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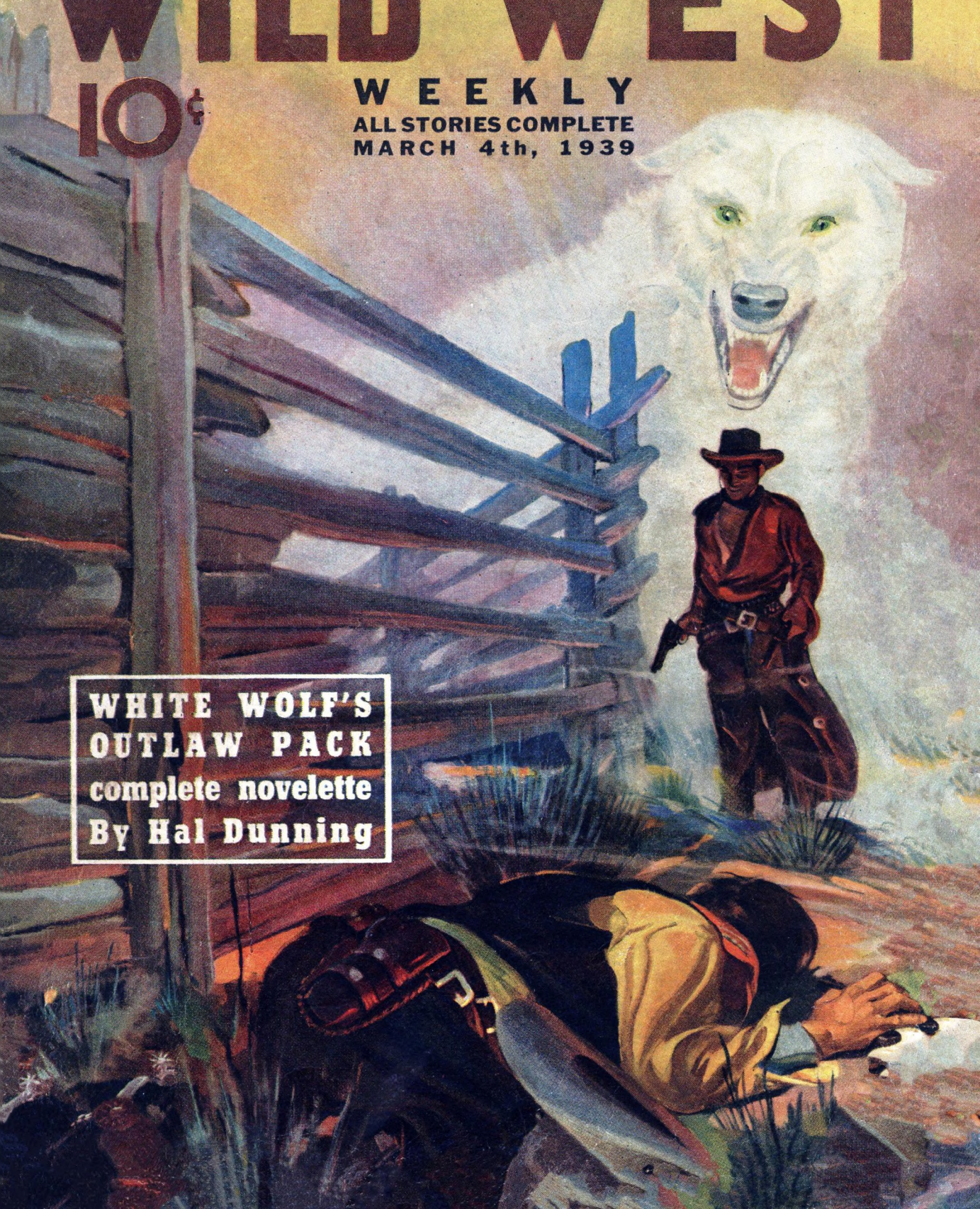
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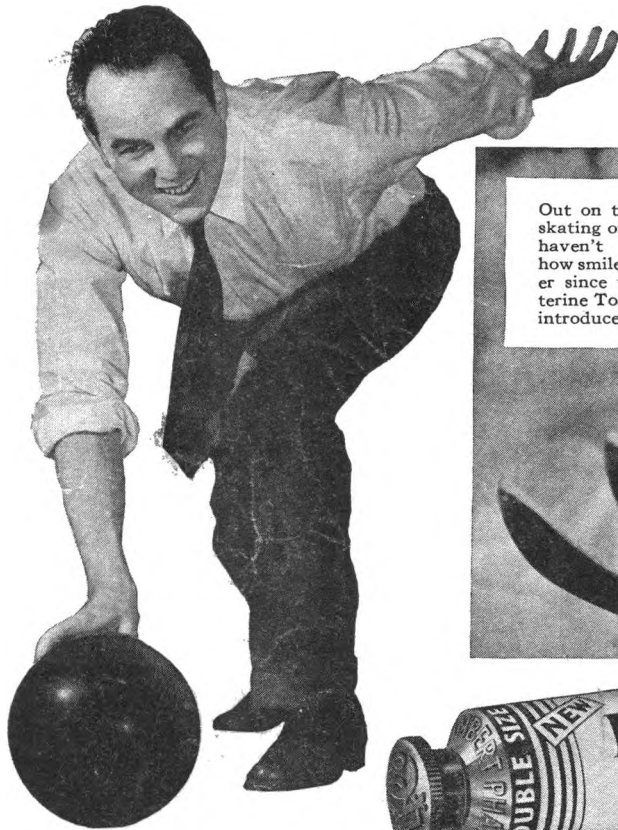
ALL STORIES COMPLETE

MARCH 4th, 1939

**WHITE WOLF'S
OUTLAW PACK**
complete novelette
By Hal Dunning



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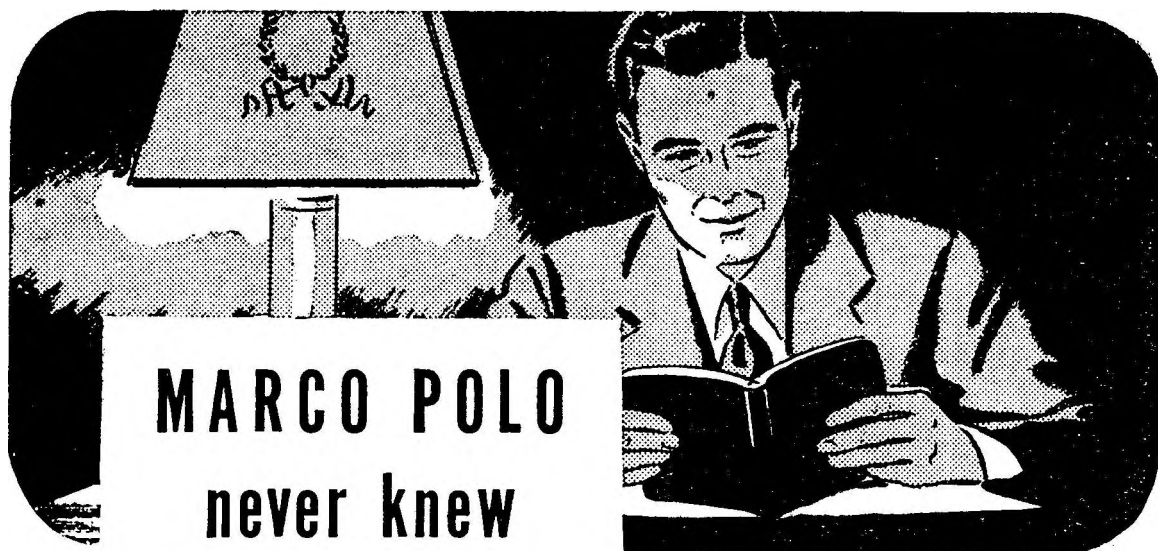
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Cover Picture from

"White Wolf's Outlaw Pack" . . . Painted by H. W. Scott

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Any similarity in name or characterization to persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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A Chat with the Range Boss

WELCOME to another issue o' 3W, readin' hombres an' *muchachas!* As I set here lookin' it over in the *sanctum sanctorum*—which same is nothin' but a couple o' ten-dollar words meanin' "editor's den"—I kind o' have a feelin' yo're goin' to like it.

Thet outlaw hombre, the White Wolf, is in ag'in, you'll notice. When I first picked up Hal Dunning's story an' read the title, "White Wolf's Outlaw Pack," I come mighty near jumpin' out o' the old easy-chair.

"What's this?" I asks myself. "How come Jim-twin Allen, the White Wolf thet always runs alone, is claimin' an outlaw pack? Jim shore ain't runnin' with no real lobos. Not unless he's changed considerable since the last time he was around."

Waal, I got to readin' plumb pronto to discover what Hal Dunning was up to now, an' the result was thet it wa'n't no time a-tall afore H. W. Scott, the artist, was hard at work on this week's cover picture, an' "White Wolf's Outlaw Pack" was on the way to the printer.

Hope you like it.

J. Allan Dunn comes through this week with another yarn about Bud Jones, the Texas Ranger. It's been a plumb long time since I've heard from J. Allan, but after readin' "Rangers Two," I'm thinkin' it was worth waitin' fer. Yore amigo, Bud,

discovers a new pard fer himself, this week—an old hombre named Kiowa Kenyon, who used to be a Ranger himself, back in the days of Sam Houston.

Not so long ago, J. Allan wrote to the Range Boss an' explained about ol' Kiowa:

I've got a soft spot in my heart for those old-time Rangers, and although old Kiowa is very much alive and kicking, I keep thinking of many another who lies wrapped in

his blanket for a shroud,
Where now and then the passing cloud
May let some gracious teardrops fall,
And wild flowers serve as Nature's pall;
That grow the braver from his dust,
Bright emblems of a Ranger's trust.
In life, it never was denied,
It is not dead because he died.

Another fairly new member o' the 3W outfit who seems to have caught on plumb well with you readin' hombres is Peaceful Perkins o' Purgatory—an' points west. He's back ag'in this week in a novelette, "Bullet Ballots In Purgatory."

Bein' kind of interested in Peaceful, I asked his author, C. William Harrison, to kind of explain the origin o' thet easygoin', calm-lookin' collection o' cold nerves, steel muscles, an' lightnin' gun hands. Here's what C. William says in reply:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: You handed me a tough job when you asked me the origin of Peaceful Perkins. But I'll do my best to let down my hair.

I guess it started while I was watching several punchers uncock some half-wild brones on a little spread in Idaho.

First, there was the horse. He was a big, shaggy, rawboned brute, standing sleepily while the punchers strapped the hull on him. Red Lightning, or something like that, they called him, and he sure lived up to his name when he exploded under the riders who tried to top him.

And then there was the little gent, who must have ridden in looking for a job. He didn't look like much, and the crowbait mare he rode was plenty seedy.

He just sat there looking on while the big bronc bounced off every rider who climbed into the saddle.

Then he decided to make a try. He didn't ask for the chance, just slid off his crowbait, swung onto the bronc, and rode it to a stand-still.

After that ride, the straw boss got nasty and asked the stranger who the blank-blank he was and why he had butted in—and was sorry for it a minute later.

Me, I was sorry, too! The straw boss landed in my lap without knowing how he got there, and then the little gent piled in to make it a full house. That frozen-faced stranger was plenty tough. I know, because during the ruckus, the straw boss ducked, and I didn't.

So that's how Peaceful Perkins got started. I had to work up something to make the little gent pay for the bruised jaw one of his wild punches gave me!

Very sincerely,

C. WILLIAM HARRISON.

Thet's shore a new way o' gittin' yore revenge on a feller critter. Howsomever, I'm plumb glad thet Señor Harrison thought of it, since it gave 3W our Peaceful pard.

Not so long ago, another letter blew in from Chuck Martin, the gent thet wrote "The Six-gun Law Cub" in this issue. Chuck is shore the writin'est hombre thet yores

truly, the Range Boss, has ever met. But I'm plumb glad he is, on account of he's always got so many interestin' things to say. Fer in-stance, take a look at this:

DEAR BOSS: I took a few days off last week to do a little work on something that I think you might be interested in. I'm building something I never saw before.

A lot of Western authors try to let on that they don't smoke their guns or kill any villains. I've killed plenty of them with my typewriter, and I've built a "Literary Boothill" on the back slope of the ranch, where my new studio will be.

I have seventy full-size graves mounded up and covered with rock to keep away the varmints; made a fence around it by cutting down trees and using the branches. Cactus all over the graveyard, and each grave has a headboard I painted, giving the name of the deceased and the title of the story in which he died with his boots on.

Like as not, the movie companies will use it for shots later on, and it shore is attracting a lot of attention.

So far, Rawhide Runyan has three "good outlaws" tallied out there in the literary skull orchard.

It's a hell of a way for a writing gent to be spending his vacation time, but I'll be sending you some pictures soon.

Like always,

CHUCK.

At the rate Rawhide Runyan and other Chuck Martin heroes kill off the bad men, it wouldn't be none surprisin' if Chuck soon had to turn his hull spread into his Literary Boothill.

Reckon thet's jest about all I got time fer this week, gals an' gents. Here's hopin' you enjoy this week's mag an' thet you'll all come troopin' back next week fer another gab-fest with yores truly,

THE RANGE BOSS.



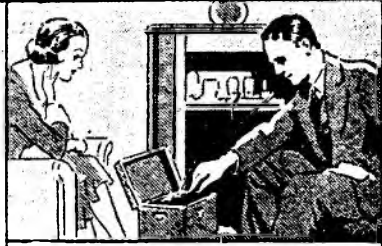


I jumped from \$18 a week to \$50
-- a Free Book started me toward this
GOOD PAY IN RADIO

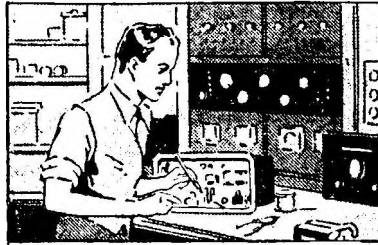
HERE'S
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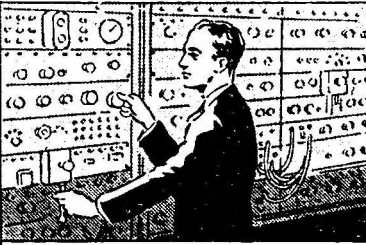
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WHITE WOLF'S OUTLAW PACK



Author of "Deputy Sheriff White Wolf," etc.

Notched guns or a hang noose—either way it looked like shore death for Jim-Twin Allen.

CHAPTER I.

BULLETS FOR A BULLY.

JIM-TWIN ALLEN shifted his weight nervously on the peeled-pole corral fence, high-heeled boots bracing his slim frame with

catlike grace as he angled to put his six-gun holsters into position in case a fast draw should be necessary.

A few feet away, Grizzly Shurdle of the G Bar S outfit had seized a young cowpuncher by the shirt

front and had shoved him roughly back against the corral fence. It was the shock of the kid's body against the rails that had attracted Allen's attention.

"I don't see yore dad at this hyar ranch auction, Skinny Burkett!" snarled Grizzly Shurdle, his whiskery jaw inches from the younger's freckled face. "You seem tuh be the only representative from the Wineglass outfit. Is that right?"

Jim-twin Allen caught the kid's reply, somewhat shaky but high-pitched with defiance.

"Dad sent me over from the Wineglass tuh buy in some—some things we need over on the spread, Shurdle. An' you ain't got no call tuh manhandle me thisaway. Let me go!"

For reply, Shurdle rocked the kid's head with a stinging slap to the jaw, a blow which went unnoticed by the sombreroed cattlemen who had come from all the surrounding ranches to be present at the close-out auction of the Nevada Cattle Company's Number Six outfit.

Jim-twin Allen clutched his gun butts as a wave of anger swept through him. It went against his grain to see a big hombre mistreat a kid hardly fourteen years of age—a kid weighing around ninety pounds and without a gun at his hip.

"Last year when Number Eight ranch was auctioned off by the bank, I tried tuh buy myself a span o' work mules!" snarled big Grizzly Shurdle, his viselike grip on the kid's arm making Skinny Burkett wince and almost cry out with pain. "But yore danged father run up the bid an' got them mules fer his Wineglass spread. I don't intend tuh be beat by him at tuhday's auction, savvy that?"

Skinny Burkett brushed a sleeve across his eyes, gulped hard to keep from breaking down, and retorted in a harsh whisper:

"I didn't ride fifteen mile tuh be buffaloed by you, Grizzly. Ifn you try tuh buy the stuff I'm biddin' on, then be prepared tuh raise me plenty, see?"

Shurdle slapped his thonged-down Colt .45s ominously.

"Jest try it, son!" rasped Shurdle threateningly. "Jest try it. When the auctioneer puts that remuda on the block, keep yore mouth close-hobbled, ifn yuh know what's good fer yuh. An' the same goes fer the mowin' machine an' the twelve sets o' harness tuh be auctioned off, savvy?"

Rasping his guns ominously in their holsters, Shurdle turned and bowlegged his way into the crowd of cattlemen packed about the chuck wagon on which a pompous-chested auctioneer was arranging his papers preparatory to starting the biggest sale which Elko County, Nevada, had ever experienced.

Jim-twin Allen, a fugitive from Western law, was passing through the Elko region on a zigzag flight through cow country on his way to the outlaws' refuge below the Mexican line.

In need of a new saddle, he had decided to take in the big auction, which the bankrupt cattle company was giving.

"Crawl up hyar, Skinny!" called out Jim-twin Allen softly, as he saw young Burkett rubbing his bruised arm. "Crawl up hyar, whar yuh'll be able tuh hear the auctioneer better."

