approval, bursting from the intruders' throats, indorsed Buzz-saw's hostile attitude. Rifles were brandished and Buzz-saw's followers muttered threats.

Unarmed, Tex confronted the angry mob, standing tall and straight in his ranger's uniform with his hard-hewn jaw and sharply chiseled face grimly set.

He knew a good many of these men, knew that they had fought bitterly against establishment of the forest reserve, because it interfered with their privileges. Long-whiskered old trappers, buckskin-clad hunters, sawmill men, and timber workers, sheepmen, and miners, still grimy from their grubbing in the earth, cowboys, cattlemen, and an assortment of riffraff river rats made up the crowd.

"I'm not scairt of yuh," said Tex curtly, "and these ain't gunmen gathered here to stop yuh. They're

folks that come here fer my weddin', which yo're interruptin'."

"Well, if yuh ain't scairt, send yore gunmen away!" shrilled a grizzled old prospector. "If the users of the Bitter Creek forest cain't come and talk business with the ranger in charge, without bein' threatened by murderin' cowboys, then it's time we all sent in a complaint to the government at Washington!"

Tex felt himself getting madder and madder, but he kept his temper. As an officer of the government, he could not handle the situation in rough-and-ready Western style.

"I'm askin' you folks all to go in the house," he said, turning to the Curlicue S and Skillet punchers. "These gents seem to have some fault to find with the ranger service, and I'm bound by my oath of office to listen to 'em. Sheriff Andrews, will you and Ringy and dad herd yore rip-roarers back inside the fence, so's as not to scare the wits out o' my visitors."

There was much grumbling among the hot-heads, but finally Tex's guests were induced to go in the house, leaving the cowboy alone with the disgruntled trouble-makers.

"Now, Mr. Buzz-saw Kitzmiller," said Tex, "tell me what yuh want and make it fast. As I said before, yo're holdin' up my weddin'."

"Ain't yuh invitin' us in?" demanded the black-bearded lumberman. "Accordin' to the law, yo're sent here to perfect the interests of the users of this forest. If we cain't go inter the ranger station and set down and talk business, there's somethin' mighty wrong. We ain't goin' to stand out here in the blazin' sun, in the middle of the road, to suit no feller in a fancy uniform."

A rousing cheer from the crowd approved Buzz-saw's words. They

all surged forward and surrounded Tex Carnochen, each one trying to talk at once.

"All right!" yelled Tex, to make himself heard above the deafening din. "Come on inter the station. It's the people's property. I cain't stop yuh. Come inside and sit down on the porch."

Grinning triumphantly, the intruders rode into the yard of the ranger station, hopped off their broncs and lined up on the porch. Tex saw Eleanor looking out of a doorway with an anxious expression on her face, and he went over to reassure her.

"Don't worry, honey," he said, "they ain't goin' to do no harm. It's jist a delegation that's come up here to crab against the government, and I got to listen to 'em, accordin' to law. I'll git shet of 'em as quick as I kin, and then we'll be married. There cain't nothin' stop us, honey, now that we're this close."

For the third time that day the lookout came running down from his glass house, all burned up with excitement.

"There's another gang comin'!" he yipped. "I jist spotted 'em ridin' up out o' Graveyard Canyon, from the direction of Hawk Nest. They'll be here any minute."

Black-bearded Buzz-saw Kitzmiller jumped to his feet.

"Did I hear you say them fellers was comin' from Hawk Nest?" he demanded. "Then it's Hoptoad Harrigan and his blackguards. They've heard why we come up here, and they're goin' to make trouble. That Hawk Nest resort that Hoptoad runs is a den of thieves. We want yuh to run Hoptoad out o' the National Forest. That's one of the big reasons why we had to see you pronto."

## CHAPTER III.

FIRE!

WHIPPING out two guns, Buzz-saw Kitzmiller backed up against the thick log wall of the ranger station, at the far end of the porch. It was a signal for his followers to jump to their feet and take up fighting positions.

Inside the house, Tex heard the frightened exclamations of the women, as another body of gun-slingers suddenly appeared above the volcano rim, galloping straight toward the government buildings.

The leader of this new band wore a high silk hat, a fancy silk vest, crossed by an enormous gold watch chain, a swallow-tail coat and black trousers, the bottoms of which were thrust into expensive calfskin boots.

Beneath the folds of his flowing coat, a gun belt was cinched around his waist. The shining pearl handles of twin six-guns protruded from the holsters. This was "Hoptoad" Harrigan.

Hoptoad's thin lips were drawn back from protruding buckteeth in a wolfish grin, as he caught sight of Ranger Tex Carnochen standing on the steps. One glance Tex gave the approaching riders, and then he turned on Buzz-saw Kitzmiller.

"Put up that gun!" he ordered angrily. "There'll be no fightin' here. There's womenfolks inside. Holster them weepons, I tell yuh, or I'll have my cowboy friends open fire on yuh!"

"But Hoptoad's comin' to git us," blurted the black-bearded lumberman: "We got to keep the drop on him. Look at them tough hombres he's got with him."

With a lightning-quick movement, Tex knocked both of Buzz-saw's guns out of his hands and scooped them up.

"Now listen to me, you salty gents!" he rapped out. "All of yuh know that I'm a crack shot. If them hoglegs ain't back in yore holsters at the count of five, I'll start shootin' 'em out of yore hands. I'm sworn to uphold the peace in this forest, and by jing, I'm goin' to do it. One—two—three—"

At the count of three most of the gunmen had their Colts back in their pouches. As a result of his fighting in the Holmes-Carnochen feud, Tex was already a famous gun fighter. One man alone defied Tex.

He was a swarthy-faced, pock-marked half-breed, who stood at the far end of the porch, drawn six-gun pointing at Tex.

At the count of five, Tex's right-hand .45 jerked from a terrific explosion. The cholo's gun was smashed from his hand and fell to the floor. With a low groan the swarthy hombre doubled up, hugging his wrenching fingers.

Tex heard a scream from the doorway and turned to meet Eleanor Holmes, who flew to his arms.

"Are you hurt?" she burst out. "Are you all right?"

Skillet and Curlicue S cowboys followed Eleanor out onto the porch, smoke-poles in hand. Bullet-shattered old Clem Carnochen came thumping out on his crutches with the others.

"What's comin' off here?" he demanded, in his hoarse, croaking voice. "Listen, you woolly-haired rannihans! Don't forgit that this ranger's my son, and that he's got every gunny on the Curlicue S backin' him up. If yo're lookin' fer trouble, you've come to the right place."

"Yo're danged tootin'!" put in Ringy Holmes. "What Clem said goes fer the Skillet cowboys, too. Better think twice afore yuh bite off

more'n yuh kin chaw, else you mossbacks will git some of the mistletoe shot outn yore hair."

Buzz-saw's ruddy face glowed an angry red.

"Who's callin' us mossbacks?" he demanded. "Jist cause we're mountaineers, ain't no sign we're goin' to let a bunch of cow-nursin' plainsmen pull no shenanigans on us."

"Shet up, all of yuh!" bellowed Tex Carnochen. "Dad, Ringy, both of yuh! Go inside and take them fire eaters along with yuh. This ain't yore battle. I'm a lawman now. As ramrod of the Bitter Creek Forest, I got to stand alone, on my own laigs. Take Eleanor and the other womenfolks inside. Here comes that Hoptoad Harrigan. If there is trouble, we don't want any of the girls to git hurt."

Amid much chattering and excitement, Tex finally got his friends to reënter the ranger station. The situation was a ticklish one. It was perfectly evident that Buzz-saw Kitzmiller's men were scared of Hoptoad Harrigan's rowdies.

A dead silence settled over the gathering, as Tex stepped down off the porch to meet the silk-hatted Hoptoad, proprietor of the Hawk Nest, a mountain inn. Some of Harrigan's men were brandishing rifles, but the dude-dressed boss himself was empty-handed when he dismounted in front of Tex.

"I want to see the ranger in charge!" shouted Hoptoad, in a high-pitched squeaky voice. "Are you him, kid?"

"I'm him, and I ain't no kid," said Tex coldly. "Tex Carnochen is the name, Mr. Carnochen to them that ain't my friends."

Hoptoad's colorless lips peeled back farther from gleaming buck-teeth, as he advanced on Tex at the twitching, hopping gait that had

earned him his moniker. Harrigan was as fidgety as a Mexican jumping bean, and kept batting his eyes and twisting his neck. Even when he tried to stand still, he would take a nervous little hopping step at intervals.

"So it's Mr. Carnochen?" he sneered. "A high-and-mighty government man, feedin' offn the taxpayers' money. Well, listen to me, you young puppy! Mebbe I ain't a big politician in government pay, but I know my rights, and I'm strong enough to back 'em up."

With a wave of his hand, Hoptoad indicated his armed riders, who had lined up behind him without dismounting. They were a hard-looking, bristly-bearded crew.

They were the gamblers and the touts, the barflies and the outlaw friends who made their headquarters at Harrigan's mountain resort in Graveyard Canyon.

"You don't have to threaten me, Harrigan!" snapped Tex. "And anyway, I ain't easy scairt. If yuh got real cause fer complaint, I'll help yuh. If yuh ain't, I'll tell yuh cold turkey. What do yuh want here?"

"I'm a business man, and I got some big leases in this forest," said Harrigan. "I run a big hotel at Hawk Nest. I got a bunch of mining claims and my sheep cover the Trinidad side of Marcom's Ridge clear to the State line. You got a fat chance of kickin' me out."

For long minutes, Tex merely stared at the fidgety hombre in the fancy gambler's clothes. Hoptoad's cunning little eyes were gleaming with a strange light of triumphant hatred. His talon fingers, hooked in a belt just above his guns, clenched and unclenched as if in feverish eagerness to grab the deadly .45s.

Danger signals, flying in Tex's brain, kept whispering: "It's a

trick! It's a trick! Watch him!" From his long experience as a gun fighter, he read sign that told him this jumpy jigger was only awaiting a chance to go into action.

Tex was unarmed. He had given Buzz-saw Kitzmiller back his guns and now faced Hop-toad Harrigan's lead-slingers without a weapon.

"Who said anythin' about kickin' you out, Harrigan?" drawled the young forest ranger.

"What's Buzz-saw Kitzmiller and his men doin' here?" countered Hop-toad. "Him and the other lumbermen have been fightin' me for a long time. They want my grazing leases for timber. But they ain't goin' to get 'em."

Slouching there easily in front of the hulking Hop-toad, Tex pretended to be entirely unaware of the danger. In reality his steel-muscled body was tensed and ready to act.

His keen, gray eyes caught the downward movement of Hop-toad's hands, and he dived for the silk-hatted gunman, knocking him to the ground.

Up on the porch he heard a gun crack and then an ear-deafening blast of shots broke the evening quiet of the mountaintop.

Sprawling in a heap on top of Hop-toad, Tex grabbed both of his arms and tried to pinion them to the ground. The bucktoothed hombre had his guns out, but could not use them because of Tex's steely grip on his wrists.

One of Hop-toad's wildly flailing boots, kicked Tex in the back, throwing him off balance and causing him to loosen his hold on Harrigan's right wrist. Instantly Hop-toad's gun barrel smashed against the side of Tex's head, stunning him.

Blinded and dizzy from the blow, Tex fell heavily to one side. With

a yell of triumph, Hop-toad leaped to his feet.

Through a red haze, Tex saw his foe about to get away, and he made a desperate grab for a spurred boot. His grip closed around spur danglers, tripping Harrigan up, and sending him sprawling again.

All about them a fierce battle was in progress. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw spurts of smoke coming from the windows of the big log house, and knew that some of his hot-headed friends were joining in the fray.

As Hop-toad Harrigan fell forward on his face, Tex managed to grab him again and hang on to both gun hands. They were on a steep slope that had been cleared of brush and trees. Down this incline they rolled, fighting and kicking.

Hop-toad's guns were gone. His big silk hat had been smashed early in the fight. His fancy silk vest was ripped in shreds and one tail was gone from his frock coat.

Tex felt a jar as they crashed against a tree trunk. It loosened his hold on the bucktoothed hombre. Instantly both men were on their feet, slugging toe to toe. Hop-toad was quick and active in spite of his size. His fists smashed into Tex's mouth, knocking the cowboy to his knees.

Thinking he had the young ranger groggy, Hop-toad leaped in, leaving himself wide open for the whizzing uppercut that Tex pulled from his boot heels.

Knuckles crunched against bone. The sickening blow jerked Hop-toad's head back and flattened him to the ground, completely out.

Wiping red spume from his lips, Tex turned away and staggered up the slope toward the ranger station. The place in which he had taken so much pride looked like a wreck. The

glass-inclosed lookout house was a shattered ruin. Every pane had been broken. The firing had died away completely, but the shouts that he heard, coming from the station told him that trouble was not over.

"Fire!" some one shouted. "Git the buckets! The ranger station's on fire!"

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### ONE DEAD HALF-BREED.