The younger's freckle-dotted face worked itself into a weak grin as he accepted Jim Allen's helping hand and climbed to the corral fence's top rail.

"I seen that Shurdle bullyin' yuh, Skinny," said Allen, calmly rolling a brown-paper cigarette. "Who does he think he is, anyhow? Yuh got as much right tuh bid as Shurdle has."

Burkett rubbed a wet cheek on his scrawny shoulder.

"Shurdle's the range boss o' these parts," he whispered. "He's shot plenty of hombres who've tried tuh buck him. My—my dad, Silver Pete Burkett, sent me over hyar tuh bid on a mowin' machine. He told me not tuh come back without it, pervidin' I could git it an' a couple o' work hosses fer two hundred bucks. Seems like Shurdle wants that mowin' machine, too—an' he's tryin' tuh hooraw me intuh not bid-din'."

Jim-twin Allen lighted his smoke, his eyes focused on the auctioneer who was busy hammering down a hotly contested remuda of peg ponies. Shurdle eventually won out.

"Yuh go ahead an' bid, son," clipped Allen. "I'll back yore play if Shurdle sticks his horns in."

Skinny Burkett turned to survey his benefactor. He saw a waddy scarcely larger than himself, a cow-prod whose face seemed young, yet whose eyes, turned up at the corners in a manner strangely similar to a timber wolf's, seemed to be those of an older and embittered man.

Allen wore a battered gray Stetson, a hickory work shirt, and cactus-scuffed chaps. Well-oiled holsters were thonged to his lean thighs with rawhide strings, and the ivory butts of the cowboy's Colt peace-makers were slick and shiny as if from much use.

"Yuh better not, pardner," answered Skinny Burkett. "Because Grizzly Shurdle is pizen mean. Ifn

yuh interfered, he'd as soon shoot yuh as spit at yuh."

Jim-twin Allen's face tightened. An inner voice was telling him to heed Burkett's advice, for if he tangled with Elko County's range hog, it would call undue attention to his presence at the auction. And for a man with a four-figure bounty on his head, dead or alive, attention was what he did not want.

"An' now, gents, we got a mowin' machine tuh sell," bawled the florid-faced auctioneer. "Good as new. Do I hear a bid?"

From down in the sea of sombreroed faces came Shurdle's hoarse snarl: "Fifteen bucks."

"Fifteen!" bawled the auctioneer, hammer poised. "Do I hear twenty?"

Allen nudged the Wineglass representative with his elbow. In a croaking voice, Skinny Burkett yelled: "Twenty dollars."

Grizzly Shurdle mouthed an under-breath oath, then barked defiantly: "Twenty-five!"

"Thirty!" rasped Skinny Burkett, the light of competition in his frank blue eyes.

An uneasy stir went over the crowd as the bidding progressed between Shurdle and the frail youth from the Wineglass outfit. An undercurrent of tension seemed to silence other bidders. At length the auctioneer knocked down the mowing machine to Skinny Burkett for forty-five dollars.

"Now we'll be movin' over tuh the far corral," announced the auctioneer, climbing down from the chuck wagon. "We got a few milk cows tuh dispose of. This way, gents!"

As the cowmen began following the auctioneer away from the scene, Jim-twin Allen stiffened as he saw Grizzly Shurdle elbow his way to the fence, his eyes twin points of

fire as he reached up, seized Skinny Burkett's leg and hauled him roughly from the corral bar.

Smack! Before Jim-twin Allen could swing down to the ground, Burkett had sent the youth spinning with a terrific right jab which squashed the kid's nose to a pulp.

"Reckon yuh won't be biddin' no more this mornin', Burkett!" snarled Grizzly Shurdle. "Next time yuh try buckin' me, yuh'll git yore teeth knocked down yore throat, savvy? You kin ride back tuh the Wineglass an' tell yore polecat of a father that fer me!"

In the act of smashing the kid's jaw with a fist, Shurdle heard a harsh voice behind him. Whirling, he looked into the rage-contorted face of Jim-twin Allen, his five-foot-five body crouched like a boxer.

"Put up yore dukes, Shurdle!" rasped the young outlaw. "I'm comin' at yuh—an' yore goin' tuh eat them booger words!"

Overcome by surprise, Shurdle tried to lift his arms as he saw Jim-twin Allen start an uppercut from his boot straps. A second later the blow connected suddenly with Shurdle's brutish face, and the range bully staggered back, tripped on his spur rowels and measured his length on the ground.

"That's fer pickin' on a guy one fourth yore size, savvy?" rasped the young outlaw, rubbing a bruised knuckle on his chaps. "Thar's more waitin' whar this came from, ifn yuh wants it!"

With a choking snarl, Shurdle bounced out of the dust and lunged at Jim-twin Allen. The young waddy danced expertly aside, as Shurdle's clawing fists seized his shirt, ripping it from the waddy's chest to reveal a brown torso webbed with countless scars and

dimple-shaped marks which could have been caused only by bullets.

"Dang yuh, yuh blasted whelp!" screamed Shurdle, as one eye was battered shut with a well-timed left. "Fog them guns yuh're packin', runt!"

A yell of dismay went up from the crowd of returning cowmen as they saw Shurdle's hairy paws yank six-guns from leather.

Then spitting flames winked behind the dust cloud as Jim-twin Allen's hands dropped with blurring speed to his belted .45s and came up with Colts thundering their ear-shattering defiance.

Brrrang! Brrrrang! Chest and skull riddled by fast-triggered slugs, Grizzly Shurdle slumped to his knees, then toppled in the boot-trampled dust, where he lay motionless. A few feet away, just regaining his senses, young Burkett stared open-jawed at the sight of his unknown benefactor calmly holstering his smoking guns.

"Fast shootin', son!" roared the auctioneer, himself a veteran citizen of Elko County. "It was self-defense, pure an' simple. If anyone else in this crowd o' yeller-bellied cowards had half o' yore nerve, Grizzly Shurdle would 'a' got a dose of his own medicine years ago!"

CHAPTER II.

CATTLE PROPOSITION.

A FEELING of nausea assailed Jim-twin Allen as he walked away from the sprawled corpse of the dead bully. Violence was repulsive to the young outlaw, but he had no sense of regret in this particular case. He had only intended giving Shurdle a fist beating, but self-defense had necessitated revealing his matchless gun draw.

He felt a touch on his arm and

turned to look into the scared blue eyes of Skinny Burkett.

"Thanks, amigo!" panted the kid. "You—you prob'ly saved my life. I reckon the hull range will thank yuh—fer exterminatin' that Shurdle varmint this mornin'. I'll repay yuh—some day."

Jim-twin Allen smiled faintly and surveyed the wreckage of his shirt, which lay tattered in the dust.

"Thanks, kid. Now you rattle yore hocks with the crowd an' bid in the ponies yore father wanted yuh tuh git. Me, I'm goin' tuh rustle up a shirt."

Allen broke into a run to avoid the congratulations of the men swarming about Shurdle's bullet-shattered corpse. On every face was a broad grin of relief, for Elko County ranchers had long feared and hated the brutal range hog who now lay stiffening in death in the shadow of the corral bars.

Lounging near the chuck wagon, however, stood three men who did not lose sight of Jim-twin Allen as he headed for the company's barns to escape the crowd which even now the auctioneer was urging over to the cow corral.

"Am I seein' things?" rasped Smoky Barshall, turning to the two rangy, saddle-warped hombres beside him. "Did you huskies get a look at that kid's back, all criss-crossed with scars?"

The lantern-jawed waddy with a dead quirkly pasted to his lower lip winked significantly. His moniker was Dave Pettigill.

"I shore did, Smoky. Likewise I saw the fastest gun draw I've blinkéd at sence the day the White Wolf shot up that thar saloon mob at Albuquerque, four year back."

The third member of the shifty-cyed trio rubbed his jaw reflectively.

He had the Indianlike face of a half-breed.

"I seen that kid's face, jest as he was sockin' Shurdle. His eyes was yellow an' slitted like a wolf's. An' that brockle face an' button nose was a dead ringer fer Jim-twin Allen's."

Smoky Barshall felt a thrill go through his veins as he headed for the barns, flanked by Dave Pettigill and Chihuahua Charlie, the half-breed.

"We couldn't be mistaken, pards. That runt is the White Wolf, who's wanted by the law in a dozen States. Who else would be built like a pint whiskey bottle an' have that gun swift in his j'int's? Who else but the White Wolf would have his bris-kit scarred up like the back o' yore hand, an' have them wolfish eyes? Gents, we're goin' tuh make Jim-twin Allen's acquaintance, pronto."

Smoky Barshall and his gun-hung henchmen had traveled the owl-hoot trail for many years. As head of Nevada's largest gang of rustlers, Barshall had been directly responsible for the Cattle Company's going broke and being forced to auction off their big ranches, one by one as their ranges were stripped of prime steers.

It was typical of Smoky Barshall, vicious Nevada outlaw, that he had attended today's auction. It was like going to the funeral of an hombre you had shot in the back.

As they rounded a barn wall, they came in sight of the runty jasper they had seen beat Grizzly Shurdle to the draw. Shurdle had worked hand in glove with the Barshall rustling ring, for years; but Barshall had been secretly glad to see the range bully die. Shurdle had begun to get ringy, wanting to wrest the control of the rustlers away from Smoky Barshall.

"That settles it, *compañeros!*"

chuckled Barshall as the three outlaws saw the young stranger stride over to where a pair of gray saddlers were tied to a fence, and rummage in a saddlebag for a new shirt. "Years ago when the White Wolf prowled along the border, his only pards was a pair o' grays. An' thar they are."

They slowed their eager stride as they approached the young hombre who was pulling on a fresh shirt to replace the one ripped from his back during the brief fray with Grizzly Shurdle.

"Let me do the talkin', boys," rasped Barshall out of the corner of his mouth. "We kin use the White Wolf on this rustlin' deal, an' then see to it that the law dabs its loop on him. That way, they'll figger it was the White Wolf's outlaw pack that choused them Wineglass steers, an' not us. Mebbe we kin even cash in on the White Wolf's reward dinero, *quién sabe?*"

Jim-twin Allen stuffed his shirt-tails under the waistband of his batwing chaps and eyed the three approaching hombres sharply, his slanting eyelids drooped suspiciously as he raked them from boots to Stetson in search of a star which would betray them as John Laws.

"Howdy, kid!" greeted Barshall, extending a horny palm. "We wanted tuh congratulate yuh fer squashin' a pizen-mean snake over thar. Likewise we figgered, seein's how you done it fer Skinny Burkett's sake, that yuh might like tuh sign up on the Wineglass pay roll fer a spell. We could use a jigger with yore guts—pervidin' yore cow savvy is as good as yore gun savvy."

Jim-twin Allen scowled uncertainly as Barshall introduced himself and his two pards, adding that they were riders on old Silver Pete Burkett's Wineglass outfit.

"I didn't know any other Wineglass waddies was at the auction," said the young outlaw. "The kid said his dad sent him over hyar tuh bid—"

Barshall nodded agreeably. "So he did. Me, I'm jest a *segundo*. Silver Pete's aimin' tuh make a real cowhand out o' Skinny, an' he's puttin' plenty o' responsibility on the kid's shoulders. Silver Pete even give us orders not tuh horn in on any o' Skinny's scrapes—tuh let him learn tuh take keer of hisself. That's why we didn't buck Shurdle tuhday, like you did."

Jim-twin Allen shifted his cartridge-filled belts absently.

"The Wineglass is runnin' a herd o' fifteen hundred baldfaces down tuh railhead this week," went on Barshall, with a sidelong glance at Dave Pettigill and Chihuahua Charlie. "We're short-handed, an' figger mebbe yuh'd rent yore lass rope. Pay is fifty a month an' bait, extra dinero if we have trouble with the herd goin' down Hot Creek Pass."

Hot Creek Pass! That was the isolated, unsettled route to the south, the very pass that Jim-twin Allen had intended taking on his road to Mexico.

Badly in need of cash, he was tempted. If he could get an honest job hazing beef stuff down Hot Creek Pass it would enable him to move southward without much fear of the law. No Nevada sheriff would think to find him in Silver Pete Burkett's crew.

"Reckon yuh've hired yoreself a cowhand, Mr. Barshall," said the waddy who traveled under the sinister nickname of the White Wolf. "I'm jest a roamin' cowpoke, an' yuh kin call me Jim. These are my top hosses in any string—Princess an' Gray Comet."

CHAPTER III.

HOT CREEK PASS TRAIL DRIVE.

A WEEK later found the White Wolf riding point on a herd of bawling shorthorns, headed southward down the desolate, cactus-bordered mountain canyon known as Hot Creek Pass.

He had hoped to contact young Skinny Burkett before leaving the stock auction, but the *segundo*, Smoky Barshall, had insisted on heading across the range land immediately, claiming that Chihuahua Charlie and Dave Pettigill were saddle tramps whom he had also met at the auction and had hired.

The White Wolf little dreamed, when he first topped a rise overlooking Hot Creek Pass with Smoky Barshall at his stirrup, that the moving rust-colored sea of steers being hazed down the pass was a herd that had been won at the cost of many lives the night before.

By force of numbers the rustler gang had managed to beat off the Wineglass punchers who had tended the herd at a bed ground on the Wineglass range to the north. When the night raid was over, the Wineglass cattle were stampeding southward into the bottleneck of Hot Creek Pass, and twelve Wineglass cowpunchers had been shot from saddle back on the bed ground.

The evening of the first day, when the White Wolf was busy flushing strays out of the brushy draws which rimmed the pass on the west, Smoky Barshall explained to his skittery crew of gun-packing killers the reason why he had brought a strange puncher for the trail drive.

"That sawed-off runt is the White Wolf," Barshall had announced at the chuck wagon. "In case old Silver Pete rustles up a big posse an' tries tuh git his herd back, we'll

see to it that he finds the corpse o' the White Wolf, even if we has tuh gun him down ourselves. That'll make the Wineglass waddies figger they're buckin' a pack o' bad wolves, savvy? An' they'll know that any rustler gang ramrodded by the White Wolf will be too proddy tuh buck fer long."

During his first two days of trail driving, the White Wolf saw nothing to rouse his suspicions. He observed that the trail crew were a casehardened, tight-lipped gang of men, many with furtive looks and thonged-down guns with notches in their backstraps.

But this hard, strained atmosphere was explained plausibly enough to the young outlaw, when he was told that Hot Creek Pass was plentifully infested with desperate gangs of rustlers who preyed on the herds of honest stockmen.

"Any day we may be surprised by gun-slammin' rustlers, Jim," Smoky Barshall had explained to his new hand over beans and coffee, the first night. "That's why I insist, an' that's why Silver Pete Burkett permits, the hirin' o' men who know guns. One look at you throwin' lead at that Shurdle skunk told me you was the kind o' man this spread needs."

And so the White Wolf entered willingly into his work, the kind of work he knew well and upon which his restless spirit thrived. The clacking of horn against horn where the herd bunched between narrowing cliff walls of the Pass was music in the waddy's ears.

The hoarse yips of flank riders, the bawling of strays, the creak of saddle leather and the swirling dust and thud of thousands of cloven hoofs on adobe were all part of the picture which buoyed up the young owl-hoot rider's spirit, made him for-

get the man-killing hours in the saddle, the scanty periods of hard-won sleep.

Most of the horses in the rustlers' cavvy bore Wineglass brands, and the Wineglass iron was on the saddle fender of more than one rider's kak; but Jim-twin Allen had no way of knowing that the Wineglass property was part of the loot of the grim raid pulled off a few nights before.

"They're hazin' them critters unmercifully fast," commented the White Wolf to his favorite pony, Gray Comet. "Won't be much tallow on their ribs when we gits tuh railhead. But that ain't any o' our business, is it, Gray Comet? After all, Silver Pete's got a rep fer knowin' the cow business inside out, an' he wouldn't hire Smoky Barshall fer trail boss if Smoky didn't know his business."

It was mid-morning on the third day of the drive down Hot Creek Pass that tragedy struck without warning.

The White Wolf was riding west point, the long string of brown steers strung out between the rim-rocks, yelling punchers prodding them along, beating stragglers with rope ends and keeping the herd well bunched.

Riding nearest to Jim-twin Allen was one of the hands he had met at the stock auction in Elko County, the shifty-eyed waddy named Dave Pettigill.

Pettigill had reined over alongside Allen, ostensibly to borrow his makings, when the skyline suddenly bristled with Stetson-clad riders.

"Hey! Dave! Rustlers!" shouted Jim-twin Allen, snaking his Winchester .30-30 from leather.

Pettigill jerked erect in the saddle, eyes slitting as he saw forty riders pour down the western ridge

with smoke boiling from the barrels of rifles and six-guns.

A hail of lead swept about the flank riders, and across on the east rimrock of Hot Creek Pass swarmed another army of horsemen, riding hell for leather toward the rim of the cliffs, guns hammering out their deadly song.

Whipping his rifle to check and drawing a bead on one of the on-coming horsemen above him, the White Wolf's gray pony shied violently as a bullet kicked gravel against its withers.

That action saved Allen's life.

Brrrang! A shot roared out close beside him, and the dismayed waddy turned to see Dave Pettigill cutting down on him with a smoke-spewing Colt.

"Hey—what's the idea—"

With his other arm the White Wolf swept out a lass rope, cutting sharply across Pettigill's leering face and leaving a livid red welt on the bridge of his nose.

Brrrang! Allen felt Pettigill's point-blank bullet sear the muscle on his right shoulder.

Rolling from saddle, the Wolf swung his rifle to cover the berserk cowpuncher.

"Yuh gone loco, Dave?" screamed Allen frantically. "Use yore bullets on them rustlers—"

Pettigill leaped from his own bucking horse, even as the bronc pitched to its knees with a .45-70 slug in its neck.

"Yaaah, White Wolf!" screeched Pettigill. "Yuh're—"

Allen pulled trigger and saw his Winchester drill a neat blue hole through Pettigill's beetling forehead. Gray Comet galloped off along the slope as riders came pouring out of breaks in the cliffs, lead mowing down the herd riders.

A thousand thoughts milled and

stampeded in Allen's skull as he dropped flat on his belly near some rocks, and levered another cartridge into his .30-30.

Something was wrong. What it was he did not know. Pettigill knew his owl-hoot identity. Something was behind that. There was some grim reason why his own saddle pard had turned on him at the outset of the attack.

Slaughter was being enacted before Jim-twin Allen's eyes. A torrent of bullets was raking the cowboys who had been hazing the Wineglass steers down Hot Creek Pass.

"No rustler gang is that big—danged near a hundred gunnies!" moaned Allen through clenched teeth. "No such rustler outfit could exist, in Nevada or anywhar else, without me havin' heard about it—"

Thundering hoofs drew his attention toward the oncoming riders. Behind him a low bass rumble of stampeding cows warned him not to retreat down the slope into the pass, where a thousand-odd head of panicked cattle were stampeding.

Planting his Winchester barrel on a rock to steady it, Jim-twin Allen notched his sights on the nearest attacker, a slim figure astride a galloping paint horse.

And then, in the act of pulling trigger to send the rider hurtling into eternity, the White Wolf held his fire.

For that rider was Skinny Burkett, the button he had saved from the bully at the stock auction up in Elko County.

Sight of Skinny Burkett brought instant understanding to the young outlaw's mind.

"I—I been tricked! Smoky Barshall double-crossed me!" groaned the White Wolf, dropping his rifle and standing up with arms raised.

"All this while I been helpin' rustle Wineglass stock. These attackin' hombres are honest ranchers—"

Skinny Burkett reined his pinto to a dusty, gravel-spraying halt not ten feet away. The kid's blazing eyes were staring down the barrel of a .30-30 leveled straight at Allen's chest.

"So—so—so *you* are one o' that slick long-loopin' outfit!" screamed Skinny Burkett, his eyes widening with recognition. "Waal, dang yuh—if yuh're that stripe, I'm goin' tuh blast yore brains all over the landscape! My kid brother was one o' the waddies you fellers kilt the other night—"

The White Wolf closed his eyes, braced himself instinctively for the bullet that was about to tunnel his chest.

But the shot did not come. The crunch of boots on rubble made the cornered outlaw open his eyes to see Skinny Burkett striding for him, rifle barrel upraised.

"I cain't kill yuh with yore hands raised!" snarled the button. "I'll leave that fer the law to do!"

Crash! The White Wolf made no move to avoid the down-smashing rifle barrel which jarred through his grimy Stetson and cut a welt in his scalp. The will to live, to fight, to escape had left him.

He collapsed in a shower of stars, and knew no more.

CHAPTER IV.

"LYNCH THE WHITE WOLF!"

[T was night when Jim-twin Allen revived. He found himself heavily bound hand and foot, and lying in the bed of a jouncing buckboard. With him were half a dozen of his rustler companions, several of them crimson-soaked from minor wounds.

Propping himself up so that he could peer over the wagon bed, the White Wolf saw that the wagon was being convoyed by a score or more of grim-faced riders, black blots against the starry sky.

Two rustlers, heavily bound and sitting near the White Wolf, were talking in low tones.

"Reckon Barshall made his git-away O. K., him bein' a mile in front o' the herd when he was jumped by Silver Pete Burkett's outfit. What yuh reckon Barshall will do? Try tuh round up the gang at Devil's Kitchen an' rescue us?"

The other rustler grunted cynically.

"Not Barshall. With the guard they left with the Wineglass flitter-ears, I reckon Barshall will git the Devil's Kitchen gang an' rustle that herd all over ag'in. He wouldn't ride tuh Mesquite Flats tuh save four-five o' his rannihans, when thar's a thousand head o' beef critters tuh steal."

The wagon was approaching a cow town, its saloons and gambling dives blazing with light. As they rattled into the main street, the White Wolf recognized one of the horsemen alongside the wagon as being Skinny Burkett's father, old Silver Pete.

The relationship was unmistakable. Silver Pete's face was the face of young Skinny, except that it had been seamed by time and trouble, and his flowing bush of hair was snowy white.

The wagon jounced to a halt. Riders dismounted to clamber aboard the wagon and drag out the six prisoners as if they had been butchered carcasses of beef.

"Howdy, Sheriff McRoe!" called Silver Pete Burkett, as a rawboned hombre emerged from an adobe-walled building in front of which the

buckboard had halted. "Got a passel o' Hot Crick Pass long riders fer yuh."

Sheriff McRoe of Mesquite Flats scanned the harsh faces, scrutinizing the White Wolf's pale, crimson-streaked countenance in turn.

"Jumpin' Jerusalem!" cried the sheriff. "The riders who come in fer the doc said thar was a couple dozen rustlers hazin' that herd down the Pass. Is this all that's left of 'em?"

Silver Pete Burkett's voice carried an edge of triumph.

"This is all. We wiped 'em out like the varmints they was. Over a hundred ranchers from Elko way responded when I give the word how the rustlers had massacred my herd guard an' grabbed my stock. Except fer these yellor-bellies who surrendered, we wiped the gang out clean."

They were being escorted into the adobe building, which Jim-twin Allen recognized, with a dull, detached feeling, as being the Mesquite Flats jail.

"Wonder if yuh nailed the ring-leader?" the sheriff grunted, as he slammed the prisoners behind barred cell doors.

Silver Pete slapped his leg exultantly and led the sheriff to the White Wolf's cell.

"I'll say we did!" boomed the Wineglass boss. "Believe it er not, sheriff, but it's this pint-sized runt. He's the White Wolf—an' ever' one o' the crooks admits he's the leader o' their pack."

Disbelief crossed Sheriff McRoe's face as he stared at Jim-twin Allen, huddled disconsolately on the stone floor of the cell.

"I'll be a bowlaigged leppie!" cried the sheriff. "So this is Jim-twin Allen, huh? I didn't know he had took up rustlin'. Most gen'ally he plays a lone-wolf game."

Jim-twin Allen managed to find his voice. As if from far away he heard himself croak out:

"Silver Pete, I was captured by yore son, Skinny. I reckon the reward fer my pelt will go tuh that salty kid o' yourn. I—"

A figure came through the jail door, and Jim-twin Allen saw Skinny Burkett stop beside his towering, white-haired father. The kid's nose was still swollen and discolored from the blow he had received at the hands of Grizzly Shurdle.

"I don't want no blood money fer capturin' you, yuh skunk!" rasped the kid defiantly. "All I want is tuh see you swingin' from the water tank o' Mesquite Flats, along with yore owl-hoot pards. An' from what talk I hear around town tuh-night the sheriff better depitize quite a few hombres tuh keep you from bein' lynched, White Wolf!"

Something in Allen's pathetic, wistful eyes made the kid close his outburst on a choked note. Skinny Burkett was remembering how Jim-twin Allen had braved the guns of Grizzly Shurdle a few days before. He had faced those murderous .45s for Skinny, with everything to lose and nothing to gain except Skinny Burkett's gratitude.

"I know I've come tuh the end o' my rope, son," husked out the White Wolf, his voice freighted with all the crushing pathos of his years of being on the dodge, hunted by honest men and outlaws alike, knowing no man to call friend. "I won't care, specially, ifn a lynch mob does nab me tuhnight. But—afore I go—I'd like tuh talk to yuh. Just a minute? Please?"

Skinny Burkett hesitated, glancing off to where the sheriff and his father had moved down the row of cells to stare at Chihuahua Charlie, leering at them behind the bars.

WW—2D

"O. K.," rasped the kid, coming to the barred door. "But I ain't puttin' no stock in anything you kin tell me. Not any."

Allen moved his pain-racked body over to where he could speak close to the kid's ear.

"I don't hold nothin' agin' you, Skinny. If I did, I could 'a' plugged you easy this mornin' over in Hot Crick Pass, instead o' throwin' down my carbine an' surrenderin'. Listen."

Speaking swiftly, tersely, the White Wolf sketched briefly how he had been approached by Smoky Barshall over at the stock auction, how he had jumped at the chance of getting honest work. He described the trail drive and how he believed he had been working for Silver Pete Burkett driving cattle to railroad loading pens instead of for a rustler crew.

"That's the size of it," finished Jim-twin Allen hoarsely. "I didn't know the cards I'd drawed until I seen you gallopin' down the slope at me, gun a-foggin'. You don't believe me now, Skinny, but I'm hopin' yuh will—after yuh see 'em tamp the clods on top o' me in boothill."

The kid's lower lip trembled, but before he could answer, a crackle of shots roared out in the street.

Drawing his guns, Sheriff McRoe rushed to the doorway, Silver Pete Burkett at his heels.

Standing in the doorway of the jail, the sheriff of Mesquite Flats looked down on an angry mob of cowpunchers, prospectors, and some townspeople, which packed the main street from curb to curb.

"Sheriff, we know yuh got yore duty tuh do by them prisoners that Silver Pete hogtied," called out the mob's spokesman. "But as friend

tuh friend, sheriff, I advise yuh not tuh stop us. We aims tuh save the county the expense o' givin' the White Wolf an' his outlaw pack a jury trial."

The sheriff's guns weaved over the crowd threateningly.

"I'll kill the first lyncher who tries tuh bust my jail!" roared the game old Nevada lawman. "Mebbe the White Wolf an' his coyote crew are guilty as blazes, but you hombres cain't take the law in yore own hands—as long as I'm sheriff hyar!"

A sullen roar of defiance came from the restless mob.

"Yuh fergittin' how the White Wolf pounced on the Wineglass riders up north an' wiped 'em out tuh the last man?"

"Lynch the White Wolf!"

"Stand aside, sheriff. We're honin' tuh string Jim-twin Allen tuh the cross-tie o' the town water tank, *muy pronto!*"

Grimly, Sheriff McRoe cocked his guns. The lynch mob had formed more swiftly than he had counted on, and he was without deputies to back his play.

"Think this over, amigos!" called out the sheriff pleadingly. "I wouldn't want tuh kill nobody. But yuh'll take the White Wolf over my dead body. I—"

Thud! A whiskey bottle hurtled out of the crowd, and shattered with a grisly smash on the sheriff's cheekbone.

Gushing crimson, knocked out on his feet, the sheriff toppled back into Silver Pete Burkett's arms.

Like a tidal wave, the lynch mob jammed the door. Rough hands jerked a ring of keys off McRoe's belt. Then boots slogged across the jail floor, and rage-flushed faces appeared at Jim-twin Allen's cell door.

"Hyar he is! The White Wolf, lassoed at last!"

The door swung open. Jim Allen, helpless in his bonds, felt himself being hauled roughly to his feet, seized by cruel hands.

CHAPTER V.

GALLOPING GRAYS.

SKINNY BURKETT had wriggled his way out through the lynch mob in front of the jail a few seconds before the sheriff had confronted the murder-thirsty throng.

Sprinting at top speed, the freckle-faced kid made his way down the street until he came to a false-fronted store reading:

BONANZA MERCANTILE COMPANY
MINER'S SUPPLIES
JIM LARKIN, PROP.

Slamming pell-mell up the steps and into the store, the kid cried out frantically: "Jim! Jim Larkin! Whar are yuh?"

He received no answer. No doubt his storekeeper friend was down the street in front of the jail, calling for the life of the White Wolf and his outlaw pack.

Panting with desperation, the little waddy made his way behind a counter piled high with miners' tools, explosives, hobnailed boots and other supplies catering to the needs of the prospectors who made Mesquite Flats their headquarters while not out grubbing for mineral ore in central Nevada.

A few minutes later, Skinny Burkett had what he wanted. He worried a purse out of his pocket, left a five-dollar bill on Larkin's till to pay for the supplies he had taken, and then fled out a back door.

Moving down the street came the lynch mob, dragging Jim-twin Allen

and his so-called "outlaw pack" in the forefront. The night was harsh with loud, murderous shouts, the popping of guns into the night sky, shrill calls of hate. Riding before that sea of tramping men came the stern-visaged old rancher, Silver Pete Burkett.

"Dad wouldn't be headin' a neck-tie party," sobbed the kid as he fled across lots, "if my brother Larry hadn't 'a' been shot in the back the night them varmints jumped our herd—"

Looming against the blue-black night sky was the bulk of Mesquite Flats' water tank, a huge wooden affair mounted on massive twelve-by-twelves, forming a squat tower some fifteen feet high. The tank, with three thousand gallons' capacity, was the only source of water the cow town had when the shallower wells dried up during the parched summer drought season every year. A deep well had been drilled some four hundred feet through the hardpan and subsoil, to be pumped by windmill into the big tank.

But the tank had a more sinister purpose. It was used in lieu of gallows by the local sheriff, its massive beams making an ideal support for hang ropes. And more than once Judge Lynch had presided at kangaroo court under the shadow of the imposing structure. Many horse thieves and rustlers and saloon killers had done an air jig from the huge beams in years past.

The lynch mob was turning down a side street, heading for the water tank with their victims, even as Skinny Burkett began scaling the water tank ladder with monkeylike speed.

Gaining the platform on which stood the circular wooden tank, Bur-

kett disappeared around the mammoth cylinder. A moment later his crawling form appeared on the slight slope of the tin roof, and he was tugging at the trapdoor on top.

By the time the lynch mob had reached the fenced-off inclosure occupied by the windmill, the pump house and the tank, Skinny Burkett had accomplished his work and was coming down the ladder, unseen by the approaching throng.

The inclosure gate swung open to admit the swarm of bellowing cowmen, intent on exterminating for once and for all the White Wolf and his rustlers who, they believed, had long preyed upon the Nevada ranchers of that vicinity.

Lanterns glowed fitfully under the water-tank tower, as men climbed the ladder and slung down six lariat ropes from the big crossbeams overhead.

Hangman's knots formed the bottoms of those ropes, and one by one they were slipped over the squalling heads of Barshall's six outlaws. The crooks were standing on a plank supported by two boxes, and the expert way in which the improvised gallows was set up showed the outlaws that more than one evildoer had paid for his crimes in the same manner.

In the glow of the lanterns, Skinny Burkett worked his way over to where Jim-twin Allen stood helpless in his bonds, arms tied behind his back, wolfish eyes resigned to his fate as he watched the six prisoners standing in a row on the improvised bench, slack hang ropes dangling above them.

"White Wolf," snarled Silver Pete Burkett, and his voice carried the edge of clanking sword blades, "we're savin' you fer the last. Yo're goin' tuh see yore pards go acrost

the divide tuh eternal blazes. An' then yo're goin' tuh jine 'em."

Jim-twin Allen's face was immobile. He glanced sideways as he saw Skinny Burkett work his way along the front edge of the crowd, to take his place beside the young outlaw.

"Listen, Jim Allen!" whispered Burkett through the side of his mouth. "Kin yuh hear me?"

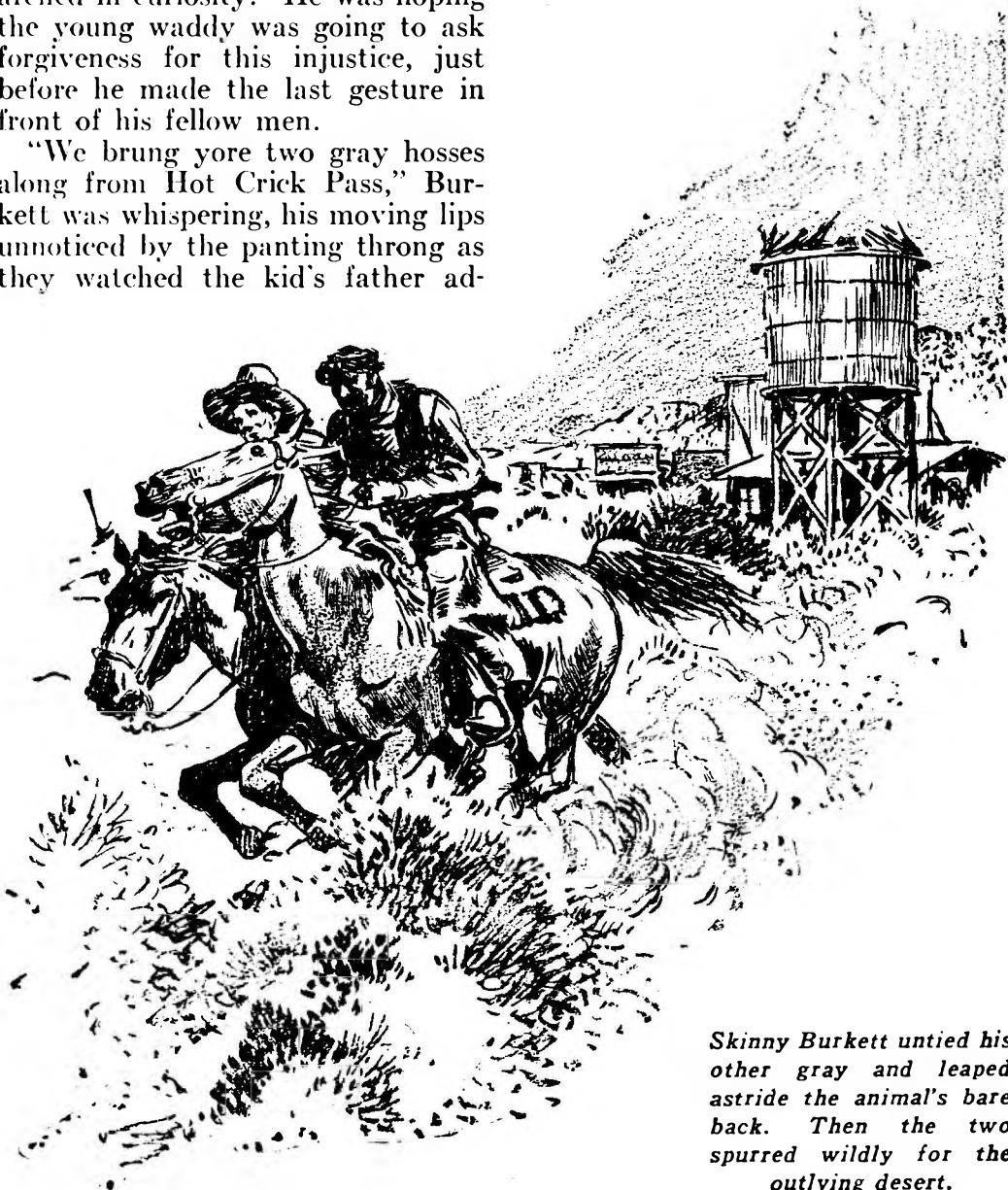
The White Wolf nodded, brows arched in curiosity. He was hoping the young waddy was going to ask forgiveness for this injustice, just before he made the last gesture in front of his fellow men.