**S**MOKE curling up through the shingle roof of the tinder-dry building, quickly developed into shooting streaks of orange flame, glowing weirdly against the darkening sky of falling dusk.

The screams of frightened women were mingling with the hoarse cries of angry, excited men, as Tex raced up to find the guests pouring out of the place in confusion. Two cowboys were carrying out a cot on which lay old Hassayamp Crowfoot, still unconscious. Other men, led by the forest guards stationed at the place, were running with buckets and ladders to extinguish the fire.

The bodies of three men, sprawled on the ground around the house were mute reminders of the fierce battle that had been staged between the forces of Hoptoad Harrigan and Buzz-saw Kitzmiller.

"Where's Eleanor?" cried Tex. "Is she safe? Have you cleared everybody out of the building?"

"All's clear!" Ringy Holmes shouted back at him. "One of them fiends set this fire. Let's git our hosses and go after 'em! Run 'em all down and make 'em pay for this!"

Old Clem Carnochen came galloping up, followed by a number of Curlique S cowboys.

"We're ready, Tex!" he croaked.

"We'll make this forest too hot for them coyotes. Yo're the boss here! Jist tell us what to do, and we'll do it!"

"I knocked Hoptoad Harrigan out!" answered Tex. "Left him down the slope there a ways. You boys ride down and git him. I'll saddle my hoss!"

"Here's your horse!" cried a girlish voice. Tex looked up to see Eleanor Holmes on her pinto, leading his claybank. "I hate to see you fight, Tex, but I know you've got to do something about this. They started that fight deliberately. I'm sure of it."

Swinging aboard his claybank, Tex galloped through the crowd of screaming women and shouting men over to the big tank wagon that supplied water for this ranger station. Located on the highest peak in the whole forest reserve, the Bitter Creek station had to depend on hauled water.

"The tank's nearly empty!" shouted one of the forest fire guards. "If we don't git some more water, we're licked!"

"Hitch a team to the wagon and go git some more!" ordered Tex. "We cain't let the place burn down. Looks like they got the fire on the roof under control."

A long file of men was lined up between the water tank and the house, passing buckets along to be used by the fire fighters. Only a faint wisp of smoke now curled from the gaping black hole in the roof.

"It looks like we've saved our home, Tex," said Eleanor, riding up beside the young ranger.

"That's fine," laughed Tex. "The fire's nearly out. We ain't licked, after all."

Old Clem Carnochen and his men came racing up, shouting that Hop-

toad Harrigan had recovered consciousness and had escaped.

The womenfolks were all herded down to the bunk house, and the injured Hassayamp Crowfoot had been installed there in comparative comfort. Skillet and Curlicue S cowboys came crowding around Tex, eager for the man hunt.

The darkness of night had fallen over the mountain wilderness, turning green-clad ridges into black, forbidding ramparts. Tex knew that it would be like hunting for a needle in a haystack to try to ferret out the trouble-makers in the dark jungle of deep canyons and towering pine-clad cliffs, but he had other plans.

"We're raidin' the Hawk Nest, boys!" he shouted, to make himself heard above the din of the crowd. "That's Hoptoad Harrigan's hide-out. It's a nest of outlaws and killers. I want to git them murderin' hounds, while this thing's still hot. Mebbe it'll cost me my government job, but if I catch that fidgety jigger again, I'll gunwhip the—"

An earth-shaking explosion cut short Tex's words. The blast ripped out the wall of the ranger station kitchen and sent flames shooting through every room and up over the roof.

In an instant, the whole place was a solid wall of fire, so fierce and terrific, that Tex was turned aside by the heat as he spurred toward it.

A shadowy figure arose from a patch of brush and suddenly darted toward the fringe of woods near by.

"Halt!" shouted Tex. "Stop, or I'll fire!"

The skulker whirled and pointed something black at Tex. A blob of reddish flame blossomed in the gloom, and Tex felt a bullet fan past his cheek.

Snagging out his right-hand gun,

Tex threw down on the sneaking hombre and pulled trigger.

*Crack-crack-crack!* The air was filled with booming echoes of the explosions.

Tex felt a searing pain across his neck, and thought for a minute he had been hard hit. A twist of his head showed that he could move his neck, all right, and told him it was only a flesh wound.

Feeding steel to the claybank, he charged straight into the face of the skulker's blazing .45s, shooting carefully at a target that kept ducking and dodging in the darkness.

*Wham!* He heard the dull thud as a fat slug crunched through bone and muscle.

The ghostly figure fell and lay still. Dropping off his horse, Tex approached the fallen man cautiously, both hoglegs aimed at the prone body. He was taking no chances of a trick.

Riders came tearing up on all sides of him, Ringy Holmes, Eleanor, old Clem Carnochan, and cowboys from both ranches.

"Looks like Hoptoad Harrigan left one of his men behind to make sure the job was done up right," said Tex bitterly as he stooped to turn the skulker over. "This feller set a fire that exploded the big can of kerosene which we keep for the oil lamps. That proves that this was all planned out in advance."

A sheet of flame, shooting up from the fast-burning building, made the place almost as light as day. It shone on a swarthy, evil face, ghastly in death, when Tex turned the firebug over.

"Look!" croaked old Clem, "that ain't one of Hoptoad's men. He's the half-breed that come here with Buzz-saw Kitzmiller. The feller whose gun you shot out of his hand, Tex. Don't yuh recognize him?"

"Sizzlin' sidewinders!" burst out Tex. "Yo're right. It is one of Kitzmiller's men. Looks like I got two outfits gunnin' fer me. Mebbe them two skunks framed this up between 'em, so's they could burn me out and make it look like an accident."

## CHAPTER V.

### BULLETS FROM AMBUSH.

**A**GAINST the pitch-dark background of the surrounding forest, the figures of milling men and galloping horses were outlined with ghostly sharpness by the tongues of flame that shot a hundred feet into the sky from the burning house. Hot cinders and blazing pieces of shingles were falling all around Tex, as he knelt down and swiftly searched the slain breed.

He found nothing on the dead man. Leaping up, he swung aboard the claybank and raced up the slope toward the bunk house, where the women had all taken refuge.

With a sinking heart, he saw that the water tank had not returned from its trip to the spring. Without water, they could not hope to save any of the buildings. The roof of the barn was already smoking and a blaze was crackling through the brush perilously close to the bunk house itself.

"Everybody out!" cried Tex. "Hitch up yore rigs and ride for yore lives! The whole mountainside's catchin' fire!"

Men were already throwing harness on frantic horses, while others saddled up. Using wet sacks, shovels, hoes, and other implements, the regular forest-service fire fighters, aided by cowboys, beat out the grass and brush fires as quickly as they started. Others were up on the roof of the bunk house and barn, trying

to check flames ignited by cinders and live coals.

A sharp wind fanned the flames in the doomed house. The heat was so terrific that no one could approach within fifty feet of the place. A four-horse team, hauling the big tank wagon, came racing into the yard, water slushing over its sides.

A cheer went up as men grabbed buckets and formed a fire brigade again.

"Pass buckets up to the men on the roof!" yelled Tex. "We still got a chance to save the bunk house and barn!"

In spite of the confusion caused by the frantic plunging of horses being hitched to wagons, buggies, and buckboards, the bucket lines quickly formed and the fire fighters began drenching the dry roofs.

A rifle cracked, and one of the bucket men yelled. Water spurted from the big tank through a bullet hole.

"Some one shot a hole in the tank!" bawled Ringy Holmes. "Who done that? Plug it up!"

A cowboy rushed forward, picked up a stick and began whittling it down to drive into the hole.

*Wham!* Another slug zinged through the wooden sides and another silvery stream of liquid squirted from the tank right in Tex Carnochen's face.

"Watch fer the gun flash!" howled Tex, dashing water from his eyes as he snagged out his smoke-pole. "Somebody's firin' on us from ambush!"

A half dozen Curlicue S and Skillet waddies came tearing up on their broncs, eyes peering keenly into the shadowy darkness of the thick jungle of pine and fir. A yellow tongue of flame spurted from the depth of a manzanita thicket and

another hole appeared in the water tank.

*Br-r-rang! Crash! Bang!* An answering volley from the guns of Tex and his friends drowned out the excited screams of the women and the hoarse oaths of the men.

On the heels of the shots, the cowboys raced toward the spot and plunged recklessly into the gloomy foliage.

The fitful light from the burning ranger station played through the tree branches, transforming every bush and rock into a moving enemy.

Thrashing around in the brush, Tex and his men searched in vain. The skulker had sneaked away. Over on the other side of the house they heard the sharp report of the rifle again. One more hole appeared in the tank, from which the precious fluid was now leaking rapidly.

"The barn's on fire!" croaked old Clem Carnochen. "The hay is burnin' like wild fire. Everybody git out o' there!"

Wheeling his claybank out of the woods, Tex galloped back into the ranger-station yard. The women were being cleared out rapidly. Only Eleanor Holmes and a few others remained.

With a deep rumble like the roar of a waterfall, the dry hay seemed to go up in a puff of smoke and twisting flame, like so much powder. The new blaze sent red-hot embers flying in all directions.

Wherever a live coal fell on the dry grass it started another fire, threatening to spread along the whole mountainside. A wide fire guard had been cut through the woods below the station and completely surrounding it. But this would not stop the blaze if it started jumping along the tops of the pine trees.

"The bunk house will go next!"

yelled Tex. "All you men git yore things out o' there! Don't try to save any of the buildings! It's no use! Tie inter them brush fires, and don't let 'em git beyond control!"

The rifle firing had ceased. The water tank, converted into a sieve by bullets, was empty and useless. Tex was helping load old Hassayamp Crowfoot's unconscious body into a buckboard when Eleanor rode up beside him.

"What're you doin' here?" demanded Tex angrily. "All the women have been ordered to leave!"

Bareheaded, with her golden hair falling down over her bedraggled wedding gown, Eleanor Holmes looked the picture of woe. Her face was pale and haggard.

"I couldn't go without seeing you," she said. "Our dreams have all gone up in smoke. We have no home. What are we going to do?"

"We ain't licked yet!" growled Tex. "I'm rebuilding this place. It won't take long, and then we kin be married. Our bad luck cain't last forever. Now you high-tail it out o' here, afore more trouble busts loose. All the other womenfolks have gone. Don't any of yuh stop till yuh git plumb to Navajo. It ain't safe in the forest anywhere, with these firebugs on the rampage."

"But what are you going to do?" demanded Eleanor. "What good can you do here with everybody in the forest fighting you? They'll ambush you next and kill you."

"No they won't," said Tex grimly. "Not if I see 'em first. Jist leave it to me. I ain't licked, and I ain't quittin'. I'll ride over and see you, soon's I kin git away. Good-by, honey. Take good care of yoreself."

Stifling a sob, Eleanor spurred away after the other women. Tex saw old Hassayamp safely on his

way, then he joined the grass-fire fighters.

The bunk-house roof was blazing in several places. No chance to save it. The ambusher's rifle was silent and there was no possibility of finding the skulker in the blackness of the woods.

It was past midnight before the sweating, grimy fire fighters got the thing under control and formed a cordon around the smoldering ruins.

Crippled-up old Clem Carnochen, half fainting from the severe effort, rode up beside Tex and slapped his despondent son on the back.

"Buck up, boy!" he growled. "Look at yore old dad, all ruined and dyin' from bullet wounds, and then thank the stars that yuh got yore health and that a fine girl's waitin' fer yuh. You kin have yore old job as foreman of the Curlicue S again, if yuh want to quit this blasted place and come down among civilized folks."

"That's shore grand of yuh, dad," said Tex, "but I ain't a quitter. I'd be branded as yaller all over the West, if I let these mossbacks run me off the forest reserve."

"Good boy!" yipped old Clem, "I'll leave some of my gunmen to help yuh, and I know Ringy Holmes will do the same. We'll give these woolly-whiskered brush-skulkers a taste of cattle-country justice."

"We shore will," put in Ringy Holmes, who had come riding up with two of his sons. "I consider Tex jist like my son-in-law, even if this business did stop him and Eleanor from gittin' hitched. Anybody that fights him, fights me."

"Gosh, Ringy," said Tex, "them words shore make me feel proud. But I got to turn both of yuh down on this deal. A forest ranger ain't allowed to bring in gunmen to fight

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his battles. He's got to either go it alone or call in regular lawmen."

"Then what's the matter with calling on me?" growled Sheriff Milt Andrews, who had edged his big white horse into the circle. "Rangers is authorized to ask the coöperation of the sheriff's office. I'll depu-tize every man-jack here to run down them murderin' coyotes that burned you out. I place myself under yore orders. It's yore turn, son. Talk and talk fast."

"By jing, I will talk!" burst out Tex. "Pick out a dozen tough gun fighters! Leave the others to watch the fire. We're raidin' Hoptoad Harrigan's Hawk Nest, to find out if a lot of them hawks ain't turned into buzzards."

## CHAPTER VI.

### HAWK NEST.

NESTLING amid rocky crags on the shores of Lake Montezuma, within the shadow of Silver Veil Falls, the Hawk Nest Hotel of Hoptoad Harrigan was an armed fortress in a natural setting.