"We brung yore two gray hosses along from Hot Crick Pass," Burkett was whispering, his moving lips unnoticed by the panting throng as they watched the kid's father ad-

vance to scan the six helpless outlaws. "They're over that corral fence yonder, beyond the windmill. Me an' you're goin' tuh make a run for 'em in a few ticks, savvy?"

White Wolf grinned ruefully, glancing back at the throng which blocked the fenced-in inclosure.

"It'd take a miracle fer me ever tuh straddle Princess an' Gray Comet ag'in, Skinny," replied Jim-



Skinny Burkett untied his other gray and leaped astride the animal's bare back. Then the two spurred wildly for the outlying desert.

twin Allen softly. "Don't you go do anything rash. Yuh'd jest git kilt in the bullets aimed at me."

The White Wolf felt the grip of his guard tighten on his left arm. A ghastly hush went over the crowd as Silver Pete Burkett turned to the cowpunchers stationed beside the boxes which held up the plank on which the six outlaws of Smoky Barshall's gang stood, all of them whimpering piteously.

"Go ahead an' whine, yuh yellercbellied polecats!" yelled Silver Pete Burkett. "Yuh had yore chance tuh shoot it out—a lot more chance than yuh give my kid an' the Wineglass rannies who was ridin' night herd on' my beef stuff."

The White Wolf lowered his eyes. He heard Burkett give the waddies their order. A gasp went up from the crowd as the cowboys lashed out heavy boots to knock the boxes out from under the plank.

When Allen glanced up again it was to see six limp, kicking bodies hanging under taut ropes, their heads bent over in a broken, gruesome angle.

"An' now fer the White Wolf!" snarled Silver Pete. "Bring him up hyar, Joe!"

The burly horse wrangler from the Wineglass outfit, who was holding the White Wolf's left arm, started forward. Jim-twin Allen felt his right arm being held by young Skinny Burkett.

A rope was rigged up. The White Wolf, face taut with suspense, climbed up on the box which was to be his stepping-stone to eternity. The hemp rope scratched his cheeks as it was lowered about his head, Skinny Burkett himself adjusting the deadly roll against his left ear.

"I'm slashin' the rope holdin' yore hands, Jim-twin Allen!" whis-

pered Skinny Burkett as he stood close to the outlaw, apparently bent on adjusting the fatal noose. "Yuh see, I dropped a wooden box intuh that water tank. It's floatin' up thar now. An' in that box was a stick o' dynamite, all capped an' fused tuh go off in ten minutes from the time I dropped her in thar."

The White Wolf stiffened, a thrill going through his frame as he swept the sea of faces illuminated by the lanterns hanging under the tower.

And then, even as Jim-twin Allen felt a jackknife cut through the bonds which knotted his wrists behind his spine, the sky seemed to erupt in a deep, ear-shattering roar of sound, as if the heavens were tumbling down to engulf the very earth.

CHAPTER VI.

DESPERATE FLIGHT.

THE Mesquite Flats municipal water tank lost its roof in an upward explosion of shingles and splinters, soaring high into the star-dusted Nevada sky. Pink smoke billowed from the tank, the barrel-stave sides of which had been ruptured in a score of places by the blast inside.

Then a deluge of pounding water streamed out in umbrellalike shape from a hundred cracks in the gigantic tank, to drench the astonished crowd, which fell back in terror before the unexpected catastrophe.

"Jerk off yore noose an' foller me, Jim!" hissed Skinny Burkett.

The White Wolf jerked the hang noose from his head and leaped down into the grass directly beneath the water tank, his action unnoticed or unseen behind the curtain of water which deluged down from all sides of the heavy-timbered platform.

Through the tower supports Jim

Allen raced, on the heels of Skinny Burkett.

Men plunged backward against the inclosure fence as pelting water tumbled from the broken tank. Yells were lost in the echoes of the roaring blast. The jets of water came down like rain over the pandemonium.

Unseen as they fled through the scattering crowd, Jim-twin Allen and his rescuer vaulted the far fence beyond the pump house. A few yards away, Jim-twin Allen caught sight of a row of ponies, where the visiting Wineglass waddies had pitched their camp on the outskirts of Mesquite Flats.

Among them were Princess and Gray Comet, his leggy grays.

"We ain't got no time tuh waste, Jim!" yelled Skinny Burkett. "Won't take dad an' the others long tuh see yuh vamosed."

Allen jerked Gray Comet's cinch tight, swung aboard. He was in time to see Skinny Burkett untie his other gray and leap astride the animal's bare back. Then the two were spurring wildly for the outlying desert.

Glancing over his shoulder, the White Wolf saw lanterns bobbing under the draining water tank, saw the drenched corpses of the six rustlers under the dashing spray.

"You mustn't ride with me, Skinny!" yelled Jim-twin Allen, spurring close alongside the kid who was plastered hard to Princess' back. "All heck's goin' tuh be trailin' us afore long, remember—"

Burkett did not reply. He was too busy clinging aboard the racing gray as they burned wind in the direction of Hot Creek Pass.

Five miles out from Mesquite Flats, they reined up on the crest of a hogback ridge, to rest their blowing ponies.

"Why—why'd yuh do this fer me, kid?" panted Jim-twin Allen, as he shook hands with his deliverer from almost certain doom.

Burkett rubbed his fist-smashed nose gingerly.

"Yuh remember I told yuh I'd pay yuh back some day fer what you done fer me over at the stock auction?" panted the skinny younker. "Waal—that was what I tried tuh do tuhnight."

"But—but you know I'm the White Wolf. You know what—what that means, Skinny. It means yuh helped the most-wanted crook in Nevada tuh escape a hang rope tuhnight."

Skinny Burkett rubbed a long arm up Princess' nose, and shook his head.

"Don't call yoreself a crook, Jim Allen. Yuh ain't that stripe. I believed yuh when yuh said Smoky Barshall tricked yuh intuh j'inin' their rustler crew."

Gratitude made a strange stir in the little outlaw's heart as he listened to the kindest words he had heard in years.

"But—but I ain't denyin' I'm the White Wolf—"

Burkett smiled again. "Yeah. They call yuh the White Wolf. An' what is the White Wolf? The Injuns claim the White Wolf is a curly lobo outlawed by his pack, shore. But they also claim the White Wolf only kills them as deserves it, that he only kills skunks in self-defense. Thar's a heap o' difference between the White Wolf o' the ol' Injun fables an' the killer wolf that the sheriffs claim you are, killin' fer the sheer joy o' seein' men die."

A trace of mist was on Jim-twin Allen's lashes as he averted his gaze from that of the fourteen-year-old

younger who had planted the dynamite charge inside the Mesquite Flats water tank that night. That explosion had given Jim Allen the few moments of confusion he had needed to make good his escape.

"We're partin' company now, son," choked the young outlaw. "It wouldn't do fer yuh tuh travel with me—"

"But I'd be afeared tuh face dad, after lettin' yuh go," protested Skinny Burkett earnestly. "He—he'd danged near shoot me hisself. He wouldn't understand why I done that dynamitin' job—"

Jim-twin Allen balled his right fist into a hard knot. He laid his left hand in friendly fashion on the kid's shoulder as they faced each other in the starlight, flanked by their blowing horses.

"Kid, you've won my undyin' friendship tuhnigh. You know that, don't yuh?"

Burkett nodded.

"That's somethin' I—I ain't ever told ary man before now," went on the outlaw. His ears, far more acute than those of the grinning kid before him, picked up a faint hammer of hoofbeats on the night wind, and he knew that pursuit was under way from Mesquite Flats. "So—kid—this is adios. Yore father'll think yuh was kidnaped—no need o' him knowin' yuh blew up the water tank. He'll think some o' my—outlaw pack—done that."

Skinny Burkett opened his mouth to protest, but no sound came. For the White Wolf's right fist came upward in a smooth, clean arc.

Crack! The uppercut connected with a smack of sound on the waddy's jaw.

Without a moan, Burkett sagged and was lowered gently to the earth by the young outlaw.

"I'd 'a' heap sooner been hit myself, pardner," whispered Jim-twin Allen as he unbuckled Burkett's gun belt and fastened it about his own waist, carefully loosening the kid's .45 six-gun in its holster. "But now, when yo're found unconscious hyar, the crowd will know yuh was kidnaped by me, an' they won't blame yuh none."

Leaving the insensible youth stretched on the ground in plain sight, the White Wolf swung into saddle and whistled for Princess to follow him. Then they vanished in the shadows of the far side of the ridge.

Ten minutes later an infuriated posse from Mesquite Flats, composed mostly of Silver Pete Burkett's grim-faced cowpunchers, thundered up the slope to find Skinny Burkett weaving groggily about, hands rubbing his sore jaw.

"Thank heavens that polecat didn't kill yuh, son!" groaned the boss of the Wineglass outfit. "When I looked around after that danged explosion, an' seen you an' the White Wolf was missin', I was shore his gang o' killer wolves had kidnaped yuh tuh hold fer hostage or somethin'."

Skinny Burkett wagged his jaw gingerly, feeling it for a possible break.

"I reckon," he wavered weakly, "that we won't see the White Wolf ag'in, dad. An'—seems like as how he stole my gun, too."

Silver Pete Burkett assisted his son aboard his own mustang, then mounted himself.

"Fan out, men!" roared the Wineglass owner. "We'll dab our twine on that White Wolf killer afore he kin git tuh Hot Crick Pass, I reckon."

But when dawn burst over the

Nevada waste lands and the tired posse spotted a lone rider on the horizon near Hot Creek Pass, they were due for an unexpected surprise.

For as the heavily armed riders converged upon the lone rider they found it was not the White Wolf. Instead, it was the Wineglass *segundo* who had been left to superintend the return of their rustled cattle herd, while the others took the prisoners to Mesquite Flats.

The *segundo's* side was drenched with crimson, and his body nearly toppled from the saddle as they surrounded him, yelling anxious questions.

"The White Wolf's outlaw pack—jumped the herd—jest after midnight," wheezed the dying *segundo* as Silver Pete and young Skinny helped him from the saddle and put a canteen to his lips. "Seems . . . as if the White Wolf . . . had another body o' rustlers waitin' down Hot Crick Pass a few miles. I reckon . . . I'm the only jasper . . . who escaped alive."

CHAPTER VII.

RIDERS OF DEATH'S KITCHEN.

THE crackle of gunshots out of the night made Jim-twin Allen alter his line of flight to the southward, after he had gained the west rim of Hot Creek Pass.

"What kin that shootin' be, I wonder?" grunted the young outlaw. "Comes from up the Pass, whar that Wineglass cattle herd is supposed tuh be bedded down an' under guard o' Wineglass waddies."

A sickle-shaped moon lifted above the Nevada malpais to eastward as the cowboy outlaw worked his way along the broken brink of the cliffs, his gray saddler followed by the leggy mare, Princess.

From time to time distance-muffled gunshots reached his ears, making him spur harder.

And then, in a sudden dash of recollection, the White Wolf remembered the guttural conversation between Barshall's men when they were riding in the wagon toward the town of Mesquite Flats.

"Barshall escaped yesterday's attack, an' must 'a' ridden on down tuh the Devil's Kitchen country. From what them critters said tuh each other, Barshall had the second half o' his owl-hoot gang waitin' down thar."

Clear as crystal, the young waddy knew what had happened to cause that burst of firing down Hot Creek Pass. Barshall knew that Silver Pete Burkett had left his bedded-down herd of shorthorns guarded by only a standard-sized crew while he went to Mesquite Flats with his prisoners.

The grizzled old Wineglass owner had no way of knowing that Smoky Barshall, the real leader of the rustler outfit, had been farther down the Pass at the time of their attack, and that he had escaped altogether.

By the same token, old Silver Pete had no idea that Barshall had reinforcements hiding out down at Devil's Kitchen, a few miles farther on.

"Barshall's jumped the herd ag'in," groaned the White Wolf. "He figgers tuh chase them critters intuh the badlands an' hole 'em up somewhar—"

Riding around a bend in the snaky course of the Pass, the White Wolf got bitter confirmation of his theory.

The odor of burned powder caught his nostrils as he peered down into the moon-drenched canyon, and saw

the corpses of murdered cowboys strewn about the floor of the gorge.

A mile beyond moved a smudge of dust, and the rattling of horns and hoofs reached his ears, telling the White Wolf that Barshall's attacking rustlers had wiped out the Wineglass crew for the second time and were hazing the beef stuff south as fast as they could be pushed through the canyon.

Clamping his jaw grimly, the White Wolf spurred Gray Comet down a ravine and out into the Pass.

"Here's hopin' I kin pick up a Winchester," he panted as he dismounted beside the riddled carcass of a Wineglass horse. "It's a cinch I couldn't do much with Skinny's six-gun, toward headin' off them rustlers."

The third dead horse which Jim-twin Allen inspected netted him that for which he was searching—a .40-caliber Winchester carbine, slung from the saddle boot of a man who had been shot from ambush before he could get it into action.

There were eleven cartridges in the gun's magazine. A brief search of the dead cowpunchers scattered about, many of them trampled by stampeding hoofs into human wreckage beyond identification, brought to light a bandolier whose loops were filled with .40 ammunition.

Swinging back into his gray's saddle, the bandolier strapped about his waist, the White Wolf spurred back up to the rimrock and then headed southward through the moonlight.

Behind him he could almost visualize the angry posse from Mesquite Flats, closing down on him. Common sense told him to lose himself in the barrancas which gashed the semidesert wilderness.

"But I ain't goin' to," declared the White Wolf doggedly. "If Smoky Barshall got salty an' tried tuh make me the leader o' his outlaw pack, then I'm goin' tuh see to it that they don't get away with that herd o' Silver Pete's. I'll do it—fer the kid's sake. He risked more'n that fer me, tuhnight."

Riding hard, the White Wolf had no difficulty overtaking the herd of rustled stock, which was already beginning to tire. Moonlight clearly showed the White Wolf the figures of Barshall's owl-hoot point riders, busy hazing the herd along.

But the White Wolf rode on, passing the herd. He rode until daybreak sent crimson streamers over the land. By the time the ruddy copper ball of the sun was twenty minutes high, the White Wolf had hidden his broncs in a thicket of mesquites atop a knoll.

Then, rifle in hand, he made his way down to the broken rim of Hot Creek Pass.

Around a bend in the canyon came the leaders of the outlaw-hazed cattle herd. Tongues lolled from dripping, foamy mouths. The cattle were groggy with fatigue, but were being relentlessly pushed on from behind.

Levering a cartridge into the breech, the White Wolf took careful aim at the towering, chocolate-colored sombrero worn by the foremost outlaw rider.

Spang! The heavy-calibered carbine roared out sharply in the keen morning air. The outlaw's hat went spinning to the brush. And the seared face thus revealed was that of Chihuahua Charlie, Barshall's right-hand man.

"The—the White Wolf!" screeched the outlaw as he caught sight of the runt-sized figure of the waddy

standing on the rim of the cliff, sixty feet above.

The outlaw nodded, grimly reloading his carbine.

"That's right, Charlie!" yelled back the White Wolf, jerking carbine to cheek. "An' this is adios!"

With a yell the half-breed snaked his own .30-30 from leather, whipped it up to fire two swift shots at the rigid figure on the rimrock.

Spang! The White Wolf's .40 carbine bucked in his grasp and Chihuahua was knocked from his saddle by the impact of the boring slug.

A slam of shots came from farther back in the pass as the outlaws from Devil's Kitchen caught sight of the waddy blocking their path.

Brrrang! Brrrang-bang-bang-bang!

Kneeling in the midst of a storm of whistling leaden missiles, the White Wolf calmly began aiming and firing.

Spang! A point rider threw up his hands and dropped from the saddle. *Spang-spang!* Two outlaws, who had leaped from horses to steady their rifles across boulders, flopped back with bullet-drilled skulls, evidence of the White Wolf's uncanny skill with a high-powered Winchester.

And then the forward progress of the cattle herd broke. Panic-stricken because of the crashing shots before them, the Wineglass herd started back up the pass, northward.

Frantic outlaws farther up the pass, deciding that they had been attacked by a huge posse to judge from the fusillade of shots, began fleeing north. And a moment later the escaping crooks who had holed up in Devil's Kitchen found themselves facing the grim-eyed riders from Mesquite Flats, headed by Silver Pete Burkett.

Not until he had no more targets to shoot at did the White Wolf get up from his kneeling position on the rimrock and grimly reload the magazine of his hot-barreled carbine.

A roll of shooting came from the north and made the White Wolf grin to himself. He knew all too well that Barshall's crooks had been cornered by Silver Pete's posse.

"An' now that I've saved Burkett's herd for 'im, I reckon my job's done," panted the waddy, turning to go back to his cached horses. "I reckon Smoky Barshall will surrender when he sees he's cornered, an' in the meantime I'll be foggin' on toward Mexico, whar I'll be safe."

And then, in the act of pushing through the dense chaparral which hemmed the rimrock of Hot Creek Pass, the White Wolf came to a sudden halt, his heart slamming into his mouth.

Creeping up through the rocks and brush, not five feet away, was the grim-jawed figure of Smoky Barshall, chief of the rustler outfit.

In Barshall's hairy fist was a Colt .45, and its bore was leveled straight at the White Wolf's heart.

CHAPTER VIII.

DEATH OF THE WOLF.

SO yo're the hombre responsible fer turnin' my herd o' wet stock back toward the Wineglass range, huh?"

Hatred made the rustler king's voice thick and incoherent, as he stared over his gun sights at the slight figure of the most-wanted outlaw in Nevada.

Without answering, Jim-twin Allen pulled the trigger of the .40-calibered rifle he was holding.

The bullet bored off through the brush inches from Smoky Barshall's

head, but it startled the outlaw enough to spoil his aim.

Brrrang! Barshall's .45 blazed, but the whining slug clipped foliage from the brush above Allen's head as he dived sideways and backward out of Barshall's sight.

His rifle barrel caught in a crotch of the mesquites, jamming there.

With Smoky Barshall smashing through the brush a few feet away there was no time to wrench the carbine out of its brushy trap. The White Wolf took to his heels.

Up the slope he ran, hand filled with Skinny Burkett's .45.

Then he had gained the refuge of a heap of broken lava boulders, into the shelter of which he dived.

But Smoky Barshall, faced with the ruin of his outlaw gang, was determined not to lose his revenge against the fearless young outlaw who, single-handed, had rescued Silver Pete Burkett's thousand head of cattle from the rustler crew.

Keeping out of sight in the brush, Barshall circled wide around the rock nest in which the White Wolf was cornered, and headed up the steep slope.

Fifty yards up the mountainside the outlaw had a view down into the boulders and saw the White Wolf crouching there, eyes raking the terrain for a glimpse of his stalking foe.

Resting his six-gun barrel on a fallen mesquite log, Smoky Barshall took careful aim. But he had not figured on the slanting rays of the morning sun flashing off the metal weapon, and giving away his ambush.

Ducking instinctively even as he caught sight of the glittering six-gun on the slope above him, the White Wolf's head dropped, even as Barshall's slug cut through his hair

and flattened itself on the lava behind him.

Leaping into the open, the White Wolf lifted his six-gun and triggered it five times in rapid succession, spacing the shots into the brush where Smoky Barshall had hidden.

A high-pitched scream of agony came from the outlaw, and a moment later he reared to his feet, clawing at a spurting bullet wound at the base of his neck.

Then, like a dummy toppling over, the dead body of Smoky Barshall crashed forward and began rolling in grotesque fashion down the slope.

Fascinated, the White Wolf watched the rolling corpse of the boss outlaw who had tried to betray him. At the same time he thumbed cartridges from his shell belt and stuffed them into the hot chambers of the gun he had borrowed from Skinny Burkett.

Barshall's rolling corpse came to a bounding halt against the very rocks where the young outlaw had holed up.

Alert for possible trickery on Barshall's part, the White Wolf emerged from cover, gun alert. Then he relaxed, holstering the weapon as he looked down on the dead outlaw.

"Yuh figgered tuh brand me as the leader o' yore own outlaw bunch, Barshall," rasped the waddy as he stooped and withdrew Barshall's other six-gun from its holster to fill his own. "But I don't hone tuh have no part o' yore kind o' life."

He turned to make his way on up to the brushy summit where Gray Comet and Princess would be waiting to carry him on to the border.

And then the White Wolf froze in his tracks as he looked into the leveled guns of an hombre who had

ridden up unobserved in the heat of his duel with Smoky Barshall.

"Stick 'em up, White Wolf!" came the grim voice of Silver Pete Burkett, the white-headed old owner of the Wineglass spread.

Jim-twin Allen hesitated, debating mentally whether to defy Burkett's gun drop or surrender. The latter course would mean a speedy trip back to the hangman's noose at Mesquite Flats, if not a lynching from the victorious Wineglass cowboys, here on the desert.

Then a sickish feeling of despair went through Jim-twin Allen as he realized that he would not shoot the father of Skinny Burkett, even if he had the chance. After all, the grizzled old cowman was only defending his own property against an hombre he believed to be the head of a vicious outlaw pack.

"You win, Silver Pete," whispered Allen, raising his arms.

The hostility softened in the old rancher's gaze, though he did not lower his guns.

"I had a talk with my kid, Skinny, after we found out that you had headed off them rustlers with my herd, Jim Allen," said the Wineglass owner. "That was the first I knew that Smoky Barshall, yonder, was the real boss o' this outfit o' crooks, an' not you."

Hoofbeats were sounding back along the rimrock, so the oldster hurried on.

"My men are comin'," he said. "I'm givin' you a head start, White Wolf. Yore hosses are up the hill yonder—I seen 'em when I come this way tuh find out who was shootin'. You better git to 'em, pronto."

With a grin, the White Wolf started for the chaparral.

"I—I borrowed yore son's hog-leg, Silver Pete," he said. "Don't

git boogery with them triggers now, because I'm goin' tuh unholster his .45 an' drop it. O. K.?"

Silver Pete Burkett, who bragged about his ability to judge men accurately, forgot about the reward posters offering cold cash for the return of the White Wolf, dead or alive. He watched as the White Wolf dropped Skinny Burkett's six-gun on the rubble, waved a hand in farewell, and then hurried up to where his horses awaited him.

Ten minutes later a rider broke brush behind the waiting rancher just as Silver Pete Burkett was drawing his rifle bead on a moving object on the Hot Creek Pass rimrock, a hundred yards to the south.

As the rifle blazed out the rider came alongside him. It was Skinny Burkett, his eyes wide with alarm.

"Was—was that him—yuh shot at?" he quavered as he caught sight of his familiar six-gun lying a few feet away. "Did—did yuh shoot—Jim Allen, dad?"

Other cowpunchers galloped out of the chaparral to halt alongside their boss and his son as Silver Pete Burkett calmly booted his smoking Winchester.

"I just kilt a wolf, men," he clipped, reining about. "Let's git back tuh the herd. I reckon all the outlaws is dead now."

A choked cry came from Skinny Burkett's throat as he jabbed in the rowels and headed for the rimrock toward which his father had been aiming.

A moment later he was leaping from stirrups to where a smear of fresh crimson was on the rimrock. And in the brush below was broken foliage, where the body of his father's victim had tumbled.

"Yuh—yuh shouldn't have kilt him," sobbed the kid as he scrambled down a ledge and fought his

way through the brush. "Yuh shouldn't have kilt the White Wolf—thisaway—"

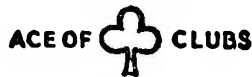
And then the kid broke off as he stared at a tawny carcass smeared with crimson from the bullet hole in its skull. He understood, then, what Silver Pete Burkett had meant when he had said he had killed a "wolf."

For sprawled out in the brush at the kid's feet was the dead carcass

of the gaunt-ribbed timber wolf which his father had just shot.

Silver Pete Burkett had never intended to take up the head start he had promised Jim-twin Allen.

The law has a price on Jim-twin Allen's head, an' he's likely ter be shot wharever he goes. But, in spite of thet, he's the sort of gent who's allus helpin' other hombres in trouble. Thar'll be another big story about him soon in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly. Don't miss it.



VANISHED INDIAN TRIBE

WHEN the first Spanish explorers came to America, a tribe of Indians, known as the Calusa, made an attack on the force of Ponce de Leon with a fleet of eighty canoes. The Spaniards were preparing to land on the coast in southern Florida when the Indians swooped down on them. After an all-day fight, the Spanish adventurers were obliged to withdraw.

These Indians had the reputation of being great fighters and practicing all sorts of cruelties on their vanquished foes. After the coming of the Spaniards, the Calusa secured large amounts of gold from Spanish ships that were wrecked on their way to Spain when they were loaded with treasure.

Two hundred years later, they were still killing and seizing all the gold they could lay their hands on. They showed no mercy to the crews of the vessels that were wrecked on their coast, but killed them whenever they could. Some escaped by hiding and creeping away through the dense growths of timber and bush that covered the land. They lived to tell some horrible tales of the tortures that they saw inflicted upon their fellow countrymen, who

were put to death only after terrible sufferings.

About one hundred years ago, this tribe that had dominated Florida and struck terror into all the white people who were so unfortunate as to get among them, disappeared completely. It was as though the earth had opened and swallowed them up, for they were never seen after that. They had many wars with other tribes, and it is said that some of them became mixed with their enemies.

There is no account of the language of this tribe, although it has been heard that occasionally one or two of them have been found on widely separated reservations. But as a tribe, they have vanished. Tireless search has been made in many efforts to find them, but so far all have failed.

A few words of their language, and some place names have been picked up from time to time, but no Indian has been found who can speak the language, or give any information about the lost tribe. The only characteristics known of them is that they were great fighters and practiced unbelievable cruelties on their helpless captives.

Roy Bean's Ruling

Most of the cases that were tried by Judge Roy Bean, the "Law West of the Pecos," could be settled by a fine. The amount of this depended on the amount of money the guilty one carried in his clothes. When the prisoner happened to be accused of stealing a horse, or rustling cattle, the usual decision in such cases was made, and was always carried out at once. This was conducted under the supervision of the judge's able deputy, Bart Gobble, who lost no time in seeing that the sentence was duly and properly performed, according to Bean's "rulin'."

Judge Bean's rulin's were always final. One time, a young man was caught while he was breaking into a loaded box car. His intention was apparently, to help himself to a horse. He was seized quickly and was taken to Roy Bean's saloon, the Jersey Lily. As the young man, followed by a crowd of curious citizens, entered the barroom, the judge was busy serving liquid refreshment to some customers, but he took off his apron, donned his black coat, and listened attentively to the evidence. It was bad, to say the least, for the accused. He was found guilty, and was sentenced to be taken to the railroad tracks and there hanged at once to the nearest telegraph pole.

The youth made no protest. He had been caught in the act, and no doubt he realized that there was nothing he could say that would prove his innocence. So he simply asked Judge Bean to give him pen,

ink and paper, as he wished to write a last letter to his mother. His request was granted and the judge looked over the condemned man's shoulder as he wrote his farewell to the mother he would never see again.

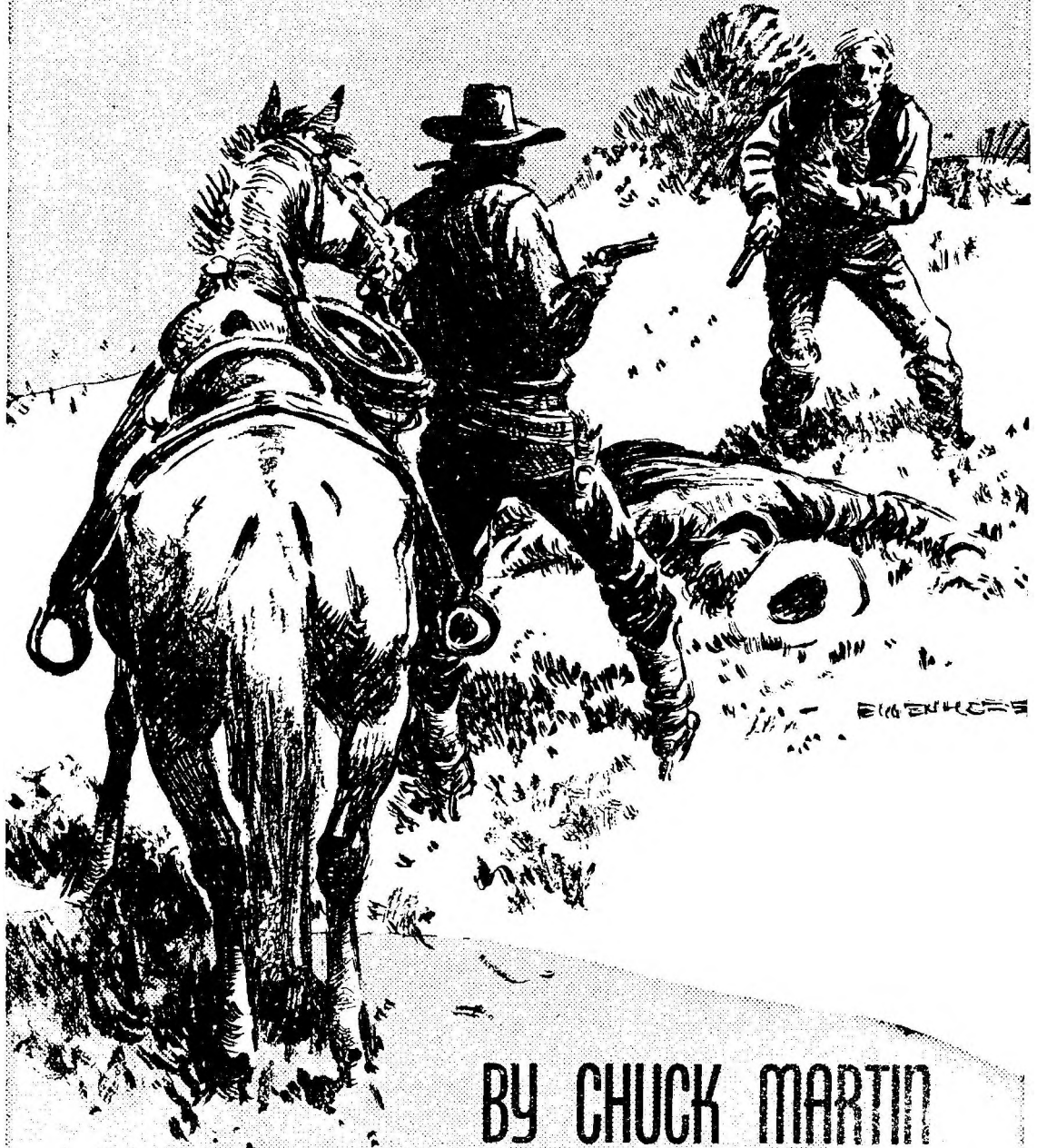
Presently, Roy Bean let out a yell and, turning to W. H. Dodd, the worthy man who succeeded to the judgeship after Bean's death, he exclaimed: "By gobs! This young man should not hang!" The excited justice of the peace had read a short line in the letter that said, "I have four hundred dollars." Here he saw a good opportunity to fix a fine instead of a hanging. But what followed disillusioned him. The peeping judge read, "I have four hundred dollars in the savings bank, which you may get and keep."

Bean was so angered at finding that the money was not in the man's clothes, that he ordered Bart Gobble to take him to the tracks and string him up instanter.

Mr. Dodd was in the crowd that went to the scene of execution, and when the hanging party reached the railroad tracks, some of the spectators started a ruckus, and while the racket was at its height, Dodd slipped the rope from the prisoner's neck, gave him a push, and told him to run. This command was obeyed promptly, and the released prisoner disappeared in a flash. Needless to say, he never showed up again within the judicial limits of the Law West of the Pecos.



THE SIX-GUN LAW CUB



BY CHUCK MARTIN

Hig Coulter knows that thar's a trap been set fer the sheriff, but what chance has a tenderfoot lawman got o' savin' 'im?

The Six-gun Law Cub

HIG COULTER finished buying supplies for the Box C and turned to look for Big Horse Hawley who made up the rest of the crew. Then he frowned and stomped down the street to the Maverick Saloon, but he forgot his anger when he stepped through the back door where a game of poker was in progress.

Big Horse was studying his cards while he tugged on his cowhorn mustaches with his right hand. A tall, lean man of thirty was watching him with a sneering smile on his dark, swarthy face. A pile of money was heaped on the green table between the pair, and then the Box C cowboy reached for the flat wallet in his hip pocket.

"I don't like the way you rough up that big bay stud of yores, Wolf Denton," he said softly, and raised his eyes to stare at his opponent, "so I'll just bet you another hundred of my riding pay agin' the stallion. High hand takes all the marbles!"

Wolf Denton was foreman of the big Pitchfork outfit, and he turned his head and glanced at a wide-shouldered cowboy who was watching the game from a chair at the side. Hig Coulter frowned when he saw Curly Beaumont nod his head. Beaumont was segundo to the Pitchfork ramrod, and he had seen a king in Hawley's hand.

"I'll call yuh," Denton shouted. "And after I win yore dinero, I'll show you how to snap the rough out of that big stud tied out there to the rail!"

Big Horse Hawley counted out a hundred dollars in bills and pushed them to the center of the table.

"I'll pay for a look," he said quietly. "What you got?"