The deep waters of the lake protected it on the east. On all other sides rose sheer rock walls of red sandstone, penetrated only at one point by a guarded pass. A rifleman was always on duty here.

The main road between Buzz-saw Kitzmiller's lumber mill and the Riorite and El Dorado mines, ran close to the outlaw hide-out.

So powerful was Hoptoad Harrigan, that not even the forces of the law had threatened to wipe him out until the Federal government had taken this territory over, to form the Bitter Creek National Forest.

In the presence of Tex Carnochen and his fire fighters at the ranger station, Hoptoad Harrigan saw a threat to his business and safety,

and he had struck with swift deadliness to destroy that danger.

Darkness still hung heavy over the sky-canopied forest, when Hop-toad and a party of jangling riders filed past the rifleman at the pass and halted their broncs in front of an ancient log house.

The big two-story building, constructed of heavy logs with the bark still on them, had once been a frontier fort, but was now turned into a hotel and saloon. Lights blazed in the windows, and rigs and horses were tied at the hitch rail, in spite of the lateness of the hour.

There was a big six-horse team freighter, a covered wagon, drawn by four fine bays and another wagon piled high with freshly sawed pine and fir. At the tailboard of the canvas-covered outfit, stood a thoroughbred white-stockinged sorrel with a nose-bag on.

Hoptoad's small, piggy eyes centered greedily on the beautiful sorrel, and its expensive saddle.

"Slinky!" he roared, in a voice loud enough to be heard all over the clearing. "Come here, you dog!"

A wizened, saddle-colored Mexican darted out of the shadows and came slinking to Hoptoad's side.

"Wat ees cet, señor?" squeaked "Slinky." "Wat you want?"

"Whose outfit is that?" growled Hoptoad, pointing to the covered wagon and the thoroughbred sorrel.

"A stranger," answered Slinky in a voice that was almost a whisper. "Ees very reech man. I see he have *mucho dinero*."

"Is he alone?" asked Hoptoad, twisting his face in a leering grin.

"*Si, señor*," chuckled Slinky.

"I like that hoss," said Hoptoad. "I'd like to have him. It would be too bad if this stranger got drowned in Lake Montezuma."

"*Si, señor!*" burst out Slinky excitedly. "I understand. He justa fall in and drown."

Casting another leering glance at Hoptoad, Slinky darted through a side door into the hotel. All was dark on this side of the house. The noise and hilarity in front of the saloon that greeted Hoptoad's riders drew every one's attention away from Slinky and his evil boss.

Sitting his saddle by the shores of the lake, Hoptoad listened to the waters swishing among the reeds and tules and kept his eye fixed on that side door. He did not have long to wait.

Slinky was a very efficient hombre at such business as this. In a few minutes, the swarthy, wizened Mexican appeared, carrying a limp body on his back. Bending low so that the brush hid him, Slinky hurried over to Hoptoad and dropped the unconscious man at Harrigan's feet. A fringe of willows concealed them.

"Good work, Slinky," growled Hoptoad, as he turned the body over and looked into the handsome pale face of the victim.

The man's clothes and appearance were those of a person of wealth. The iron-gray hair was neatly barbered. The features were fine.

A diamond ring gleamed on one of his fingers, and the watch which Hoptoad picked from his pocket, was of solid gold and of the best workmanship.

"You sure you ain't killed him, Slinky?" demanded Hoptoad. His deft fingers were looting the victim's pockets as he spoke. He found a big roll of bills that made his eyes bulge and a money belt around the fellow's waist, stuffed with eagles and double eagles.

There were no papers on the un-

conscious man to indicate his identity.

"He ain't dead, is he, Slinky?" repeated Hoptoad. "If you've killed him, I'll break every bone——"

"No, no, señor!" exclaimed Slinky, "I don' keel him. Long time now I work for you. Never do I keel mans when you don' like. See, he begin to move."

"That's good," muttered Hoptoad. "Throw him in the lake afore he comes to his senses. Him bein' alive, his lungs will fill with water, showin' that he drowned."

*Crack! Bang!* Over at the pass, the sentry's rifle roared two warning shots.

"Riders comin'!" howled the guard. "A whole passell of 'em, led by that danged forest ranger, Tex Carnochen!"

"Wat I do now?" gulped Slinky, who still held the unconscious man in his arms.

"Throw that hombre in the water!" commanded Hoptoad Harrigan. "Throw him in, I say, and be quick about it. Where's my boat hid?"

Slinky let the unconscious man sink in the water and gave him a kick to force him out where it was deeper.

"The boat ees over by the cat-tails," stuttered the frightened Mexican. "I go weeth you. They don' fin' me, then."

Leaving his reins atrail, Hoptoad raced over to the boat and climbed into it. As Slinky tried to get in with him, Hoptoad gave the wizened Mexican a shove back onto land.

"You stay there, you dog!" snarled Hoptoad. "Take my hoss and look after it. If they ask yuh any questions, tell 'em you ain't seen me. Pass around the word to the boys to act meek and innercent. We ain't ready to tangle with that

ranger yet, not with all them cowboys at his heels. When his friends leave, he'll be alone and easier to handle."

## CHAPTER VII.

### TEX TO THE RESCUE.

**S**HADOWY shapes of trees, brush and rocks grew more and more distinct as stars paled above the mountain peaks and the sky to the east turned saffron with the approach of dawn.

Hoptoad Harrigan twitched jumpily, greedily clinked the coins he had taken from the stranger and slowly poled his get-away boat through the clinging swamp grass and cat-tail toward a hidden slough.

Through the leafy drapery of cottonwood and willow, he could see the main wagon road that skirted the lake along a high cliff. A rider on a silvery-maned, black-stockinged claybank appeared on that cliff, and halted to stare fixedly down at the water. It was Tex Carnochen.

As Hoptoad watched, Tex did a strange thing. He unbuckled his gun belt and dropped the weighted weapons to the ground. Then he spurred the claybank straight toward the brink of the precipice and made a jump into the icy lake waters.

Startled and alarmed, Hoptoad steadied his boat and turned about. What he saw sent a shudder along his spine.

The stranger he had robbed and had thrown into the lake, was thrashing around in the water, frantically trying to reach a half-submerged log.

Tex Carnochen, clinging to a stirrup of his bravely swimming brone, was going to his rescue.

Panic seized Hoptoad Harrigan. Picking up his rifle from the bottom

of the boat, he drew a bead on the forest ranger's bobbing figure.

Hoptoad's finger crooked around the trigger, but he did not fire. More riders appeared on the cliff above the lake, hard-looking cowboys with rifles in their hands. Hoptoad knew if he fired on Tex, those punchers would get him.

Lowering the hammer of the Winchester to half cock, Hoptoad dropped the rifle into the bottom of the boat and began poling swiftly, deeper and deeper into the slough. Jungle-thick foliage hid his movements. He had often taken refuge here, when things got too hot.

Up on the cliff, Tex's cowboys pieced lassos together and tossed them out to young Carnochen, who was trying to hold the drowning man up. Tex grabbed the rope and slipped it under the stranger's arm-pits. In a few minutes both men and the horse were safe on land, with Curlicue S and Skillet waddies crowding around them.

Dripping wet, Tex placed the half-drowned man face down on the grass and began to work the water out of his lungs. The fellow was unconscious. None of the punchers had ever seen him before.

"Look at that bruise on his head," said one of the buckaroos. "Reckon he must 'a' hit on a rock when he fell in."

"Yeah," grunted Tex dryly. "He shore must have fell hard, to crack his haid and turn his pockets inside out at the same time."

"Gosh, yes!" muttered one of the men, "he has been robbed. And this means they knocked him out and throwed him in. I've allus heard that Hoptoad Harrigan was up to sech tricks. And now we got the goods on him. Let's ride in there and wipe him out."

"Hold yore hosses," growled Tex.

"Don't forgit I'm a Federal officer. I got to have evidence, afore I kin go tearin' inter anybody."

"I'm fer burning him out, and stringin' 'em all up!" flared Ringy Holmes.

"Me too," croaked old Clem Carnochen.

"I'm forest ranger in charge here and you'll take my orders," said Tex curtly. "Sheriff Andrews will tell you I'm responsible and that I got the authority."

"That's right, boys," said Sheriff Andrews. "We're all takin' orders from Tex. What do you aim fer us to do, ranger?"

"We're ridin' into Hawk Nest peaceable," said Tex, swinging into his saddle and holding out his arms to take the stranger's body. "Then I'll arrest any feller we recognize as bein' with them firebugs that burned us out. We got to git this half-drowned man to a doctor, or he's liable to die on us."

Soaked to the skin, shivering from the early-morning cold, Tex led his men through the pass without interference and dismounted in front of the Hawk Nest.

A bleary-eyed mule skinner was just getting his wagon-load of lumber in motion. A few early risers stood around, looking at them curiously, but nearly every one else was in bed.

The barroom was deserted when the cowboys carried the stranger inside, placed him on a cot and threw a blanket over him. The fellow had begun to breathe regularly and was muttering deliriously.

A dusky-faced barkeep in a white apron came forward to get Tex's order. It was Slinky, the breed. He had a towel over one arm and his dirty face was twisted in a greasy smile.

"Wat weel you have, señores?" he smirked.

"Where's Hoptoad Harrigan?" asked Tex sharply.

"Hoptoad no ees here," whined Slinky. "He gone 'way. Mebbe don' come back two-three days."

"The blazes you say!" flared Tex. "I think yo're a danged liar. Men, search the place! Look in every room! Upstairs in the hotel, too! I want Hoptoad Harrigan!"

Tex Carnochen and his cowboy friends combed every building, from cellar to garret, without finding one person that they could recognize as a firebug. Hoptoad Harrigan had completely disappeared.

Tex thought of going out on the lake, but found there were no boats. The crisscrossing bayous and sloughs prevented horsemen from riding around the lake.

At last, Tex had to acknowledge failure. The stranger had recovered consciousness, but seemed kind of stunned. He did not appear to understand what was said to him.

"No matter who he is, we cain't leave him here," said Tex. "Them murderin' hounds would finish him off. Mebbe by the time we reach Shoshone, he'll be able to tell us something."

Shoshone, located on the main lumber road, consisted of a few log and frame houses and stores and of a large, rambling place with a flagpole in front of it. From this pole floated an American flag.

Over the main entrance were the words:

Forest Supervisor's Office  
Bitter Creek National Forest

The cowboys came to a doctor's office and left the stranger there. His head was crimson-stained from the severe crack he had got. He

talked wildly and kept saying something about Washington.

In spite of the early hour, Tex was surprised to see a crowd gathered in front of the forestry office. He recognized Forest Supervisor Newberry standing on the steps, addressing the crowd.

Suddenly Tex reined in, throwing up his hand as a signal for the others to halt also.

"Look close, boys!" he burst out. "Don't yuh recognize any of them fellers?"

"Them's the firebugs," growled Ringy Holmes. "There's black-bearded Buzz-saw Kitzmiller, steppin' up beside the forest supervisor."

The black-bearded lumberman, standing spraddle-legged beside the forest supervisor, began making an impassioned speech.

"I tell yuh it was the ranger's fault!" shouted Buzz-saw. "He didn't handle things right. Me and some of the boys went to see him to put in our complaints. Instead of invitin' us in, he made us stay out on the porch. When he seed Hoptoad Harrigan and his rowdies come ridin' up, he wouldn't even let us perfect ourselves. He grabbed my guns, he did, and stuck us all up. It was only natural, then, that trouble would bust loose. Ain't that right, boys?"

A roar of approval went up from the crowd, most of whom made their living off the forest and did not want any ranger interfering with them.

"Who started the shooting and who set the fire? That's what I want to know," demanded Forest Supervisor Newberry.

"Some dirty sneak done that, to git us in bad," said Buzz-saw.

Buzz-saw suddenly caught sight of the tall, bronzed-faced Tex Carnochen. His mouth popped open,

and he pointed a wobbly finger at the new ranger.

"There he is, Mr. Supervisor!" yelped Buzz-saw. "Him and his gunmen. He's got his nerve comin' here with them toters. You said, yoreself, a ranger ain't got no right to bring in gun-slingers. Let him explain that, if he kin. Let him explain how he met us honest mountaineers with them same killers, when we approached the ranger station."

In the uproar that followed Buzz-saw's excited yells, Forest Supervisor Newberry could hardly make himself heard. The firebugs drew aside as Tex and his cowboys dismounted in front of the steps.

With his spurs jingling, Tex strode up to the supervisor and halted in front of him.

"I'm sorry to report, sir, that the ranger station has been wiped out by fire," Tex announced.

The forest supervisor was an iron-gray man with a lined, worried face. He scowled at Tex and slowly shook his head.

"You're hours late in making your report, ranger," he said coldly. "I know all about it. It's the worst and most disgraceful thing that's ever happened in the service. The very first day you take office, you let a brand-new ranger station, with all equipment, burn down and you go tearing over the forest leading a bunch of wild-eyed cowboys that have no right in here whatever. This will take a lot of explaining."