Wolf Denton smiled coldly and tapped the cards in his hand on the table. He figured that Hawley had a pair of kings, and he made his spread with a smile of triumph.

"You can't beat the ladies," he chuckled. "Four queens, with a king for a stopper!"

"Somebody read my hand wrong," the old cowhand answered dryly. "I'm only holding one king, but then the light ain't none too good back here."

He made his spread with his left hand to flip four aces on the green felt. The last card was the king of hearts, and Big Horse Hawley smiled at Wolf Denton and reached for his winnings.

"No, you don't!" Denton snarled, and dipped his right hand down for the bone-handled gun on his right leg.

Big Horse Hawley's right hand came up from under the table and rested on the cloth with a cocked .45 centered on Denton's chest. Wolf Denton jerked back and raised both hands, but Curly Beaumont kicked back his chair and finished his draw.

Hig Coulter was standing wide-legged just inside the door, sighting down the barrel of his belt gun. He fired a shot just as Curly Beaumont cleared leather, and the roar of his gun started a stampede from the long bar out in the saloon. Curly Beaumont's six-gun jumped from his hand and banged against the wall, and the Pitchfork cowboy shook his numbed hand and stared through the swirling smoke.

"I'd have killed you if you was looking at me," Hig Coulter said softly. "I saw the whole play, and it ain't legal to make a bet when you ain't bought no chips in the game!"

Curly Beaumont was too stunned for speech, but Wolf Denton curled back his lips in a snarl. "You didn't have any stake in this game, yuh salty law cub. That pard of yores won this hand on a sneak, and I'm calling the whole thing a misdeal!"

Big Horse Hawley gathered up the money with his left hand and pushed his chair back when he came to his feet. He was tough and lean from forty years in the saddle, and he holstered his gun and faced the Pitchfork foreman with a little gleam in his cold blue eyes.

"I win that big horse you've been abusing, Denton," he said quietly. "It's yore bad luck because Curly thought he saw two kings in my hand when I tilted it so's he could take a quick look. Then I had my gun in hand to keep from killing you, and I'm obliged to the young ramrod of the Box C for keeping yore pard honest. You wanting another little game of draw?"—and he touched the handle of his six-gun.

Wolf Denton stared for a long moment and then shook his head. "I said it was a misdeal," he growled. "You can have the money, but that bay stud is still my horse!"

"I'm taking the bay, and you can have another game of draw any time," Hawley answered quietly, and walked through the saloon.

Hig Coulter watched the two men until he heard Hawley ride up the street. Then he holstered his gun and stepped outside without a word. He stopped by his horse when he saw his father shoulder through the swinging doors, and then the bellowing voice of Wolf Denton drowned all other sounds.

"I'm signin' a warrant agin' Big Horse Hawley, sheriff. He stole my bay stallion, and you've got to bring him in!"

Sheriff Bart Coulter saw the cards

WW—3D

on the table, and Curly Beaumont's gun on the floor. He was a stocky man of fifty, with plenty of gray in his hair from twelve years as sheriff of Comanche.

"I'll talk to Hawley first," he told Denton. "Like you know, Big Horse has worked for me ever since I took office."

"He can do his talking in court," Denton blustered. "If I sign the complaint, you've got to serve the papers!"

Big Horse Hawley was tying his blanket behind the cantle of his saddle when Hig Coulter roared into the Box C yard. The cowboy grinned when he saw the big bay stallion under the saddle, and then the smile faded from his face.

"Yo're just about fifteen minutes ahead of the sheriff, Big Horse," he told the old cowhand. "Wolf Denton signed a complaint charging you with hoss stealing, and dad will have to serve the papers!"

"I never thought I'd be straddling the owl-hoot trail, but I don't aim to go to jail and be shut off from the sun," Hawley murmured. "You seen the whole play, boss!"

"I saw it, but you know Bart Coulter," the cowboy answered soberly. "Looks like you better hide out for a spell until Denton gets sober."

The lean old-timer nodded gloomily and climbed his saddle. Hig Coulter was waiting on the little porch of the ranchhouse when his father reined his sweating horse to a stop and swung to the ground.

"Where's Big Horse?" the sheriff demanded, but the cowboy knew that old Bart was just making conversation.

"He hightailed it on that stallion he won from Wolf Denton," Hig answered quietly. "I saw the whole

play, and if I was you I'd tear up that warrant agin' Big Horse!"

"You ain't me, and I took an oath to do my duty," the sheriff answered coldly, and then his voice dropped. "Big Horse should have dropped that welshing sneak," he muttered.

"And then you'd have hunted him down for murder," Hig Coulter pointed out. "Have you got a warrant for me?"

The sheriff faced around swiftly and stared at his son.

"Says which?" he barked.

"I shot the gun out of Curly Beaumont's hand," the cowboy answered evenly. "He was getting set to smoke Big Horse, but I was watching him with a gun in my hand!"

"Now look, Higgins," the sheriff said slowly. "You ain't but twenty years old, and you've done a mighty good job of rodding our little spread. But you're only a yearlin', and I'll handle the law in Comanche!"

"That's what Denton said," the cowboy murmured. "He called me a law cub, and mebbe he was right. I knew you wouldn't want a killing so close to election."

"I've got to make a show of hunting for that old owl-hooter," the sheriff said softly. "Have you got any idea where he's riding, so I can mebbeso come up on him?"

"He rode west," the cowboy answered promptly, and watched his father's face.

"That being the case, I better trail him toward the east," Sheriff Coulter grunted. "You ain't much of a hand at lying, son!"

"Now looky, sheriff," the cowboy protested. "Big Horse has worked for you going on twelve years. He taught me all I know about guns, hosses, and men. You know right well he wouldn't draw agin' the law!"

"But the law says he'll have to

stand trial," Bart Coulter answered firmly. "It is my duty to bring him in."

II.

Sheriff Bart Coulter entered his office a week later and sat down behind his scarred desk. Hig Coulter followed his father inside, and he glanced carelessly at the old peace officer when the sheriff picked up a piece of wrapping paper and stared at the crude writing.

Bart Coulter slowly spelled out words, and then reached for the shell-studded belts hanging from a low set of deer horns, close to his left hand. Young Hig Coulter watched the simple preparations for war, but he did not speak until his father had fastened the tie-backs around his muscular thighs.

"Was that writin' from Big Horse?" the cowboy asked slowly.

Sheriff Coulter snugged his six-guns deep before he answered. Then he raised his silvered head and stared for a long moment at his only kin.

"I don't know how that note got here, but it's from him," he answered gruffly. "Like you know, the stage was held up last night, and Big Horse was blamed for the job."

"He never done it," the cowboy defended loyally. "I'd stake my life on that old buckaroo!"

"Mine too," the sheriff seconded promptly. "Big Horse claims he can name the holdups, and he wants to come in and stand trial on that horse-stealing charge before he gets in too deep."

"I'll ride down with you," the cowboy offered eagerly. "The court meets day after tomorrow, and I was witness to that ruckus in the Maverick Saloon."

The old sheriff reached into a drawer of his desk and brought out a deputy's star. Then he faced his

son and held up his right hand by way of example.

"Say your 'I do's,' and pin on this law badge, Hig," he said sternly. "This will make you a law cub, but I want your word not to ride out after me under an hour at the most!"

Hig Coulter took the star and repeated the oath of office after his father. He was medium tall and saddle-lean, and a bright spot of color burned high on his cheeks when he fastened the badge to his wool shirt.

"I won't ride out for an hour, sheriff," he promised. "Give my best to Big Horse."

Hig Coulter sat down behind the old oak desk when the sheriff mounted his roan and left town at a high lope. The cowboy deputy leaned forward when a pair of riders stomped out of the Maverick Saloon and mounted their horses at the rail. His gray eyes narrowed when he recognized Wolf Denton and Curly Beaumont, and he came to his feet with a little growl in his throat.

"I got a mind to tail them two," he muttered angrily, and then he sat down again. "But I promised the sheriff," he snarled bitterly.

Wolf Denton was foreman of the Pitchfork, the biggest cattle outfit in the valley. Now Denton and Beaumont were dipping down toward the river where the stage road crossed a ford four miles from Comanche. Hig Coulter turned back to the desk, and then he leaned forward to study the scrawled writing on the note.

"That ain't Big Horse's writing," he said under his breath, and then his eyes wandered to a sheath of papers. The one on top caught his eyes, and he caught his breath sharply when he saw that it was the complaint signed by Wolf Denton.

He leaned closer to study the scrawled signature.

"I'm a dirty name!" he whispered hoarsely. "Wolf Denton wrote that note to bait a trap for the sheriff!"

He ripped to his feet and slammed out of the office with his spurs biting chunks from the splintered floor. His right hand jerked the slipknot while his left gathered up bridle reins, and then he hit his saddle like a relay rider and thundered down the dusty street.

Anger seethed through his brain when he remembered that Big Horse Hawley could neither read nor write. The sheriff also knew it, and young Hig Coulter suddenly realized that his father had forgotten everything except his duty. That, and his desire to clear the name of his old friend.

Six-guns began to crack faintly across the tops of the cottonwoods that bordered the distant river. The cowboy raised his head to place the explosions, and then he scratched with both spurs to send his sorrel racing down the river road.

"It's more than a mile," he groaned, and his right hand slapped for his gun and came up gleaming with blued steel.

An ominous quiet settled over the wooded trail, broken only by the hammering thud of his horse's hoofs. He rounded a bend and hit the river ford with a splash that threw spray all over him, and then he almost pulled the sorrel over backward when he saw a sprawled huddle on the ground.

Hig Coulter stepped off a-running and dug his heels into the loamy soil to stop his slide. His eyes widened when a tall figure staggered up and stood facing him with left hand clutched to his belly. A long-barreled six-gun dangled in the limp right hand, and Hig Coulter clicked

his hammer back with lips skinning back over his teeth.

"Drop that cutter, Big Hoss!"

Big Horse Hawley swayed and opened his fingers. The gun slid to the ground at his feet, and the cowboy lowered his eyes automatically and gasped. Crimson was sloshing from the top of Hawley's peewee boots, and Hig Coulter leaped forward and caught the slumping old cowhand just as Big Horse unhinged his knees.

"Easy, law cub," moaned the old cowboy. "They shot me through the middle when I stepped out to make talk with old Bart!"

Hig Coulter lowered the old-timer to the ground and braced the sagging body against his right knee. Then his eyes darted to the body of his father, lying face-down in the short grass. A rusty red stain was spreading across the back of the faded old vest, squarely between the wide shoulders.

"Talk fast, Big Horse," the cowboy murmured, but his voice was hoarse with a terrible anger. "You stepped out to talk to the sheriff!"

"I've been hiding in that bat cave over south," the wounded man whispered, and bit his lips to stop a red flow.

Hig Coulter wiped the bearded lips with the stained bandanna under Hawley's chin. He had been with Big Horse hunting strays when they had found the big cave at the edge of the badlands. The anger left him when he remembered Wolf Denton and Curly Beaumont riding out of Comanche after the sheriff.

"I had the sheriff under my gun," Big Horse whispered weakly. "I knew he would take me back to jail, and he said something about getting my note."

"I saw the note," Hig Coulter answered grimly. "Then I remembered

that you couldn't write. Wolf Denton wrote that message for the sheriff to come down here and meet you."

"A Mexican kid gave me a message last night," murmured the old cowboy. "Said old Bart wanted to clear my name, and to meet him down here."

"And you come out behind your gun," the cowboy prompted softly.

"A shot knocked the sheriff down before we had begun to talk," the wounded man whispered. "There I was with Bart under my gun, and two shots got me through the middle before I could turn. Wolf Denton and his side-kick were foggin' it through the brush over yonder, but I knocked Curly's hat off before I went down!"

Hig Coulter gripped the old buckaroo by the shoulders and closed his eyes. He knew that Big Horse was making ready for the long trail, and his voice was soft when he leaned forward.

"That stage holdup, Big Horse. You know who did it?"

The old cowboy nodded and opened his glazing eyes. "Denton and Beaumont," he murmured.

Hig Coulter tightened his grip when he felt the thin shoulders sag under his fingers.

"I'll square up for you the law way, old pard," he growled huskily, and went to his knees beside his father.

A low moan jerked him forward with his hands turning the sheriff over. Bart Coulter opened his eyes slowly, but his face was twisted with the pain that racked his tough body.

"Bushwhackers, Hig," he barely whispered. "It wasn't . . . Big Horse!"

"Big Horse is gone, sheriff," the cowboy answered with a catch in his deep voice. "Wolf Denton and

Curly Beaumont shot him through the middle. It was them two who robbed the stage, and I'm taking out after them. First I got to get you and Big Horse back to town!"

He saw the sheriff nod drowsily before the wounded man lost consciousness.

It was almost noon when Hig Coulter rode slowly into Comanche leading two horses. Old Dr. Jennings saw him from his front window, and the little doctor arrived at the jail just as the cowboy swung to the ground.

"Big Horse is done for," he told the doctor. "Help me carry old Bart back to that bed behind the jail cells."

They laid the wounded sheriff on the bed and stripped off his shirts.

Hig Coulter bit his lip and walked through the jail, leaving the doctor to his work. A crowd was gathered around the big bay stallion, staring at the body of the dead man. A sneering voice broke the silence when the young deputy picked up his bridle reins.

"Them two must have made it a draw from the looks of things!"

Hig Coulter whirled suddenly when he recognized the speaker. Curly Beaumont was standing with boots spaced wide, his right hand on the grip of his gun. His beady little eyes were watching Hig Coulter, and the crowd sensed that something was wrong.

"The sheriff was shot in the back by some sneakin' lobo," the young deputy announced quietly. "This same gent gut-shot Big Horse on a bushwhackin' sneak, but Big Horse saw this feller before he fell. He told me who he was, and said he had knocked this hombre's hat off with a slug!"

Every man in the crowd turned to stare at Curly Beaumont. The

Pitchfork cowboy was wearing a bandage under his peaked Stetson,

"Are you namin' any names?" Beaumont demanded sneering.

"I'm naming you, you killin' holdup!"

Hig Coulter saw the beady eyes jerk at the corners when he spat his accusation. Curly Beaumont was jerking his gun from the low-slung holster on his right leg.

The crowd jumped back just as the young deputy twitched his shoulder, and Curly Beaumont was hammered back with the gun spilling from his clutching fingers.

Hig Coulter caught the bucking gun high in his hand with thumb rocking back the hammer for a follow-up. Then he stared at the man squatting on the ground and slowly lowered the hammer.

"You'll live long enough to talk," he said grimly. "You can tell it to the boys while I ride law on yore pard. I'll use Hawley's horse after I leave him down there with Burying Joe!"

III.

Wolf Denton was lazing on the big front gallery of the Pitchfork ranchhouse when Hig Coulter rode into the yard. The Pitchfork foreman had just finished his noon meal, and he leaned forward to stare at the big stallion when the deputy dismounted at the rail.

"Looks like you caught the hoss thief," he said grinning. "Thanks for bringing the stallion back to me."

Hig Coulter brushed the handle of his gun with sensitive fingers when he faced the big man. There was no answering smile on his tanned face when he studied the smoke-grimed gun on Denton's right leg.

"The horse can wait," he said slowly. "Like you can see, I'm talking to you from behind a law star!"

Wolf Denton jerked up his head and then smiled coldly. "You've made a right good start for a law cub," he sneered. "Did you kill him?"

"Not outright, but he'll cash just like Big Horse did," the deputy answered clearly. "I recognized him from that bandage on his head. Yuh see, Big Horse lived long enough to name his killers!"

Wolf Denton stiffened and arose from his chair. He hooked both hands in his gun belt and leaned forward.

"Bandage?" he repeated. "You meaning . . . Curly?"

Hig Coulter nodded. "You and him was seen robbing the stage," he answered quietly. "And you shot the law in the back on a sneak!"

Wolf Denton wasted no more time in talk. He knew that the game was up, because he knew Curly Beaumont. Curly would talk before he died, and the Pitchfork foreman made a slap for his gun.

Hig Coulter's gray eyes were burning with a smoldering light when he read the big man's intentions plainly written on the swarthy distorted face. His right shoulder twitched to drive his clawed fingers down with thumb notching back the heavy hammer. The firing pin dented the cap just as his gun

snouted over the lip of his holster, and Wolf Denton triggered a slug into the ground between his wide-spaced boots.

Hig Coulter side-stepped when the big man pitched from the porch and measured his length beneath the tie rail. Then he gathered up his trailing reins and mounted the bay stallion.

The big stud was lathered when the deputy turned him into the corral behind the jail, and old Doc Jennings met him at the back door with a smile on his wrinkled face.

"The sheriff will live, Hig," he whispered. "He's been asking for the law cub. Don't let him talk too much!"

Hig Coulter felt a great weight lifted from his shoulders. His eyes were bright when he stepped into the sick room. Old Bart reached out a hand, but his wise old eyes were staring at the powder-grime on the .45.

"You got Curly, but he talked before he cashed," the sheriff whispered weakly. "He named Wolf Denton, and told where the loot was hidden. I heard you rode out there. Well?"

Hig Coulter gripped his father's hand and nodded his head. "Yeah," he muttered. "Wolf Denton died of six-gun law!"

APPEAL



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BULLET BALLOTS IN PURGATORY



By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

Author of "Gun Trail In Hoss-thief Canyon," etc.

When sidewinder killers ask for trouble, even an easy
gem' gent like Peaceful Perkins is willin' to oblige.

Bullet Ballots In Purgatory

CHAPTER I.

LEAD BEFORE BREAKFAST.