Standing tall and straight in his ranger's khaki outfit, Tex Carnochen hooked his thumbs in his cartridge belt above his holstered .45s and glared challengingly at the crowd of trouble-makers.

He recognized many of them as being among the visitors at the ranger station when it burned. As

he looked at the trappers, the hunters, the old prospectors, hard-rock miners, and timber workers, he wondered which of them were really guilty and which were only tools, duped by unscrupulous leaders.

"In the first place, sir," said Tex, "I didn't bring in these cowboys to fight. They were guests at my weddin'. They naturally took a hand, when a bunch of gun-shootin' coyotes attacked the ranger station. It was no accident that the place was burned. We had the first blaze under control, when somebody sneaked into the kitchen and exploded the big cans of kerosene stored in the lean-to. When the tank wagon came up with water, ambushers shot it full of holes. It was a deliberate attack to wipe out the ranger station."

Forest Supervisor Newberry rubbed his chin and frowned.

"Who are these armed cowboys with you?" he asked. "What right had you to enlist them?"

"I asked the assistance of the local authorities, as provided by law," answered Tex. "The big man on the white horse is Sheriff Milt Andrews. Them buckaroos are his deputies. I acted strictly according to regulations."

"Perhaps you did," admitted the supervisor, "but the fact remains that you failed to handle the situation. And that, on your very first day, you got nearly everybody in the forest stirred up against you."

"I didn't get 'em stirred up against me," said Tex. "Somebody else did. Some feller that's afraid to see a ranger in Bitter Creek Forest. His name is Hoptoad Harrigan. He started the fight at the ranger station, and I'm certain that it was some of his men that set the place on fire. I cain't find him any-

where. He's a fugitive from justice."

"Who is a fugitive from justice?" cried a shrill voice.

Dressed in silk hat and swallow-tail coat, twisting his neck and jerking his body, Hoptoad Harrigan emerged from the forest supervisor's office.

"You!" cried Tex. "What're you doin' in the supervisor's office? Yo're under arrest. I charge you with robbery, arson, and murder! Sheriff Andrews, take Hoptoad into custody!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### KICKED OUT!

**G**UNS flashed in the mountain sunlight, as Sheriff Andrews stepped forward, smoke-pole in hand, muzzle pointed at Hoptoad Harrigan. The Curlicue S and Skillet waddies were quick-trigger hot-heads. They had the plainsman's dislike for mountain men and they were just aching to mix it up.

Hoptoad Harrigan stood, as if petrified, on the top step of the forest-service building.

"Wait a minute here!" roared Forest Supervisor Newberry. "Yo're still in the national forest, and I'm in charge! If I want any arrests made, I got a deputy U. S. marshal here to make 'em! What evidence have you got against Harrigan, Ranger Carnochen? Who has he robbed? Who has he murdered? And what fire has he set?"

The supervisor's questions took the wind out of Tex's sails. For the first time he realized how flimsy was his evidence against Hoptoad. He hadn't an iota of proof that Hoptoad had slugged old Hassayamp Crowfoot or had thrown the stranger in the lake. Although he was dead certain that Hoptoad's men had fired

the ranger station, he could not prove that either.

Hoptoad was quick to take advantage of Tex's hesitation.

"See there? He's got no proof agin' me when you pin him down, Mr. Supervisor," exulted the jumpy hombre. "I'm filin' charges against him. I demand his dismissal."

The roar of agreement that went up from the mountaineers was almost drowned out by hoots and cat-calls from the cowboys.

"You cain't do this to a son of mine!" yipped old Clem Carnochen. "If yuh want to match irons with me, I'll meet yuh any time, Hoptoad Harrigan. My body's crippled, but my haid ain't. I could be deaf, dumb, blind and string halt and still lick a yallerbelly like you, with one hand tied behind me!"

"Take it easy, dad!" shouted Tex. "I got to fight this out alone. Yo're only makin' things worse!"

Forest Supervisor Newberry was bellowing at the top of his voice to make himself heard above the din.

"The meeting is over!" he roared. "If any of you have any evidence in this matter, I'll hear you one at a time in my office."

"What about this snooty ranger?" demanded Buzz-saw Kitzmiller. "Do we still have to take his orders?"

"Ranger Carnochen is suspended until the arrival of District Forester Cameron," announced Newberry. "Mr. Cameron is due here any day. You'll all have a chance to be heard. The meeting is dismissed."

Tex took the shock of losing his job without visible emotion. His friends crowded around him, slapping him on the back and making wild threats. Only after bitter argument did he get them to ride away.

"I'm goin' to stay and git my job back," he vowed, when his father in-

sisted on him going home with them. "And I kin do it better alone."

It was dusk before Tex finally got rid of them. He went in and had a long talk with Newberry, but it was no use. The forest supervisor knew that Tex had done the best he could, but he thought the presence of the cowboy would cause more trouble.

Dejectedly, Tex stepped out of the office into the growing darkness and slowly mounted the claybank. A light in the doctor's house drew his attention. It was in the room occupied by John McCord, the stranger he had saved from drowning.

"Mebbe McCord's got some evidence against this Hoptoad Harrigan," muttered Tex. "I'm goin' over there."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when Tex yanked out his six-gun and jabbed the spurs into the claybank. A slinking figure moved under John McCord's window. Tex caught the glint of lamplight on a gun barrel, as the skulker peered into the lighted room. There was no time to sound a warning.

Snapping back the hammer of his gun, Tex threw a swift shot at the ambusher. With a howl the man dropped his weapon and jerked around, writhing in pain as he hugged a mutilated forearm.

The racing claybank was on the dry-gulcher in a minute. Tex half expected to see Hoptoad Harrigan. Instead he found himself looking at Buzz-saw Kitzmiller.

Doubled up in a ball on the ground, Buzz-saw was groaning and shrieking at the top of his voice.

"He's killin' me! That crazy ranger shot me!" howled Buzz-saw.

Doors of homes were flung open and Tex saw people come running out, some of the men with guns in their hands. John McCord ap-

peared on the steps of the doctor's office, fully dressed.

Buzz-saw suddenly straightened up, gripping a gun in his other paw. The smoke-pole spurted streaks of orange flame, sending bullets whistling past Tex's ear. A burning iron seemed to run through the cowboy's hair, and instantly his eyes were blinded by hot fluid, that flowed down over his forehead.

His own weapon was churning away, pointing at the black-bearded hombre. Dimly, through the film that clouded his eyes, Tex saw Kitzmiller crumple up and lie still.

By this time, Tex was so blind that he could not see which way to go. He heard John McCord's voice beside him and felt a hand on the reins of his claybank.

Close by a rifle cracked. The bullet thudded into the building with a deadly thump.

"There he goes! There goes the killer!" yelled some one.

"Hold onto yore saddle!" shouted John McCord. "I'll git yuh out o' here!"

With bullets sizzling past them, they entered a thick wood, where McCord halted to examine Tex's wound.

"Are yuh hard hit, cowboy?" asked McCord. "Kin yuh go on?"

"It's jist a crease," growled Tex, shaking his head and wiping crimson off his face. "I hear Buzz-saw's brone nickerin' close by. Grab him and let's git out o' here. You made a bad mistake when yuh got mixed up with me, Mr. McCord."

## CHAPTER IX.

### FOREST FIRE!

HIDDEN by the dark shadows among the trees, Tex waited until John McCord came riding up on Buzz-saw's horse and then both gal-

loped up a mountain trail. Behind them they heard the noise of pursuit. Six-guns roared out alarm signals. Yelling, swearing men ran and rode after the fugitives.

For an hour, Tex and McCord held to a tight gallop. When at last they halted, it was far in the depth of the mountain forest. Not a sound of the chase reached their ears.

John McCord wrapped a bandage around Tex's injured head and then they started on again. Tex was beginning to like John McCord. The iron-gray man wore store clothes and was from the city, but he had plenty of nerve.

"Well, this is where we part," said Tex when they emerged onto a wagon road. "If they ketch you with me, they'll shoot yuh. I'm wanted fer murder, you know."

"I'm not leaving," said McCord. "I'm the only man that can prove that you shot Buzz-saw Kitzmiller to save my life. No need to argue now, I'm stayin'."

"You cain't go where I'm goin'," growled Tex. "I'm ridin' into death and destruction. Like as not, I'll never come out."

"What do you mean?" demanded the iron-gray stranger.

"I mean I'm raidin' Hoptoad Harrigan's Hawk Nest," said Tex. "It's the only way I kin clear my name and git back my job. I know Hoptoad is a thievin' murderin' hound. I know it was him that had the ranger station burned. Unless I kin prove it, I'm ruined. So long, Mr. McCord. If you'll ride fast to wherever yo're goin', you kin probably git there afore somebody ketches yuh for stealin' Buzz-saw's hoss."

Without a second glance at McCord, Tex swung the claybank about and raced away. He heard

the thud of hoofs and saw McCord right behind him.

"Go back!" snarled Tex.

"I won't!" retorted John McCord stubbornly. "You saved my life, and now I'm going to help you."

Two hours of fast riding brought them to the shores of Montezuma Lake. In a thick growth of willows, Tex dismounted and started peeling off his duds.

"Are you crazy?" demanded McCord. "You ain't goin' swimming this time of night."

Stripped down to his red underwear, Tex turned to John McCord, with a warning for silence.

"This place is guarded by sentries," he whispered. "We cain't git through the pass. You take my things and git as close to the entrance as you can. I'll take care of the lookout."

The plunge into the icy-cold lake water took Tex's breath away, but he began to warm up as he started the long swim, keeping close to shore and in the shadows of the willows. Noiselessly feathering his strokes to avoid any betraying splash, Tex quickly reached shore.

A short distance away he saw a guard sitting in a boat, half dozing. A twig cracked as Tex stepped close to the man. With a low cry the guard whirled, bringing up his gun to fire. Tex's hard fist, crashing against his jaw, knocked him cold.

Two minutes later the guard was bound and gagged and Tex was creeping toward the pass, wearing the lookout's shoes and trousers and carrying one of his guns. A horse whinnied close by. Over by the rocks at the entrance to the pass, a sentry stood up and looked sharply around him.

"Dang the fool luck!" growled Tex. "He'll give the alarm and that'll spile everythin'."

Stepping close to the brone, Tex took the lasso from the saddle and began creeping toward the thoroughly aroused sentry. He had to clear the pass so that McCord could get through.

Cautiously he crept toward the swarthy little man in the big saucer-brimmed sombrero among the boulders. The Mexican's wide hat would make it hard for him to rope him around the throat. The dusky fellow held a rifle in his hands and was on his feet, black eyes darting suspiciously in every direction.

Back of Tex, at the *posada*, he could hear the sound of laughter and loud talking, as the usual night celebration at the dive got under way. Rigs and saddled horses were lined up at the hitch rack. It would be only a question of minutes before some one from that direction came riding toward the pass and discovered him.

Tex's arm jerked suddenly. A loop shot over the guard's head and yanked him tumbling down the steep incline. The lasso choked off his cry, but the rifle, falling from his hand, exploded with a sharp report.

The crack of the Winchester was answered almost instantly by a harsh, angry bellow from the Hawk Nest. Tex saw a horseman come galloping toward him and knew he would have to work fast.

The swarthy sentry was unconscious. Snatching off the hombre's sombrero and serape, Tex dragged the limp figure into the chaparral and climbed up to the sentry post, wearing the Spanish clothes.

As he picked up the fallen rifle, he saw a horseman in silk hat and swallow-tail coat come tearing up, waving his hands and swearing. It was Hoptoad Harrigan. Behind him came two other riders.

"Hey you, Pablo!" howled Hop-

toad. "Why the ding-dang blazes did you fire off that gun?"

Uttering a triumphant growl, Tex brushed the sombrero off his head and leaped down at Hoptoad, covering him with the rifle.

"I got yuh, Hoptoad Harrigan!" he burst out. "Don't move a muscle. Better order yore killers not to shoot, or I'll plug yuh."

Instead of obeying, Hoptoad flung himself off his mustang on the side away from Tex. The cowboy squeezed trigger on the rifle, but the mechanism refused to work. The fall on the rocks had broken it. Bullets rained around him, as he ducked through the pass, firing both six-guns that he had captured from the boatman.

A horse loomed up in front of him. It was the claybank, with John McCord close behind it. Swinging into the saddle, Tex raced away, yelling for McCord to follow.

Bullets clipped through the tree branches over Tex's head, as he entered a forest of quaking aspens out of danger.

"I bungled it," growled Tex. "Now we're in fer it. We cain't fight 'em, with the odds ten to one against us. We'll make our get-away and then come back after Hoptoad some other time."

Jingling along at a lope, Tex and McCord penetrated deeper and deeper into a narrow canyon. Behind them they heard horses crashing through the brush and could make out Hoptoad Harrigan's harsh cries.

From the noise, Tex judged that at least forty gunmen were in close pursuit.

"They cain't ketch us in this dark woods," said Tex, "not if we keep goin'."

"Look!" cried McCord. "Look ahead of us!"

Tex looked and his heart stood still. A sheer wall of sandstone and granite blocked their path on all sides.

"Gosh, we're trapped," groaned Tex. "They'll wait till mornin', then shoot us down like dogs."

"They're not waiting till mornin'," said McCord. "Look over there."

Billows of smoke were rising from the brush at the entrance of the canyon. With a roar like distant thunder, flames leaped to the top of a pitch-pine tree and began spreading in every direction. A whipping wind blew smoke and burning cinders into Tex's face as he darted anxious glances around him. A creek ran right behind them, bordered by green willows, alders, cottonwoods and hazelnut bush. It made a sort of a fire guard, but it would never stop that raging fire demon that leaped a hundred feet across tree-tops.

A terror-stricken deer came tearing past them. Dying birds fluttered all around, dropping to the ground. They heard a cow bawling piteously as it dashed about, it's bell ringing. Abruptly the bawling ceased and the bell stopped ringing.

Wolves, coyotes and even a big bear scurried past without a second glance at them.

The rumble of the oncoming blaze was deafening. A tree went down with a crashing, crackling sound and fresh flames spurted up.

They were trapped. The rock wall cut off their escape to the rear. In front of them the white-hot inferno was death itself. John McCord batted out fire that started in his coat, and grinned through the black soot and grime on his face.

Already the heat beat upon their faces, like the blast from a furnace.

"I guess this is just about our finish, pardner," said McCord.

"No, it ain't!" cried Tex. "I still got a hole card to play. Here's some matches. We're startin' a back fire all along this creek. It's our last chance."

Quickly the two men raced in opposite directions, touching off the tinder-dry grass and leaves beyond the fringe of green willows that bordered the creek. Now the heat was so terrific that they had to lie down in the creek bed. Flaming twigs fell all around them, setting fire to their clothes and stinging their broncs to desperation.

Then slowly the heat faded as the back fire ate into the wind toward the oncoming blaze. Sitting down on the hot stones of the creek bed, Tex handed a six-gun to John McCord.

"They'll be comin' in to find our bodies pretty soon," said Tex. "Mebbe we won't win out, but we'll give 'em a hot reception."

There was a deafening roar as the back fire met the main blaze. Flames shot hundreds of feet up in the air. The atmosphere was filled with the bawling of dying cattle, the crash of falling trees and the crackle of the conflagration.

Gradually this died down, leaving only isolated fires burning here and there. Riders appeared, racing through the clear patches. Tex recognized Hoptoad Harrigan headed straight toward them.

"Harrigan!" he howled, leaping to his feet. "Come and git it, you fidgety coyote!"

Both men opened fire at the same time. Tex was dimly conscious of fierce firing going on over at Hawk Nest. He heard John McCord shouting: "Help is coming," but his whole mind was centered on Hoptoad's evil face.

Hunched forward in a gun fighter's crouch, Tex aimed carefully and fired with great deliberation at the bobbing rider. He felt his left leg give way from under him and dropped to the ground. He had not even felt the bullet hit him.

With a triumphant shriek, Hoptoad came tearing toward Tex, bent on crushing him under the steel-shod hoofs of his mustang. Tex let out a Comanche war whoop, causing the horse to swerve aside. At the same instant he lifted his gun and fired at Hoptoad's fang-toothed face.

Hoptoad Harrigan crumpled out of his saddle, not ten feet from Tex and lay still. Horsemen came galloping up, headed by Forest Supervisor Newberry. With him was a big posse. He had come here in pursuit of Tex Carnochen, but the Hawk Nest outlaws had opened fire on them, and they had wiped out Hoptoad's gang.

A familiar figure on a pinto pony raced up and dismounted beside Tex Carnochen. It was Eleanor Holmes. She took the wounded cowboy's head in her arms and began sobbing without a word.

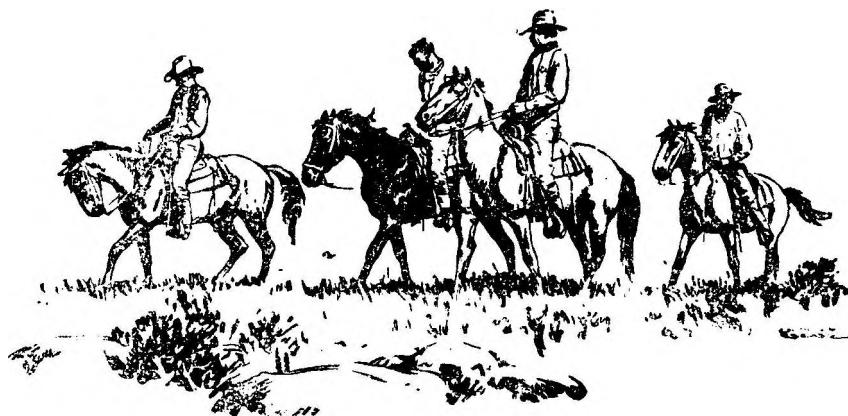
Supervisor Newberry rounded up

his prisoners and attended to the wounded before he finally came back to Tex. John McCord had bandaged Tex's leg and was standing beside the young cowboy.

"I'm sorry, Carnochen," said Newberry. "You did a good day's work, shooting Hoptoad Harrigan, but I've got to put you under arrest just the same. You must stand trial for killing Buzz-saw Kitzmiller, and you're definitely through as a forest ranger."

"No he's not," said the man who had called himself John McCord. "Let me introduce myself. My full name is John McCord Cameron of Washington, D. C. I'm the new district forester. Tex Carnochen not only keeps his job, but I'm building him a better ranger station than the one that burned down. As for the killing of Kitzmiller, Tex shot that murderer when he was in the act of ambushing me. What have you got to say to that, young man?" he concluded, turning to Tex.

But Tex was not saying anything just then. He had Eleanor in his arms and both of them were looking up at the stars, their faces alight with happiness.





# Escape from the Vigilantes

A True Story of the Wild West

By Kent Bennett

Author of "Christmas with the Sheriff," etc.

**T**HE posse of vigilantes closed in solidly around Aleck Stewart. The steady black muzzles of cocked six-guns stared coldly at him. He was helpless.

Suddenly one of the vigilantes slipped a rawhide noose over Aleck's neck and yanked it tight. Then he tossed the free end of the lariat over a thick limb of the big cottonwood tree and drew it tight.

Aleck seemed frozen with fear. He tried to cry out, but for some reason no sound would come. He

tried to raise his arms, to loosen the strangling noose. But his arms seemed wooden. A vigilante kneeled his horse close, raised his quirt, and brought it slashing down.

Aleck's bronc leaped forward. He tried vainly to yell as the horse went out from under him and left him dangling in the air. His body writhed and twisted. He tore frantically at the strangling noose.

And then suddenly he woke up. He was lying in his own bunk, close to the ceiling of the big log ferry

house that he and his brother, Charley Stewart, had lived in for several years.

Cold sweat beaded Aleck's forehead. He was breathing hard from the very real terror of his dream. Then, as the sound of voices reached his ears, and the sharp, unpleasant odor of tobacco smoke and liquor reached his nose, his nerves quieted.

He swung his long, thin legs over the edge of the bunk and reached for his boots. Below him, five men sat at a plank table, playing poker. They were laughing loudly, swearing, plainly drunk.

Aleck shook his head and growled something under his breath. One of those drunken poker players was his younger brother, Charley. A demijohn of redeye stood on the floor between Charley and Bob Hadley.

Aleck Stewart looked around the murky room with troubled pale-blue eyes. The thick walls were pierced with small loopholes for rifles. There were no windows, and only one door.

That door was locked. A heavy iron chain passed through a hole in the planking and around the door jamb. The ends were fastened with a large padlock.

Aleck sighed with relief. The ferry house was a small fort. They would be safe from a surprise attack. Grunting, Aleck leaped to the floor to watch the poker game.

The Stewart brothers had made a fair living with their ferry on Snake River when the gold rush was on. At that time, miners had crossed and recrossed the river every day.

Now, however, times were dull. Few people came to use the ferry. The home of the two Stewart brothers had gradually become a hang-out for owl-hooters.

At first, Aleck had resented these hombres. But finally he had ac-

cepted them and fallen for the lure of easy money, for they paid well.

But his brother had done more than just become accustomed to their owl-hoot boarders. He had fallen in with them, accepted their free, easy, and plenty dangerous way of life. He had even ridden out with a few of them.

"Gone over ter the wild bunch," Aleck reproached himself. "A fine thing fer us ter be comin' ter, with the folks back home—"

The folks back home! They made up the one link which the Stewarts had with their former life. The brothers wrote letters home regularly—at least, Charley did, at Aleck's urgent prodding. And suddenly Aleck recalled that they owed another letter.

Moving around the table, he dropped a big hand to Charley's shoulder. Charley looked up, a scowl on his white face.

"What yuh want?" he growled.

"Come on, Charley!" ordered Aleck. "I been fergittin'. Yuh got a letter ter write."

Charley's scowl deepened. "Aw," he snarled, "why don't yuh write yore own letters, huh?"

Aleck was tall and lanky, almost gangling. But he was powerful. His strong fingers gripped the collar of Charley's wool shirt and without a word, he yanked his shorter, but stockier and heavier brother to his feet and hustled him outside, where they could talk unheard.

It was a cold winter night, with snow under foot. But it was clear overhead, with thousands of stars glittering in the dark-blue sky.

"Listen!" snapped Aleck. "I said yuh had a letter ter write, an' yuh'll write it. The reason I don't write it myself is thet yuh write a better letter'n I do."

"Yuh mean," snarled Charley,

"thet I kin lie better'n yuh kin."

Aleck smiled grimly. "Call it thet if yuh want ter," he snapped. "We cain't let the folks know that we gone over ter the wild bunch. They still think we're runnin' an honest business. They got ter keep thinkin' thet, savvy?"

Charley glanced up at him slyly. "Waal," he said, "didn't I write ter 'em last Thursday?"

"Yuh did not!" roared Aleck.

"Yuh seen me writin'," whined the younger man.

Aleck tightened his grip on his brother's arm and almost shook him in rage. "I seen yuh writin' a fool letter ter the vigilantes," he stormed, "tellin' 'em they could never take this outfit an' darin' 'em ter come out an' try. I think yo're plumb loco, kid."

"Aw, yo're jest scared o' yore own shadder," scoffed Charley. "There ain't no danger. This place is a regular fort. Them dumb vigilantes could never—"

"Never mind whether they could or couldn't," roared Aleck. "Yuh git back inside there an' write that letter home!"

Grumbling and muttering, Charley reentered the house and sat down at the table. He pulled paper, pen, and ink toward him and started to write. Aleck took his brother's place in the poker game.

But the players had lost interest. All had been up the night before and soon began to feel drowsy. One by one, they sought their bunks, or fell asleep at the table.

Aleck shook the latter awake again and told them to roll in. Then he turned to Charley, who had likewise fallen asleep, sprawled across the letter which he had started.

Before waking him, Aleck bent

forward and read what his brother had written:

DEAR MOTHER: Your kind and loving letter came to hand and we were glad to hear that you and father were well, as this leaves us at present. I meant to write last week, but—

"Waal, thet ain't a bad start," said Aleck, grinning, as he shook Charley awake and headed him toward his bunk. "Yuh kin finish it in the mornin'. Now let's all turn in."

But before turning in himself, Aleck stopped at Bob Hadley's bunk. "If anybody knocks," he said, "yuh answer the call. If there's more'n one or two, don't let 'em in till yuh wake me. Understand?"

"Shore," said Hadley drowsily.

Aleck climbed to his bunk, and soon the big ferry house was wrapped in a silence broken only by the heavy breathing of sleeping men.

A half hour passed. Then there was a sudden loud knocking at the door. It was repeated again and again till Hadley finally roused and crawled from his bunk.

"Who's there?" he called.

"I'm with a party bound fer town," came a voice. "We want ter cross the river. We'll pay yuh double if yuh'll set us across now."

"Where's the rest o' yore party?"

"At the bend, 'bout two hunerd yards down the river."

"Who's outside the door there with yuh now?"

"Nobody," the unseen man replied. "But I'm jest about froze. Could yuh let me in ter thaw out?"

"I reckon," said Hadley, and opened the door.

The stranger entered and strode across the room to the big stone fireplace that faced the door. Bending swiftly, he threw in some small dry

twigs that flared up brilliantly as they landed on the glowing coals.

The flames lighted up the big room and streamed through the door which the stranger had not closed when he entered. As if this bright light was a signal, four men suddenly leaped inside the cabin.

They had shotguns and Colts in their hands. They covered Hadley and the bunks in which the others still slept.

"Hands up!" shouted the leader. "We're vigilantes."

Aleck Stewart sat up in his bunk. Peering down, he found himself looking straight into the double barrels of a big scattergun. He sighed wearily. His dream, earlier that night, hadn't been such a bad warning, after all. He, his brother, and everybody else in the ferry house were caught—trapped like rats.