FROM the crest of Split Hoof Ridge the west slope plunged downward, giving view to the Chico River which skirted the foot of the slope like a silver ribbon winding its way across a rumpled gray-green carpet of sage and piñon.

Peaceful Perkins let his bay gelding pick its way to the lip of the slope, then pulled it to a halt. The tall waddy glanced around him sleepily. It was early morning. The sun was just beginning to climb over the saw-toothed eastern horizon. A chill breeze bit through Perkins' leather jerkin, the seams of which were strained by the breadth of the youth's heavy shoulders. He shivered slightly, and his long-jawed, homely face clouded gloomily.

"This'll be the death of me shore," he growled glumly. "Gettin' a peaceful gent like me up afore the chill is out of the air is slow murder. Reckon Tom Fenner don't figure thet hearin' his unpleasant voice all day is enough tuh upset my peace of mind. Plumb in the middle of the quiet an' tranquillity of sunup, he has tuh bust me out of bed, an' pile his troubles on my pore shoulders."

But there was a hard, bright light in the depths of his hooded gray eyes that belied the gloomy tone of his voice. His stare drifted along the foot of the ridge, and came to a halt on the lone rider working cautiously down a draw that angled in toward the ridge. A faint, cold smile broke through the gloom clouds on the tall waddy's face.

"There's Fenner now," he muttered dismally. "Now we'll see if his hunch is right about that pack of rustlers holin' up down there."

Peaceful stirred his gelding into movement, working slowly along the crest of the ridge. As he rode, his eyes followed the base of the steep slope, searching the boulder fields for some sign of the rustler gang that had been haunting Butte County ranchers for the past two months. Below him, Sheriff Tom Fenner held to the draw that had now angled off, paralleling the ridge.

Suddenly the tall rider pulled in sharply on the reins, his wide mouth drawing into a taut, thin-lipped line. Distantly, a sound came to his ears—the bark of rifle shattering the early morning silence.

It might have been the cracking of a dry stick under his horse's hoofs, except for the faint puff of smoke that rose from a jumble of boulders directly below him. He leaned forward tensely in the saddle, eyes narrowed, worried. Then he saw them, a half dozen men hunkered down at the edge of the boulder field, facing the lone sheriff who moved slowly in on them.

The guns of the outlaw pack broke into a deadly crackle now, hammering a hail of lead toward the sheriff. But Tom Fenner didn't hesitate. He paused long enough to slip from his horse, then continued steadily forward on foot, gun leaping and roaring.

Peaceful felt a surge of admiration course through his lanky frame, but his face became more gloomy than ever.

"The hotheaded old war horse! Can't set still long enough for me tuh circle an' come in from the other side of 'em. Now I got tuh risk bustin' myself tuh pieces goin' down this slope, just so's I won't have tuh

set here an' see him blasted tuh kingdom come an' have his death troublin' my conscience the rest of my life."

He slapped his mount over the lip of the slope. For all his grumbling, there was no caution in the way he forced his horse down the steep side of the ridge. The long-limbed bronc dropped down the incline at reckless, spine-jarring speed. Half-way to the floor of the valley, it struck loose, treacherous gravel that shifted underfoot into a slide.

Face grim, hard-lined, Peaceful felt the horse under him fight the drag of the slide. Loose stones rattled down the slope, making others shift into movement, gathering speed and momentum until nothing could be heard but the grinding roar of the slide.

The bronc's muscles rolled and snapped as the animal fought to keep its feet. It whinnied in fear, snorted and blew as the dust pall rolled smotheringly down over horse and rider.

Rocks bounded erratically. One of them struck the tall waddy, numbing his muscles where it smashed into his left shoulder.

Then gradually the roar of the slide died down. The movement of the rocks slowed and finally halted. Peaceful pulled his gun, gripping the long-barreled weapon tightly in his big-knuckled hand. Dimly through the fog of dust, he heard the excited yelling of the outlaws. A harsh-toned voice boomed out.

"It's another of the sheriff's men! C'mon, there may be more tryin' tuh surround us."

Grimly, the tall waddy nudged his mount over the mass of loose stones that had piled up at the foot of the ridge. A cool breeze filtered through the dust cloud, cleaning the air, and giving faint view of the out-

law pack running wildly through the boulders to their horses fifty yards away. One of them saw Peaceful, as the dust thinned out, jerked to a halt, his Colt snapping up savagely.

"It's that sad-faced younker!" he yelled. "Dang him, he's rammed his big nose intuh someone else's business once too often. I'm punchin' his ticket right now."

The gun in the outlaw's hand blared. Lead whipped past Peaceful's cheek, fanning him hotly. He swayed to one side in the saddle, his own gun flicking upward. It jerked, roared. Then Peaceful's lips tightened, and he jammed the Colt back into its holster.

"Yuh can't plug a gent shootin' blanks," he grumbled sourly. "Dang it, I plumb forgot tuh take out them blanks, an' put in some good shells. Bein' peaceful is shore unhealthy in this danged country."

He spurred his bronc into a run, swinging around a hump of granite, and heading straight for the crouching gunman. He could recognize the man now, although the rest of the gang were out of sight, streaking through the breaks along the Chico. The outlaw was Keno Harg, a waxy-faced, black-eyed card sharp whom Peaceful had caught cheating in a poker game a few days before and had run out of town.

"Get nose trouble, will yuh?" Harg screeched. "I'm payin' yuh off, sad eyes!"

His homely face rock-hard, Peaceful thundered toward the lone gunman. The outlaw's weapon pitched and blared in his hand. A wild slug plowed through the butt of Peaceful's carbine jutting from its saddle holster and screamed off into space. Another ripped through his jerkin, burning like a white-hot iron across his arm.

Then suddenly another figure appeared near the crouching killer. It was Sheriff Fenner, blunt-jawed, stocky-bodied. The outlaw whirled with deadly speed to face the lawman. Flame and smoke licked from his gun muzzle, but his slug missed the rapidly moving sheriff.

Braang!

Lead roared from Fenner's gun. It struck the Colt in Harg's hand, sent the weapon spinning wildly off to one side. The outlaw squalled a curse, clutched bullet-numbed fingers.

"Now reach, blast yuh!" the sheriff's hot words lashed out.

Fear mottled the outlaw's narrow face, and his hands shot up over his head. Peaceful pulled his bronc to a bunch-footed halt, slid to the ground, and stalked grimly toward the killer. There was no expression on the tall waddy's face, but deadly lights smoldered in his gray eyes.

"I got nose trouble, have I?" he growled. "Mister, when I get through with yore face yore nose'll be smelling backward."

Tom Fenner leaped forward, backed the skinny killer away from the tall waddy with a prodding gun muzzle.

"Cut it, Perk," he clipped back over his shoulder.

Peaceful halted, a sad, gloomy expression coming to his homely face. "Shore," he drawled glumly, "with me already loaded down with misfortune an' troubles, yuh keep me from what little pleasure I can find on this earth. It's bad enough tuh get a peace-lovin' gent like me up afore breakfast, without gettin' his blood pressure all worked up an' not lettin' him ease it off."

Fenner snorted sarcastically. He backed Harg up to a boulder, stared at the skinny outlaw darkly.

"Yuh better talk, Harg," the sher-

iff growled. "Who are yore pards? Spill it pronto, or I'll turn Peaceful loose. An' he ain't what yuh'd call fun tuh romp with."

Keno Harg's thin lips curled sneeringly. "Yuh can't bluff me, Fenner," he snarled. "An' it'll take a lot of rompin' tuh make me talk."

Peaceful drawled softly, his veiled eyes holding a chilly glint: "Maybe after we get yuh to the *calabozo* yuh'll change yore mind. It'll be too late then, but yuh may not have tuh stay in jail long. Purgatory has some plumb salty citizens, an' they've been in an ornery mood since yuh cheated old Hap McQuade out of the money he got from sellin' his calf crop. Hap killed himself after that crooked game, an' folks are blamin' it on yuh. They're plannin' a lynch party for yuh when yuh're brought in, Harg."

Fear returned swiftly to flood the outlaw's jetty eyes. His lips sagged, trembled, and his voice took on a shrill edge.

"Yuh wouldn't let 'em, Fenner. Yuh *couldn't*, Fenner! It ain't legal. I've got a right tuh a trial, an' no one could prove I cheated in that game."

Sheriff Fenner growled coldly. "That's why the folks is plannin' a lynchin', jest so yuh won't have a chance tuh stand trial. An' I reckon they'll get yuh if they decide to. Peaceful's got his restin' to do, an' I can't stick around the jail all the time. It's goin' tuh be plumb hard to keep the town toned down after we bring yuh in."

Keno Harg's eyes rolled. "But the gang'll kill me if I talk," he quavered nervously. Fear of the gang brought a shallow veneer of courage. "I won't talk, dang it! The boss is in town most of the time, an' he'd find out. I'll take my chances on a lynchin'!"

Fenner took out his handcuffs, shrugged his stocky shoulders. "O. K.," he grunted. "Yuh're diggin' yore own grave. They say a rope don't hurt much more'n a slug anyhow."

"Wait a minute!" A wild gleam flared in Harg's black eyes. "I got money. Gimme a chance tuh slope, an'—" He broke off, motioned toward his shirt pocket with shaking fingers. "There's two thousand in here—the dinero I got offn old man McQuade. Let me bust loose, an' it's yores."

The back of the lawman's neck darkened with a rush of blood. His shoulder muscles rolled up in anger, and a growl rumbled in his deep chest.

"Why, yuh dirty, sneakin' coyote —" he began.

A cold, calculating light kindled in Peaceful's sleepy blue eyes. He leaned forward, face blank, and gripped the lawman's arm.

"Why not, Tom?" he drawled softly. "Harg's right. What's the sense of us riskin' our necks catchin' owl-hooters an' not get nothin' out of it? Yuh're only paid fifty a month, an' I ain't even on the pay roll. With a thousand apiece—"

Tom Fenner leaped to one side, lips white, taut above his blunt chin. His hot, stormy gray eyes glared at the gloomy-faced waddy.

"Dang if I thought yuh'd ever turn coyote, Perk," he bit out sarcastically. "I knowed yuh was too lazy tuh work, but—" He let his words trail off, as he caught the slow lowering of Peaceful's eyelid. He hesitated, scowling, puzzled. "Well, why not?" he growled, finally. "Who in blazes appreciates what I do anyhow? Turn over the dinero, Harg, an' yuh're free tuh slope. If I ain't re-elected tomorrow, I'll have a nest aig tuh start with anyhow."

Keno Harg grinned crookedly. His long fingers slid into his pocket, brought out a bulging billfold. He flipped it open, pulled out a wad of bills, handed them to the sheriff. Fenner riffled through them, then growled harshly.

"Well, don't stand there grinnin', yuh polecat! Blast it, I feel as skunky as yuh are!"

Keno Harg's jetty eyes screwed down into slits. Thin lips pulled back over clenched teeth, and a tenseness rippled over his bony frame.

"Shore," he drawled tonelessly. "I allus figured law dogs had their price." He started to turn away. "But this time—"

He whipped around, a short-barreled derringer dropping from the sleeve of his coat into his hand. It's stubby muzzle jerked upward toward Tom Fenner's chest.

"This time yore price is too high!" he yelled hoarsely.

Then he jerked the trigger.

CHAPTER II.

PEACE-LOVIN' WADDY.

TWO things helped to save Tom Fenner's life, and Peaceful Perkins was behind both of them. He had been scratching his head when the killer made his deadly draw, and as Harg's gun roared, the tall waddy sailed his hat into the gunman's face. That same instant Peaceful's long leg shot out, shoved the sheriff sprawling to the ground.

Keno Harg's face went white with fear and fury, as he saw that Peaceful's quick move had saved the sheriff's life. He snarled a curse, and the ugly little derringer in his hand swiveled around, snouting toward the tall waddy. Peaceful faded swiftly to one side, trying to lunge in close, but deep inside him crawled

the cold realization that he could never move fast enough to escape the death that was about to belch from Keno Harg's hide-out gun.

He saw Harg's finger tensing on the trigger of the double-barreled derringer.

Blam!

Not from the killer's gun, that blaring shot, but from the Colt in Tom Fenner's hand.

Peaceful shot a wild glance over his shoulder as he dived forward to see the stocky sheriff still sprawled out on the ground, but twisted around, his gun shrouded in a fog of smoke.

Keno Harg screamed, jerked convulsively on the trigger. Frantically Peaceful threw his head to one side as the derringer exploded almost in his face. He felt the burn of gunpowder against his cheek, the hot breath of lead fanning his neck. Then a loose rock rolled under his boot, and he pitched forward on his face. He was on his feet in an instant, homely face grim and tight. He saw Harg's dead body where the killer had crumpled to the ground, turned to face Tom Fenner, stalking up from one side.

"Yuh hurt, Peaceful?" came the lawman's anxious voice.

The tall waddy nodded gloomily. "Shore, I'm hurt," he grunted sourly. "Yuh can't shove a peaceful jasper like me around on an empty stomach an' expect him tuh keep his health. But I'm primin' myself tuh do some bitin' of my own if any more hambres get proddy ideas."

He pulled his battered old Colt, swung open the cylinder, and jacked the blank shells into the palm of his big hand. Then he thumbed fresh shells from the loops of the cartridge belt sagging around his middle, jammed them into his gun. He let the Colt slide back into its pouch.

"Now I'll be shootin' slugs that'll hurt," the sad-faced waddy grumbled dismally. "If yuh'd waited for me tuh get behind that gang, we might have caught the whole bunch. Now there'll be so much ruckus an' tarnation raised that it'll take me a week tuh get things peaceful again."

"They seen me afore I could get hid," Fenner, snapped back, an edge to his voice. "Yuh was the one that acted like a danged fool, comin' down the side of the ridge an' startin' that slide like that."

A faint smile quirked at the corners of Peaceful's wide mouth. "That wasn't anything," he drawled mildly. "Lots of times I get up in the middle of the night just tuh come out here an' ride a rock slide down. There's somethin' relaxin' about the roar of slidin' rocks after hearin' yore unpleasant voice all day. Besides, I got us a thousand bucks apiece by comin' down that slide, didn't I?"

Sheriff Tom Fenner's square jaw tightened, and tiny lines etched themselves into his leathery skin to bracket taut lips.

"Perk, yuh don't mean that, do yuh? I mean what yuh said about Harg buyin' us off?"

The tall waddy nodded calmly, his homely face blank. "Shore," he drawled. "Why not? It was the truth, wasn't it, about the town planin' tuh lynch the dirty son? Course I didn't figure on him makin' a break, or yuh killin' him, but—"

Smoldering anger flared in the lawman's narrowed eyes.

"I reckon I figured yuh wrong all these years, Perk," he ground out harshly. "Yuh dirty, bribe-takin' polecat! Yuh rung me in on yore game by makin' me think yuh had a trick planned. I got an election tuh face tomorrow, an' if anyone saw

me with this money yuh tricked me into takin'—"

His hot words broke off, as a faint yell rolled down from the crest of the ridge. Both men turned, slanted squinted eyes up the steep slope. There, silhouetted against the pink of the early morning sky, was a lone rider. Reflected light winked from a pair of field glasses the man held to his eyes. Even from that distance, Peaceful could recognize the broad, powerful frame of Joe Snoddy, line rider for Lint Pavey's giant Block P spread.

Tom Fenner groaned bitterly under his breath. "It's that spyin' Joe Snoddy. He seen the whole thing."

Snoddy's mocking yell floated hollowly down the slope of the ridge.

"How much did yuh get, Fenner? It better be enough tuh last a long time, 'cause Butte County won't reelect a sheriff who can be bought off."

Snoddy turned then, and spurred his bronc back out of sight, heading in the direction of Purgatory ten miles away.

For a long moment Tom Fenner stared up the face of the ridge, then he turned woodenly on the tall waddy. His honest, square-jawed face was gray, bitter.

"Well, that's what yore skunky deal cost me," he ground out. "It'll cost the county more'n that, blast yuh! Lint Pavey'll get his man, Cuff Reeder, in office, an' then they'll bleed the whole county dry."

Tauntingly, he threw the bills Keno Harg had given him to the tall waddy's feet. He stared sardonically into Peaceful's gloomy face.

"There's the dinero, Perkins," he sneered. "Yuh can have my share. The stuff burns my hands, an' smells like polecat. They say one skunk can't smell another, so it won't make no difference to you."

He spun angrily on his heels, stalked to his horse, climbed stiffly into the saddle, and thundered off toward town.

Peaceful Perkins wagged his head sadly, as he watched the sheriff ride out of sight. Then he stooped, and gingerly picked up the sheaf of bills. He sniffed them cautiously, then looked up again toward the trail of dust Fenner's horse had left.

"It don't burn my hands," the tall waddy muttered dismally. "An' I don't smell anything like skunk on it. If Tom wasn't such a hotheaded old coot maybe he'd have set still till I told him why I let Harg try tuh buy us off. I only wanted the skunk iuh think he was free so's I could follow him to the hide-out of that gang."

He growled gloomily in his chest, picked up Harg's body and tied the dead outlaw into the saddle of his horse. Then he led the animal to his own gelding, swung into the saddle, and turned in the direction of the town.

"It just goes tuh show yuh that the peaceful, well-meanin' gent gets the dirty end of the stick every time," he soliloquized dolefully. "Now I got tuh cart this body back tuh town all by myself, then go tuh Mrs. McQuade an' give her back the two thousand bucks Harg cheated old Hap out of. Nope, it just don't pay tuh be a peace-lovin' waddy in this danged country."

CHAPTER III.