## II.

Will McConnell, the tall, good-looking leader of the five vigilantes, kept Aleck Stewart covered with his gun. Without taking his eyes away from him, he snapped an order to two of his men.

"Get their guns," he said.

The vigilantes searched every bunk and found that each man had a six-gun hanging from a nail near his head. These weapons were taken and piled in a far corner of the room.

"What'll we do with the skunks now, Will?" demanded one vigilante. "String 'em up right away?"

McConnell shook his head and smiled shortly. "No," he said, "I reckon we better wait for Lieutenant Paddock an' his men to git here. Then we kin hold a reg'lar trial an' finish up this rotten business. Meantime, let's git comfortable."

The door of the cabin was closed

and the fire stirred up to a snapping blaze. Then the vigilantes, always keeping the Stewarts and their companions covered—and not allowing them to leave their bunks—settled down to await the coming of Paddock who, according to their plan, was to have met them at the ferry house before the attack.

Will McConnell's grin grew broader as he thought back over the events of the last few minutes. Arriving at the house and finding it dark and quiet, he had decided that he and his four men did not need the help of Paddock to make a capture.

His eyes swept around the littered interior of the cabin. He easily read what had been going on there that night. Cards still littered the center table, and several empty whisky bottles lay on the floor.

Suddenly he spotted a single sheet of white letter paper, lying on the table beside an open ink bottle and a rusty pen. Getting up, he moved closer to see what these things meant.

"'Dear Mother!'" he started to read aloud. "'Your kind and loving letter came to hand an' we—'"

When he came to the end of the scrawl that Charley Stewart had written, his face was grim. Swinging around on his heel, he found Aleck Stewart watching him from the top bunk.

Something in Aleck's expression disturbed the vigilante leader. He suddenly felt vaguely uncomfortable. For some reason, the capture of the Stewart brothers' ferry house no longer seemed such a brilliant and praiseworthy undertaking.

But his thoughts along this line were abruptly interrupted. There was a shout from outside.

Will heard the sound of running feet, then the door of the house crashed open. He whirled to face it,

hand dropping to the butt of his holstered six-gun.

Into the room burst several men, dressed in army uniforms, all with guns in their hands. Their leader was a lean-faced lieutenant.

"Hands up!" roared the lieutenant. "You're all under arrest—What the— McConnell! What are you doing here? I thought you were going to wait for us."

Will McConnell relaxed and a wide grin split his weather-toughened face. The surprise of the army officer was funny. Several of the men in the room burst out laughing. And after a moment of stunned surprise, the newcomers joined in.

"I jest figured, Paddock," said McConnell finally, "thet there wasn't any sense in waitin' fer you to arrive. So we staged a little raid here on our own hook and—waal, there's the men we was after." He waved his hand toward the bunks on which lay the Stewart brothers, Bob Hadley, and their companions.

The lieutenant scowled as he looked at them. "A pretty-lookin' bunch," he muttered. "Yuh did a good job, Will. The country will be well rid of 'em, I'm thinkin'."

McConnell nodded. For almost a year, now, the residents of the ferry house had been causing trouble in the neighborhood. All sorts of crimes had been attributed to them. Several well-known outlaws and gunmen had been seen there.

The last straw had come when the vigilantes had received a note from Charley Stewart daring them to try to take their fort.

"Let's string 'em all up right now an' start home," suggested the same vigilante who had made that suggestion some time before. "I'm git-tin' hungry an'—"

"There'll be no hangin' without a trial," snapped McConnell.

"An' no trial without somethin' to eat," added the lieutenant. "I see plenty of food here. Rout out some of these outlaws and make them get our breakfasts."

The two Stewart brothers crawled unprotestingly from their bunks and set to work at the cook stove. Charley was white-faced and trembling, but Aleck was as cool and calm as if there were no vigilantes within a hundred miles of his home.

McConnell watched the tall young hombre, and in spite of himself, began to grow sorry for him. Again and again, his mind went back to that unfinished letter that he had found lying on the table. But there was nothing he could do about it now, and after breakfast, the trial got under way.

There were no useless formalities. Several of the vigilantes and soldiers were chosen to act as jurors. Then the whole outfit ranged themselves in a circle about the prisoners and listened to the evidence.

The first witness stood up. "These here Stewart skunks," he said, "has allus got plenty beef fer themselves, their friends, an' ter sell ter passin' freighters."

"What's wrong with that?" demanded Charley Stewart angrily.

"Nothin'," allowed the witness, "'cept that yuh don't own ary cow an' never have."

The jury nodded their heads and called the next witness. "Last summer," said this hombre, "a gent named 'Black Charley' stayed here at the ferry fer quite a spell. Reckon all yuh gents know what a terror that hombre was."

They all agreed. "Black Charley" was a notorious two-gun man and killer.

"Waal," went on the witness, "'bout the same time, a friend o' mine that owned a ranch near here

sold out an' headed fer Californy, soon after, with a string o' plumb fine broncs. Black Charley paid a boy ter spy on this gent's movements, an' bring the news back here. When my friend pulled out, Black Charley disappeared, too."

"Then what?" prompted McConnell, as the rancher paused.

"Jest that my friend never got ter Californy. Nobody never seen him nor his hosses nor his money ag'in. An' never heerd from him, even though he'd promised ter write ter some of us, an' was allus a gent to keep his word. I figure that Black Charley, a gent that hung out right here in this house, followed my friend, killed him, an' stole his hosses an' his dinero."

"But what's that got to do with us?" asked Aleck Stewart. "We couldn't ride herd on Black Charley, could we?"

"No, mebbe not," stated the witness, "but I figure yuh must 'a' knowned he had a kid spyin' on my friend. That bein' so, yuh should 'a' warned him what he was up agin'."

Again the jury nodded and called another man to the stand. This man fixed his eyes on Charley's white face and started telling his story.

"Three-four months ago," he said, "Charley there an' a blasted half-breed Injun got drunk over ter Miller's Station on Burnt River. On their way home, they stopped at Knuman's tool house an' yelled fer 'em all ter git up. Bein' as they was all sleepin', they didn't hear Stewart an' his pard. So the Injun drew his shootin' iron an' slammed lead right through the house. One slug killed John Knuman whilst he was sleepin' in his bed."

"Go on," said Lieutenant Paddock briskly, as the speaker paused.

"After they left Knuman's," said the witness, "they rode ter the Ex-

press Ranch. They walks inter the kitchen an' orders Mrs. Durkee, what runs the place, ter cook 'em breakfast. She allowed as how she wouldn't do it an'— *Blam!* The danged Injun plugs her in the arm."

Will McConnell added to the testimony at this point. A posse, he said, aroused by the killing of Knuman, had overtaken the two killers at Straw Ranch on Willow Creek.

"They hid in the brush," he said, "but we found the Injun easy. We strung him up ter a tree pronto."

"What happened to Stewart?"

"Waal, we all figured he was jest a wild kid who was drunk an' in bad company. We figured he'd had his lesson an' let him go."

That concluded the testimony. The jury retired to consider their verdict and judgment. The task took them half an hour.

"We finds 'em all guilty," announced the foreman. "An' we directs that Charley an' Aleck Stewart be took ter Bluff Station right away an' held there till noon ter-morrer. Then take 'em over ter the Junction House an' hang 'em."

"As fer Bob Hadley, we give him jest twenty-four hours ter git out o' this neck o' the woods—an' stay out. If he don't go, he'll git the same as the Stewarts."

The other men, the jury found, had no connection with the ferry house, and were discharged.

Will McConnell heard the verdict with mixed feelings. It did not seem fair to him. Why should the Stewarts be hanged, while all the others got off free?

Memory of that unfinished letter came back to him. And it brought with it thoughts of his own mother, whose death had sent McConnell into the West.

He had been an important man in the party that had captured the two

brothers. If they really were hanged, he thought, it would be because of his efforts.

That idea didn't please McConnell. It pleased him less, the longer he thought about it. Maybe, if the brothers had another chance——

He looked up. Aleck Stewart was watching him. A quick glance around showed him that none of the others was watching. He winked cautiously and signalled to Aleck to follow him out of the cabin.

### III.

No one paid any attention to them as McConnell led the way from the ferry house to the bank of the river. After all, McConnell was a leader of the vigilantes and could be relied upon to guard a prisoner.

Finally, when they were out of hearing of the rest, McConnell stopped and turned on Stewart.

"I don't figure," he said, "thet yore guilt justifies a hangin'. After all, neither one o' yuh done anything so awful bad. So I'm goin' ter try an' give yuh a chance, Stewart."

Aleck stared at his captor. He seemed staggered by the other's words. But when he spoke, he kept the eagerness out of his voice.

"Go on," was all he said.

"I'm goin' ter try an' arrange it so yuh kin both escape from Bluff Station ter-night," said McConnell. "I'll have ter be careful, fer these gents would hang me quicker'n they would yuh, if they found it out."

The two men talked there by the river bank for several minutes, McConnell outlining his plan. Just as he finished, he added a warning:

"If things pan out, an' yuh escape, don't neither of yuh never come back or try ter git even with these vigilantes. If yuh do, I'll go after yuh an' hang yuh myself."

Aleck promised. Then the two men walked slowly back to the ferry house where the rest of the party was preparing to start out for Bluff Station.

Soon the two prisoners were herded together and they all got under way. They reached the Bluff about nine o'clock that night.

The station was a long log building, divided into several rooms. The largest of these was a storeroom. Against the walls were built tiers of double-decked bunks.

The Stewart brothers were led into this storeroom by McConnell himself. He assigned them to a double bunk and turned to go.

The single door in the room opened outside. It could be locked and was usually barricaded by a heavy whisky barrel. Aleck Stewart, watching closely as McConnell left, saw that the man forgot—or neglected—to lock the door. And although Aleck strained his ears, he could not hear the sound of the barrel being rolled solidly up against the door on the outside.

For a long time, the two brothers lay on their bunks in the darkness, listening to the voices of the vigilantes who were gathered in the other rooms of the station. After what seemed hours, the voices quieted and silence settled over the camp.

Slowly and silently, the two brothers slipped from their bunks and crossed the pitch-black room. Aleck reached the door first and pushed gently upon it.

It gave easily and swung open far enough for a man to squeeze through. A chill wind blew in. The brothers didn't feel it. As silently as shadows, they stepped out of the house.

A light snow had fallen. Aleck looked at it in dismay. He saw at once that the vigilantes could easily

track them, when their disappearance was discovered in the morning.

"I tell yuh what," he snapped. "The ice has jammed a little above our ferry. We'll head fer there an' cross over on the ice. On the other side, mebbe we kin fog our trail so they can't foller us."

They started out rapidly. Charley grumbled and growled, swearing at his luck, the vigilantes, and the world in general. But Aleck was thankful that they had even this slim chance to escape.

They came to the place where Aleck had remembered the ice to be jammed. But only black, glistening open water met their eyes. The jam had broken and the river was clear.

"Only one thing ter do now," said Aleck. "We'll head fer the ferry. Mebbe the boat's still there an' we kin get it. We got ter git it."

Several hours of brisk walking brought them to the ferry house just at dawn. They saw at a glance that the boat was not on their side of the river.

Straining their eyes, they saw that it was at the landing on the other bank. They also saw that Bob Hadley was with it, just saddling his horse for his get-away. His twenty-four-hour time limit was almost up, and he was getting ready to make tracks.

Aleck called to him. Hadley responded, but didn't seem anxious to recross the stream and rescue his friends. Finally, however, he did so.

There were extra horses with Hadley, and in a few minutes, the three friends were mounted and spurring away. They knew that they were certain to be pursued, but they hoped to put enough distance between them and the vigilantes to make good their escape.

Almost without stopping, the three men rode hard all that day,

following the general course of the river. The going was hard, as they often had to break a trail through the snow. By three in the afternoon, their horses, to say nothing of the men themselves, were almost completely exhausted.

"We're almost ter Olds Ferry," Charley Stewart said, at last. "I say we stop here fer the night. I reckon we're safe enough now. Them vigilantes won't trail us this far."

"Plumb good idea," agreed Bob.

Aleck Stewart, however, was not so sure. He knew the men who made up the vigilantes. They were not the kind to let prisoners escape without a struggle. He was in favor of pushing on until dark.

But the others overruled him, saying that he could go on if he wanted to, but that they were going to camp right where they were—in the willows near Olds Ferry. So Aleck gave in and dismounted to help make camp.

They built a fire and rolled up in their blankets for extra warmth. Soon, with food and coffee under his belt, even Aleck began to feel more comfortable and secure.

There was no sign of pursuit. The three started to smoke. Darkness fell early. They dropped off to sleep, tired out from their long ride and—in the Stewarts' case—a sleepless night the night before.

In the morning, Aleck Stewart lighted the camp fire and started breakfast. There was still no sign of pursuit, and he was almost happy as he routed his brother and Hadley out of their blankets and told them to "come and get it."

The three fugitives had just taken their first bite of bacon and their first sip of hot coffee when it happened.

They all heard a slight rustling in

the brush. One of their horses snorted. They stiffened warily, every heart beating fast. Hands stole slowly down to gun butts. Fear gripped them. Some one was out there in the brush, creeping up on them.

Then suddenly a voice sounded—a voice Aleck Stewart recognized. "Boys!" came the call.

It was Will McConnell. Aleck's heart sank. The man whom he had thought to be his friend—the man who had allowed him and his brother to escape—had changed his mind and—

"Yo're surrounded, boys," McConnell shouted next. "There's no sense o' tryin' ter fight us. Throw down yore guns an' surrender."

For a second, Aleck was tempted to stand up and shoot it out with this man who had turned against him. Then his reason told him that something had happened—that McConnell had been forced, for some reason, to follow them. Probably, Aleck thought, he had had to do it to conceal his own part in the escape of the two brothers.

Aleck stepped boldly out of the brush. He faced Will McConnell.

"I'm willin' ter surrender ter you, McConnell," he said.

Realizing that they were surrounded, and that there was no hope of escape, Charley Stewart and Bob Hadley likewise threw down their guns and surrendered.

Then a party of four men stepped up to join McConnell. They stood some distance away from the prisoners, keeping them covered all the time. But they were not so far away that Aleck and his two pards could not hear what they said.

McConnell was speaking. "Boys," he said, "we kin do what we please with the Stewarts—shoot 'em here or take 'em back ter be hung. But

me, I'm in favor of lettin' 'em go, after payin' 'em fer their guns so they'll have money ter travel on. What d'yuh say? After all, it won't do no good ter hang 'em, an' mebbe they'll go straight from now on."

After a long powwow, three of the vigilantes agreed to the plan. But the fourth was against it. He was an hombre who had lost a horse to a member of the former gang and was still bitter about it.

"I say we ought ter take 'em back an' let 'em hang!" he kept repeating.

"Waal," said Will McConnell, "the vote is four ter one, countin' me. An' a majority rules in this country. So the Stewarts kin go free."

He stepped forward and approached the prisoners. Aleck Stewart came to meet him. Neither man spoke, immediately. Instead, they exchanged a keen glance and shook hands.

"That was a durned funny way fer a posse ter act," said Charley, pushing onward along the river. "What d'yuh s'pose they follerred us all day fer, an' then let us go?"

Aleck turned on him and shrugged his shoulders. "Couldn't say," he snapped. "But I kin say this: As soon as we git ter where there's pen an' ink yo're goin' ter finish that letter yuh started writin' a couple o' nights ago. An' that's what-ever."

**NOTE:** The events in this story of the old West occurred in 1863, near the Snake River, in Idaho. The Stewarts followed McConnell's advice and left the State. Later, McConnell became governor of Idaho, and then United States senator from that State. Although the vigilantes in the old days were often as hard and ruthless as the criminals they pursued, they occasionally could show justice and—what is sometimes even better—mercy.

THE EDITOR.



## Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is offered in order to preserve the old cowboy songs and frontier ballads that have come down to us by word of mouth from our grandfathers. It is also intended to help you folks who enjoy collecting Western songs.

If you want to find the words to some cowboy song, write and tell us about it. We'll do our best to find it for you and publish it in the magazine. If you know any of the old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

We do not send out copies of songs to individual readers. All we can do is tell you in what issue of *Wild West Weekly* you will find the one you want.

Send all communications, with your name and address printed clearly, to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's *Wild West Weekly*, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

**H**YAR'S wishin' yuh a Happy New Year, folks! I hope it'll be a year of peace an' plenty fer each an' every one of yuh. I hope that from the bottom of my heart, folks!

I reckon New Year's wouldn't be New Year's without some talk of good resolutions, so hyar goes: I'd be plumb dee-lighted if each one of

yuh who really is int'rested in readin' an' singin' these old songs would resolve tuh keep yore eyes an' ears open durin' the comin' year, fer any new old-timers. Thet sounds funny, but it's what I mean.

An' if yuh'd do a bit of inquirin' around, especially among the old folks, an' try tuh locate songs that have come down by word of mouth

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## Western Pen Pals

Conducted by SAM WILLS—Postmaster

Some day you're going out West yourself to the Western outdoors. It will be a nice thing to have friends out West when that time comes—friends who'll extend a hand o' welcome and put you onto things.

You can make these friends through this department of Wild West Weekly. The idea is to exchange information about different parts of the West—about ranches and camps, getting work, prospecting, and learning to rope and ride.

Letters are exchanged only between men and men, and between women and women. Let's get together and make this department a real help to readers of Wild West Weekly. I'll do my part by forwarding letters between parties likely to be interested in writing to one another. You do yours by always printing your whole name and address carefully on every letter you send to this department; and by giving the name and State of the Pen Pal you choose, as it appears in the magazine, as well as the date of the magazine in which you find him or her.

Address your letters to Sam Wills, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

**J**EST a couple o' days now an' the old year will pass along.

1935 is upon us, an' I hope every reader o' this hyar department will have a happy an' prosperous one.

It's the time fer lookin' ahead an' kind o' figurin' what one'd most like

tuh achieve in the comin' year. Waal, hyar's my great hope: I wish tuh become the best frien' o' thousands more an' help each o' them make new frien's. Thet's worth while an' I know that I can do it, if every Pen Pal will be a booster.

Now read this week's letters.

**SONG LOVERS, SPECIALS,  
AN' SECH**

This hyar headin' stands fer a lot, an' yuh'll not regret readin' every letter thet's printed.

DEAR SAM: Please get me some Pen Pals. I am interested in songs to sing with a guitar, and I hope there will be boys who will be good enough to send me some.

JOHN HENSLEY, OF TENNESSEE.

DEAR SAM: I am a married man of twenty-one, asking for Pen Pals with whom I can exchange songs and snapshots, especially the former because collecting them has become a sort of hobby with me.

AL WOGMAN, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I should be very grateful to you, if you would publish a request for Pen Pals for me. I am greatly interested in pure-bred poultry, and if there are any readers similarly inclined, I should certainly like to hear from them. Letters from Oregon and Canada are especially welcome, but I will answer any one who writes to me. I am a man, around thirty years old.

FRANCIS C., OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I would very much like to become a member of the Pen Pals. I am a soldier, but I have time enough to follow my hobby of playing the guitar, singing, and yodeling. I am especially fond of cowboy and other old-time songs. Will gladly answer all letters and exchange snaps.

RANDOLPH L., OF WYOMING.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of thirteen. My hobby is collecting stamps, and I have quite a number of duplicates which I desire to trade. Please get me some Pen Pals, preferably of my own age, who are also interested in stamps.

CHAS. R., OF LOUISIANA.

**FROM FAR AWAY**

Here's some expressed wishes fer frien's in our own country. Waal, show these folks thet it's easy tuh find 'em among the Pen Pals.

DEAR SAM: I am a limey of twenty-seven who desires to find some friends in your country with whom to exchange news of interest concerning our respective countries. Will also gladly correspond with fel-lows elsewhere in the world.

THORNTON, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: I wonder whether you can find some Pen Pals for a British boy of seventeen? I do not especially care from what part of the United States letters may come, but I surely hope to hear soon from some one. Will gladly exchange snaps, papers, or anything else of interest.

BILL CARR, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: Could you possibly get some Pen Pals for a lonesome girl? I am seventeen years old, and girls around my own age from any part of the world are preferred, especially those who enjoy what I like most: Outdoor sports, housekeeping, cooking, and playing the piano. This seems like a big order, but I hope that you will not disappoint me.

ERNY, OF PHILIPPINE ISLANDS.

DEAR SAM: I am writing to join the Pen Pals whose letters I read in the W. W. W. I am a girl of sixteen, and I hope that this plea will result in my making contacts with a good many Pen Pals all over the world, not to forget the western United States. Will gladly exchange snaps or anything else desired.

SARAH WHYTE, OF NEW ZEALAND.

**LONESOME FOLKS**

Bein' sad an' blue, especially at this time o' year shore is tough luck, an' I urge everybody tuh respond pronto tuh these pleas.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fifteen, living in the suburbs of a small town. I moved here only a short while ago, and for that reason have not made any friends as yet. So you can well understand that I am lonesome and anxious for Pen Pals. Being interested in the West, I would especially like to hear from girls out there, and any one would oblige me by sending a song or two along, because I love nothing better than a good Western tune.

VIRGINIA F., OF MARYLAND.

DEAR SAM: I am a young fellow of nineteen, and I am very lonesome. I have a job as night clerk in a hotel, and that does not give me much chance of making real friends around here. I would like to have some Pen Pals to correspond with, especially some who are interested in horses and guns of any kind. All letters will be answered promptly as I have plenty of time to write.

TOMMY, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fifteen. Having no brothers or sisters, I am very lonesome and long for some Pen Pals to write me cheering letters. Girls in large families are especially asked to write as I would like to get an idea of their viewpoint. All letters will be answered.

DORIS W., OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a very lonesome young boy, and I would be very glad if you could get some of your Pen Pals to write to me, as I am sure in need of some cheering. THOMAS, OF KENTUCKY.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonesome boy of eighteen. Would you mind trying to interest some Pen Pals so that they will write to me? I would be especially glad if some Western boys would come to my assistance. However, I promise to answer all letters and will also exchange snaps.

HOYT KELLEY, OF GEORGIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of eighteen. There is not much work to be done now, and I am lonesome quite often. For that reason, I wish you would find me some Pen Pals anywhere. Will answer all letters and exchange snaps. JOAN S., OF WISCONSIN.

#### WESTERNERS WANTED

Interest in the West is as strong as ever. Come forward, gals and agents, an' tell 'em all they want tuh know.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man of eighteen, a photographer by trade since I left high school, interested also in dancing and orchestra work. As I have lived in the city all my life, I would like very much to get in touch with fellows who can tell me of the West and its mode of life. I know very little about it and would surely welcome any sort of information.

KEMPE, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of sixteen. Unfortunately, I am not in the best of health and having heard that the West is apt to help one to build up, I would like to get some Pen Pals who can give me information about life there and chances for finding work. I would love to get on a ranch in Arizona and, of course, would gladly work in return for board and clothes. Will some one help me get located?

MAX MOUTENSEN, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl, thirteen years old. I live in the mountainous part of this State, and I know nothing about the Western plains. For that reason, I am asking you to get me in touch with girls in Texas and other plains States.

SHIRLEY, OF OREGON.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of thirteen. I would like to get some cowboy Pen Pals, because the longer I live in the city, the more interested I get in the wide open spaces of the West.

ALTON, OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fourteen, and I come to you with my plea for Pen Pals in the Western States, because I am very much interested in ranch life and know so little about it. Please, girls, in Texas, Montana, or Arizona, write to me, and I will answer promptly.

RUTH DRAKE, OF TENNESSEE.

DEAR SAM: I am very fond of the West and would like to know more about it. For this reason, I am asking you to get me in touch with some Western girls around sixteen years old, which is my own age. I promise to answer all letters and will also exchange snapshots.

BETTY WILLIAMS, OF MARYLAND.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of thirteen, and, as I am interested in the West, I would like to get some Pen Pals there, especially in Texas, Nevada, or Arizona. However, I will answer letters from elsewhere and hope that there will be a whole lot that I have to reply to.

LAWRENCE TATE, OF MAINE.

DEAR SAM: I would like to get in touch with some Pen Pals in the West. I am twenty-three and interested in all kinds of outdoor sports, with football as my favorite. I would be glad if some forest rangers would answer this plea, as I have been studying on that line for over a year, and expect to be one myself, some day.

SLIM R., OF TENNESSEE.

DEAR SAM: I am twelve years old, very fond of horses and cattle, and I would like to have some Pen Pals of my age in Western States who can tell me more about them. I will gladly reply with information about the East, if any one is interested to hear about it.

NORMAN PRAET, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of sixteen. I would be very glad if you could round up a couple of Western Pen Pals for me, especially some one who could give me information about job possibilities in Western States. STANLEY W., OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: Will you please print this request for Pen Pals? I would like to hear from real Western girls, preferably from Texas and Arizona, although I will gladly answer letters from other States as well. I am eighteen years old, and all girls from fifteen years old upwards will be welcome correspondents. My interests are divided between music and the West.

DIANA GREENE, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: May I join the Pen Pals? I am a married woman of thirty with three small children. Notwithstanding that, I get lonesome and long for the West where I lived for several years. That is the reason why I would like to get Pen Pals in the West and Northwest. Will exchange snaps and books with any one who is interested.

R. J., OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of sixteen. I like all sorts of sports, especially swimming and dancing, and desire to get in touch with Western girls similarly interested.

ELENOR, OF MAINE.

DEAR SAM: I am a young country girl, and I would like to get letters from some of your Pen Pals out West. Will answer all letters I get. CORA LEE, OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I am a young fellow, twenty-two years old, at present a member of the C. C. C. I have lived on a ranch the greater part of my life, and I would like to find some Pen Pals in the West, because when I get through here, I intend to take up ranching.

BUSTER B., OF SOUTH DAKOTA.

DEAR SAM: I am twenty-one, a college graduate, and now in the medical profession. The West were just words for me until I started reading the W. W. W. and went to see Western movies. Now I know what I have missed. I long to correspond with some real cowboys and other lads who live in the great West, and I hope you will be able to find some for me soon.

J. WILLIAM, OF OHIO.

#### GENERAL REQUESTS

Jest askin' fer Pen Pals hyar an' thar. Anybody is welcome tuh answer these pleas.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fifteen, interested in sports, singing, and dancing. Please get some Pen Pals for me, preferably of my own age, anywhere in the world.

KATHERINE J., OF SOUTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am interested in Pen Pals, because they offer a chance to hear from almost everywhere in the world. I am a man in my early twenties and desire to get Pen Pals in all parts of the world.

C. L. MORRELL, OF GEORGIA.

DEAR SAM: I am longing to hear from Pen Pals anywhere and promise to answer all letters promptly. I am a boy, fourteen years old. KEN STEINMETZ, OF COLORADO.

DEAR SAM: I am a lad of nineteen, a sign painter by trade. Please find some Pen Pals for me, no matter where, as I desire to correspond with some fellows.

SIGN PAINTER, OF NEBRASKA.

DEAR SAM: Here is a request for Pen Pals from a real old bronchobuster. Can you help me find some, especially among fellows who know something about horses? I don't care how old they are or where they live. CLYDE K., OF NEW MEXICO.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fourteen, anxious to find Pen Pals in any part of the world. I love to read, sew, see movies, and ride a bicycle.

WEESIE, OF SOUTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of twenty-one. I would like to get Pen Pals anywhere, because I am starting a collection of view cards and would gladly exchange with others. I have many other hobbies so that there should be something of interest to write about for a lot of Pen Pals.

ZEDA, OF NEW JERSEY.

Thar we are. Plenty of new frien's tuh choose from. Now get busy an' write yore letters. So long until next week.



# The Wranglers Corner

All letters intended for The Wranglers Corner should be addressed to The Range Boss, Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

**T**HERE'S a plumb fine bunch of hombres waitin' at the Corner as we comes in fer this week's meetin'. First gent we sees is Calamity Boggs. He's likewise the first one we hears. Fer like always, Calamity is wailin' an' moanin' over somethin'.

"I tell yuh, gents," he's sayin', "thet this ain't agoin' to be no happy New Year fer me. I'm agoin' to die horrible. If I don't git strung up by a gang o' punchers who take me fer a rustler, I'll catch the noo-mony an' cash in pronto. It's awful fer a feller to have the terrible luck I do. Why jest yesterday I was—"

"Waal, help me, Hannah!" explodes Buck Foster, top-hand rider fer Billy West's Circle J spread. "What am the matter with yuh, Boggs? Yuh sound like an ol'

woman—beefin' an' wailin' around. Cut it out, fer Pete's sake!"

Calamity looks over at the lanky range veteran. He shakes his dark, curly head an' groans.

"Yuh don't know what yo're talkin' about, Buck," he says. "If yuh had luck like mine—"

"Blazes!" cuts in Joe Scott. "If Buck had luck like yores—or like the kind yuh *say* is yores—we'd all be plumb thankful. Howsoever, the ol' coot's a fool fer luck. He kin blunder inter more scrapes—an' then blunder right out of 'em ag'in—than any man alive. An' it's all jest bull luck. He ain't—"

"I'll be a horned toad," yells Buck, "if yuh ain't a danged spotty-faced nuisance! You am the luckiest hombre in the world. If yuh wasn't, yuh'd 'a' been buzzard bait, long ago!"

Waal, there's all that's needed ter start a nice little ruckus between them two pard's. They don't miss the chance. Whilst we starts takin' the roll, they're agoin' it, hammer an' tongs.

There's two Shortys on hand ter-night—Shorty Stevens, who's Calamity's pard, an' Shorty Masters, M. D., the which means "mule driver." With the mule driver is the Sonora Kid.

Of course, Billy is here, too. An' so is Sing Lo, the little chink cook an' handy man fer Circle J. Jest now, the little Chinaman is watchin' Buck an' Joe tear inter each other, an' is grinnin' like a danged heathen idol or somethin'.

But time is shore flittin'. So we raps fer order an' opens up the mail sack. Here's the first letter that comes out:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to the Wranglers Corner, and I hope you print it. I have been reading 3W for a plumb long time and think it is a *mag Bueno* magazine.

I sure do wish that you would print more stories about Johnny Forty-five, Kid Wolf, Circle J, Bud Jones, Silver Jack Steele, and Sonny Tabor.

I especially want you to print this, so that I can have my say about those back-shooting skunks who don't like Buck Foster and write in to say mean things about him. I also want to tell Buck that I hope he loses his temper, some day, and just plumb kills that ornery, low-down, no-account Joe Scott.

Yours till Buck Foster becomes the owner of Circle J.

PAUL COUCH.

Kilgore, Texas.

"Thar, carrot-top!" shouts Buck, his brown eyes gleamin' as he yanks furiously at his droopin' gray mustache. "How d'yu like that? By heifers, I reckon that'll hold yuh fer a while. Boss, that Couch hombre has got savvy! I'd like to shake him by the hand."

"I'd like ter shake yuh by the

neck, yuh ol' buzzard!" snaps Joe. "Every time anybody writes in an' says yo're smart—"

"Come on an' try shakin' me—by the neck or any other way, durn yuh!" says Buck. "I'll take yore ornery carcass plumb apart an' find out what makes yuh tick."

Joe starts ter come back at Buck. But Billy West, actin' on a signal from us, steps in an' puts the kibosh on the argument. We grins an' hauls out another letter. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to the Wranglers Corner, although I have been reading W. W. W. for over a year. I think it is a very fine magazine.

I see where you got a letter from a pain in the neck named Robert Voorhees. I think he is the worst pest yet. If he doesn't like the spread, does he have to read about it? And does he need to hurt all the waddies' feelings, too?

My favorites are Sonny Tabor, the Oklahoma Kid, Kid Wolf, the Bar U twins, Silver Jack Steele, Circle J, Johnny Forty-five—but not that four-flushing dumb-bell, Krumm—Freckles Malone, Shorty Masters, Bud Jones, and Hungry and Rusty.

I want to add my vote for no girls in your stories. In stories with girls in them, the hero always has to almost get killed at the show-down because of having to defend the gal.

The hombres who call Buck Foster such bad names think they're smart. They aren't. They're dumb. Buck is my favorite waddy, and I'll bet a silver dollar he'd be a swell fighter if that carrot-topped pest called Joe Scott didn't always make fun of him.

Here's hoping that Robert Voorhees sees this letter. Yours till Buck Foster dodges trouble.

SATISFIED READER.

Shreveport, Louisiana.

An' here's another:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading 3W for quite a while, and I think all of the waddies on your spread are fine, with the exception of Buck Foster. Tell him the next time moths start eating his vest, to let them keep right on till they eat him, too. I sure would like to see Buck dancing to the tune of Joe Scott's six-

guns and dodging the pans that Sing Lo could throw at his old black Stetson.

I think that Silver Jack Steele and Sonny Tabor are two of the best waddies on the spread. Kid Wolf, Dave Starr, Bud Jones, Jimmy Quick, and Calamity Boggs are all right, too.

Boss, I have a request to make: Please bring back Señor Red Mask, the Desert Phantom, and Dave Starr.

I read my first Freckles Malone story a few weeks ago, and I sure enjoyed it. Let's have a lot more stories about him. I have also enjoyed the stories about Tex Carnochan of Bitter Creek. Keep him going, too.

I had something else to tell you, Boss, but I've plumb forgot what it was. Still I wouldn't have time to write it, anyway, for here comes the stage to take me to Cotulla City where I'll get my horse, Thunder, and streak for the open range.

Yours until Sing Lo breaks a skillet on Buck Foster's head, BOBBY SMITH.  
Macon, Georgia.

Buck was all steamed up over that first letter. But when he hears the last one—waal, some o' the wind goes out of his sails in a hurry. An' then he happens ter see Sing Lo.

"By heifers," he roars, "yuh jest try breakin' a skillet on my head, yuh ornery, yaller-hided pest! I'd like nothin' better'n ter git my hands—"

"Aw, shut up!" cuts in Joe Scott. "Give yore jaw a rest, walrus! The rest of us wants ter listen ter the Boss—not ter you!"

Buck stares at the redhead an' blinks. He's tryin' ter think o' somethin' ter say. But afore he kin find the words, we grabs another letter an' starts readin' it:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to the Wranglers Corner. I never wrote before, because I didn't think there was a Corner. But I have been a reader of 3W for the last five years and think that it is great.

I'd like to read a story, sometime, about Kid Wolf taking after Sonny Tabor, and catching him. When they meet, they should have a nice fist fight. I'll bet a lot of other reading hombres feel the same way.

My favorites are Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, Johnny Forty-five, Silver Jack Steele, and Circle J. I'd also like to read stories about Storm King, Señor Red Mask, and Devil Tripp again.

I think Buck Foster is great. He could take on two hombres like Joe Scott and still cry for more. I don't think even Hungry and Rusty could beat him on the draw.

I'd like to read about a gun fight between Sonny Tabor and Kid Wolf. I think Kid Wolf would win.

Yours till Kid Wolf shoots Sonny Tabor.  
DON RAYMOND.

Fort Edward, New York.

"Thet jasper is a nice sort o' gent, ain't he, Boss?" chuckles the Sonora Kid. "He says as how he'd like ter see a 'nice fist fight' between Sonny an' the Kid. An' he wants ter see 'em have a gun fight, besides. Nice person, thet Don Raymond!"

The rest o' the gang laughs, too. They know thet Don Raymond don't want ter see either Kid Wolf or Sonny Tabor beat up or killed. But his letter shore sounds like he does.

"Waal, fellers," we says, "reckon there's jest about time fer another letter or two. Let's see what we got here."

We dips down inter the sack an' pulls out this:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Your magazine is all right, but why don't you print the stories that your readers have been asking for? I know you brought back Dave Starr, the Shootin' Fool, the Trouble Triplets, the Oklahoma Kid, and Freckles Malone, and I like them all very much. But where is Johnny Forty-five?

Boss, you know, yourself, that the readers have been asking for another story about him for a plumb long time. Bring him back. Kid Wolf, Silver Jack Steele, the Whistlin' Kid, and Bud Jones are all fine, but Johnny is the best of all.

Yes, Boss, all your characters are good with the exceptions of Lum Yates and Shorty Masters. Circle J is not so bad, but you ought to give some of the other waddies a chance in their place, once in a while.

Why don't you bring Johnny Dowst around to the Wranglers Corner some night? He is a darned good hombre.

I liked the Apache and Wagonwheel stories very much. I hope to read more about them. But I probably never will.

I've heard people asking for stories about Smoky Langdon. I never read any stories about him, but if he is any good, bring him around.

Bud Jones of Texas was very good in his last novelette. Why not put the Bar U twins in more novelettes?

You have some danged good writers on your magazine, such as William F. Bragg, William A. Todd, Stephen Payne, and Ward M. Stevens. I consider Scott and Baumhofer your best cover artists.

Well, I've said about all I've got to say. I'll just repeat: Bring back Johnny Forty-five!

Yours till you admit that Johnny won't ever be back.

FRITZ.

Wheeling, West Virginia.

P. S. Tell Buck Foster I would like to draw his picture, but I don't know how to draw a sheep-herder.

Waal, Fritz, if yuh'll jest cast yore eyes down ter the box ad that appears right down below here, yuh'll see that yore favorite—John Socrates Forty-five—will be back on the spread next week. Here's hopin' nothin' happens ter prevent yore readin' this latest yarn about him. It's a dandy!

There's news for the admirers of Señor Red Mask, down there, too!

An' that's all fer this week, we reckon. The waddies troop out, fork their broncs, an' high-tail it yonderly. There'll be another meetin' next week.

THE RANGE BOSS.

### COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

#### SEÑOR RED MASK'S BORDER TRAIL

*Novelette*

By GUY L. MAYNARD

Here yuh are, gents—a new series o' stories about one o' your favorite hombres! The red-masked rider o' the Rio trails once more forks his Thunder hoss an' crosses the Rio fer justice.

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*Novelette*

By FORBES PARKHILL

A rip-roarin' story o' the Pony Express in the days when the West was new, an' redskins done their best to collect palefaces' scalps.

#### JOHNNY FORTY-FIVE AND THE FUNERAL RIDERS

*Novelette*

By ANDREW A. GRIFFIN

The rhymin' deputy an' his fat pard, Krumm, come ridin' onto a range where Ol' Man Trouble is boss. Krumm ain't so enthusiastic, but Johnny once more lives up to his name.

*Also stories of Bud Jones of Texas, by J. Allan Dunn; the Bar U twins, by Charles E. Barnes; the Shootin' Fool, by Houston Irvine—and other characters.*

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