LAW STAR FOR SALE.

THE brassy ball of the sun was beginning to tip over into the western sky when Peaceful rode into Purgatory, and reined in at the hitch rail in front of the Bad Luck Saloon. He sat there quietly a moment, listening to the ominous rum-

ble of voices that floated over the saloon's batwing doors and jarred against his ears.

"Sounds like someone's givin' another election talk," the tall waddy muttered glumly. "Reckon Lint Pavey figures free liquor an' cigars are goin' tuh put his man, Cuff Reeder behind Fenner's star. Me, I got an awful feelin' lead will be the price of votes afore this election ruckus is settled."

He slid from the saddle, looped the reins of his gelding around the already well-filled rail. He crossed the boardwalk, and paused at the batwing doors, as the babble of excited voices died to the sudden boom of a man's harsh words. It was Joe Snoddy's voice, whiskey-hoarse, raucous.

"Yuh don't hear him denyin' it, do yuh? Shore, all he can do is lean on the bar an' bury his nose in that beer mug. Fenner, why don't yuh turn around an' tell the folks how yuh let Keno Harg buy yuh off, then blasted him down when he thought he was free?"

An instant of strained silence followed Snoddy's taunting words. Then a shrill, jeering voice piped up.

"Law stars for sale! I bet Fenner has sold his a dozen times, him an' that graveyard-faced pard of his."

Peaceful shoved coolly through the swinging doors. No man paid him a glance; their attention was on Joe Snoddy's giant frame where the Block P puncher swaggered near Tom Fenner, leaning over the end of the bar. Unnoticed, the tall waddy drifted back along the wall to the rear of the room. He halted in a shadowy corner, peering over the heads of the men who clogged the saloon room. The air was fogged with swirling clouds of smoke that mingled with the odor of stale whiskey.

At the end of the bar, Sheriff Fenner sipped his beer woodenly. Bunched muscles rode the blunt line of his jaw, leaving a trail of gray across his sun-bronzed, leathery skin. His hand, clamped around the beer glass, was white-knuckled, trembling slightly.

"Shore, any outlaw who's got the price can buy Fenner's star," the shrill voice jeered again. "A danged Judas!"

Tom Fenner lowered his glass to the bar, turned slowly to face the sneer of the men. Corded veins throbbled in his throat, and his face was gray and grim. Men crowded backward, as the cold fury of his stare struck them. He stepped out to face Joe Snoddy. A pallor crept over Snoddy's heavy face, but he covered it blusteringly.

"Gettin' proddy, huh?" he snorted. "Think maybe yuh can bluff yore way out. But I don't scare easy, Judas, an'—"

Tom Fenner's stocky body suddenly lunged forward. His left hand lashed out, cracked against the side of Snoddy's face, leaving the white imprint of his fingers.

Snoddy stiffened under the sting of the slap. He cursed brokenly, made a clawing grab for his gun, then jerked his hand away from the weapon as he felt the deadly promise gleaming in the lawman's cold eyes.

"Blast yuh!" he panted. "I see yore game now. All yuh want is the chance tuh throw yore gun—kill me."

Fenner laughed harshly, lips pale, set. "That's all I'm askin', Snoddy," he rasped. "Yuh been spoutin' off too much about me, spillin' a lot of danged lies. I'm callin' yuh, mister. Either throw yore gun, or keep yore lips buttoned."

A shiver rippled over Snoddy's

giant frame. His hair-matted hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. Hatred worked the muscles of his face, contorted his puffy lips.

"Yuh'd like tuh murder me, wouldn't yuh?" he choked finally. "Yuh know my gun's busted. Yuh'd like tuh murder me for tellin' what I saw from the top of the ridge."

"An' a lot more yuh made up," the sheriff finished gratingly. "Yuh've talked too much, Snoddy. On account of yore talk maybe I won't be sheriff after tomorrow. If I ain't wearin' a badge an' yuh're still around here, I'll be lookin' yuh up—with my guns smokin'!"

He stalked stiffly past Snoddy after that, shoved through the crowd, and banged out of the saloon. An instant of strained silence closed in, only to be broken by a man's harsh laugh.

"Yuh crawled that time, Snoddy. Maybe we won't be believin' all yore talk about Fenner now."

The big puncher spun with flaring rage. His heavy face darkened with a surge of pounding blood. Murder surged in his small eyes.

"Yuh heard what I said about my gun bein' busted," he snarled. "Yuh'll see tomorrow whether I been tellin' the truth or not. He's toted that law star so long he thinks it's sprouted on his vest. Yuh've noticed that calf-faced pard of his ain't showed up, ain't yuh? Shore, Fenner's runnin' his bluff, an' Perkins will show up later tuh give him his cut of the dinero they got from Harg."

A ripple of movement stirred at the rear of the room. Men turned curiously, then pressed back, opening an aisle for the gloomy-faced youth who was elbowing toward the Block P puncher near the bar.

Bleakly, Peaceful Perkins shoved past the inner fringe of the crowd,

slouched forward to face Joe Snoddy. For all the tall waddy's six foot four of bone and muscle, Snoddy's height and bulk made him appear small. He came to a halt a yard from the big man, a gloomy, doleful expression on his homely face.

"Yuh oughtn't tuh talk about me like that, Snoddy," he drawled sadly. "I'm a right peaceable jasper, but when I lose my head, I go plumb wild."

Snoddy's small eyes screwed up with rage, and his puffy lips pulled back in a sneer.

"Yuh go plumb wild, huh?" he jeered. "Yeah, shootin' blank shells like a danged tenderfoot. What I said about Fenner goes about yuh, too, ugly. Yuh're a danged, bribe-takin'—"

"Once I punched a guy's nose," Peaceful began dismally.

"Judas," Snoddy finished harshly.

"I punched it like this," Peaceful went on sadly.

SPLAT!

Like a piston, Peaceful's left fist shot out, shocked to a halt against Snoddy's big nose. Snoddy's head rocked back. Crimson spurted from mashed nose and split lips. He spat viciously, a murderous glitter flaming in his small eyes. He cursed chokingly.

"I'll bust yore head for that, younker," he grated.

He lurched forward, a growl of rage rumbling in his deep chest. Both fists lashed out, clubbing wickedly toward the tall youth's lantern jaw. But they didn't land.

Peaceful's left shoulder rolled up, caught one of the punches. He swayed to one side of the other, then slid in close to blast a short blow to Snoddy's middle.

Again the giant puncher rocked backward. He stumbled into the

bar, rattling the glasses and bottles with the shock of his weight. He fought to regain the breath that had been exploded from his lungs, caught it, roared a curse and bored in, both hands flailing.

Peaceful drifted back, faded swiftly to one side. His left fist speared out, crashed against the side of Snoddy's jaw, jarring the big puncher to a halt. Snoddy shook his head like a wounded grizzly. He reached out a huge arm to draw the younger waddy in close, but Peaceful drifted away from it. Then Snoddy snarled an oath, leaped savagely toward the tall youth. This time Peaceful didn't fade back from him. He slid in to meet the giant's rush. His right fist whipped up from his knees, cracked against Snoddy's jaw. Snoddy's head snapped back, only to catch the straight left that rammed out from Peaceful's shoulders.

Strength seemed to drain from Snoddy's giant body with a suddenness that brought a glaze to his eyes and a shakiness to his wide-planted legs. Then his knees collapsed under him. He dropped heavily to the floor, sat there, wagging his head as if trying to recapture some lost thought.

Peaceful stepped back, blowing on bruised knuckles. The gloomy, sleepy expression on his face scarcely veiled the bleak, cold lights dancing in his eyes, when he turned to stare at the gaping crowd. He grinned crookedly, but it was only with his lips.

"Yuh shore forget easy, you gents," he growled tonelessly. "Fenner was doin' his sheriff work here when most of yuh was still thinkin' a bullet was a calf bull. Yuh didn't stop tuh figure that maybe Fenner an' me took Harg's dinero 'cause it really belonged tuh Hap McQuade's

widow. She cried her pore eyes out when I turned it over to her a couple hours ago. An' Harg got his ticket punched when he tried tuh gun us with a hide-out. He's at Doc Deeds in case you yahoos want tuh do some mournin'. An' Snoddy is here waitin' in case yuh want tuh ask him how come he was over on that part of the range so early in the mornin'. I been wonderin' that, an' the answers I got in mind ain't exactly pleasant."

Grim-faced cowmen dropped their eyes sheepishly under the tall waddy's cold stare. They shifted uncomfortably, then one of them blurted out huskily. "Heck, Perk, Tom didn't say nothin' when Snoddy here started spoutin' off. Dang it, we jest thought—"

Another cut in gruffly. "We thought what Snoddy wanted us tuh think, that's what. Me, I'm givin' Fenner my vote tomorrow, an' the devil with Lint Pavey's tin god, Cuff Reeder."

The gloomy expression returned to Peaceful's homely face. "Funny how you gents change yore minds," he drawled sadly. "That's what keeps this place in an uproar all the time. The next minute yuh'll be howlin' after Fenner's hide, an' then I'll have tuh start bustin' noses again. It keeps a peaceful gent like me plumb—"

A man's high-pitched yell of warning sliced out sharply.

"Look out! Gun behind yuh!"

Peaceful whirled, at the same time leaping wildly to one side. The blast of the gun gripped in Joe Snoddy's hand jarred the walls of the room. Lead whimpered in Peaceful's ears, sped on through empty space to smash into a lamp hanging from the ceiling where it exploded it into a million splinters of flying glass.

Peaceful's booted foot shot out, landed against Snoddy's wrist, sending the killer's gun skidding across the sawdust floor. He poised there, fists balled, grinning like a devil at the panic that contorted the giant puncher's battered, bloody features. Snoddy's heavy jowls went ash-gray under the deadly threat that blazed in the tall waddy's cold blue eyes.

"Funny, ain't it," Peaceful was drawling, "how yore busted gun got fixed so quick? It ought tuh be workin' just as good tomorrow, an' if Fenner forgets his promise about smokin' yuh up, don't throw yore gun away. Yuh'll be needin' it bad, Snoddy, 'cause I'll be lookin' for yuh too. An' my gun won't be loaded with blanks, neither!"

CHAPTER IV.

ARMCHAIR LAWMAN.

THE faint slapping of the batwing doors and the sudden undertone of excited whispers that ran through the men who clogged the saloon room brought Peaceful Perkins around fast. Grim-faced, he swung around so that his back was to the bar, eyes searching out the big, barn-shouldered rancher who had stomped into the room to halt just inside the door.

Lint Pavey, owner of the giant Block P spread, was equally as big as his line rider, Joe Snoddy. His face was a hard mask, craggy, heavy-jowled, skin leathery and pock-marked. His jaw was like chiseled granite, jutting out below a thin-lipped, viselike mouth. Anger smoldered in his dark eyes, in the quick glance he shot to Joe Snoddy now climbing unsteadily to his feet. Then his stare jerked back to Peaceful's gloomy face, and he elbowed roughly through the crowd to halt in front of the sad-eyed youth.

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"What in blazes is goin' on here, Perkins?" he demanded harshly.

Peaceful's shoulders sagged despondently, and he wagged his head sorrowfully. "Now, I reckon yuh're goin' tuh jump down my throat," he drawled dismally. "Danged if Fate don't frown on me all the time! Take it easy, Lint. This here loud-mouthed puncher of yores sorta got tangled up in my fists. Seems he was spillin' out a bunch of lies about Fenner an' me, an' I jist corrected him, in a manner of speakin'—"

Lint Pavey broke him off with a choked oath. He whirled on Snoddy, his heavy face coloring darkly.

"That right, Snoddy?" he rasped.

The giant puncher nodded jerkily. "Only they wasn't lies, boss," he began nervously. "Dang it, I told yuh—"

The saloon doors banged open again, and Tom Fenner pounded into the room, gun held high, alert. He skidded to a halt, keen gray eyes sweeping the room. Then he shouldered forward, blunt jaw grim and hard. His glance flashed from Peaceful to Lint Pavey, and then to Joe Snoddy. Snoddy's battered face grayed under the smears of crimson that splotted his cheeks and jaw.

"I heard a shot," Fenner growled. "Snoddy, that's yore gun there on the floor."

Joe Snoddy shrank back against the bar. Peaceful chuckled mournfully, slouched around so that his Colt hung in the clear.

"It wasn't nothin', Tom," he drawled. "Snoddy jist thought his gun was busted, only it wasn't. 'Less maybe that's what made his slug miss my back."

The stocky lawman fastened bleak eyes on the tall waddy. Bitterness was etched deep in Tom Fenner's leathery face, but there was a stubborn set to his blunt jaw.

He grunted softly: "Peaceful, it looks like yuh'd get the idea that it's not healthy around here for yuh."

Peaceful's head wagged sadly. "It shore looks that way," he admitted glumly. "But right now I'm so tuckered out I'd fall ajart if I had tuh ride far. Seems like some-thin' is allus comin' up tuh keep me unhappy. Like this Snoddy jasper. He was spillin' how you an' me took that money from Harg. I figured yuh wouldn't want nobody tuh know about it, so I sorta gagged him with a few knuckles."

Fenner's taut lips went white, and his eyes screwed down into slitted pin points of cold gray.

"Yuh're doin' a right good job of jawin' yoreself," he growled bitterly. "Gents that talk too much usually end up in a heap of trouble."

Peaceful nodded easily, chuckling at the lawman's thinly veiled warning. "That's what I tried tuh show Snoddy," he moaned. "But he didn't seem tuh learn fast. Not even when I told him we took that dinero from Harg so's we could give it back tuh Hap McQuade's widow."

Tom Fenner's eyes widened with dawning understanding. His jaw sagged, then snapped shut as if he had been about to say something and then changed his mind. A faint smile shadowed his lips.

"If folks wasn't so thick-headed maybe they'd catch onto things like that without bein' told," Peaceful went on meaningly. "If they'd jest relax an' take it easy like me—"

Back in the crowd a man snorted jeeringly. Fenner looked around, and Peaceful's eyes raised sleepily. Cuff Reeder, short, chunky, impassive, elbowed through the staring punchers and edged around to Lint Pavey's side. His long arms hung loosely, brushing twin Colts thonged

low on his stumpy legs. A crooked smile was on his lips, mocking the cold gleam in his pale, colorless eyes.

"Maybe if folks wasn't so thick-headed they'd catch ontuh a lot of things," Reeder sneered tonelessly. "I've kept my oar out of this ruckus long enough. I'm speakin' my piece now, an' it'll be short an' sweet. If I'm elected into yore job tomorrow, Fenner, maybe we'll see why that rustler gang ain't been caught afore."

A tide of color rose to darken Tom Fenner's square face. The knuckles of his blunt-fingered hand whitened around the butt of his gun. He seemed suddenly conscious that he still held the heavy Colt, and jammed it savagely back into its sheath.

"Meanin' anything in partic'lar, Reeder?" he asked in strained softness.

Reeder's head nodded curtly. "Yuh're danged right I do," he grated. "Yuh've toted the star around here so long folks have got tuh thinkin' yuh're the fair-haired boy with the red wagon. They can't see past their noses. If they could, maybe they'd wonder how come yuh do most of yore sheriffin' from yore chair."

Slouching back against the bar, Peaceful saw veins swell in the lawman's throat and throb as Fenner fought to hold back his mounting rage.

"Go on, Reeder," the stocky sheriff urged in a hoarse whisper.

"Maybe they'd figure yuh was in with that rustler gang," Reeder droned flatly. "That's the way I figure it, an' I ain't backward about tellin' yuh. Harg was in yore gang, an' yuh killed him 'cause he held out on splittin' the dinero he cheated Hap McQuade out of. Then yuh figured givin' that money back tuh

old Hap's woman would help yuh get elected again, an' then yuh could bleed the county for another term. Only Joe Snoddy here saw yuh doin' yore skunky job, an' spilled it. Yuh lied yore way out of it, an' then threatened Snoddy yuh'd kill him if he stayed around town tuh talk any more."

"Threatened tuh kill Snoddy!" The hot, vibrant words leaped from Lint Pavey's viselike mouth.

"Shore," Cuff Reeder jeered. "An' if Fenner didn't do the job, this sad-eyed galoot here said he'd take over."

Peaceful groaned mournfully. "Shore, I knowed I talked too much. Now I'll have tuh bust some more noses tuh calm this danged town down."

Back in the crowd a puncher piped up in a shrill, excited voice. "Maybe Cuff's right. Fenner shore has been roostin' in his chair plenty lately."

A man snickered, and a grizzled, white-haired ranchman growled ominously. "An' he ain't done much tuh catch them long-loopers. I lost forty head a week ago, an' another thirty last night."

A wedge-faced jasper with narrow, bony shoulders cursed harshly. "Let's throw the danged Judas in jail right now. Him an' that walkin' graveyard, too! Cuff can start his law job today, an' we can elect him proper tomorrow."

The Colt jumped out of Tom Fenner's holster, swung menacingly on the crowd. Peaceful edged his lanky frame up alongside of the stocky sheriff, gun dangling in his hand.

"An' so the wind blows," he drawled mournfully. "Fust it blows good an' then it blows bad, an' after that a lot of gents get their toes tromped on. Pavey, yuh an' Snoddy an' Reeder started all this wind. Keep it blowin' an' dang if yuh won't

find a lead tornado plumb in yore laps afore it's all over."

A cold, calculating light flared in Lint Pavey's muddy eyes. His craggy, hard-lined face was blank, but his eyes mirrored the ugly thoughts racing through his brain. His glance flicked to Joe Snoddy standing pale-faced and shaken near the bar, and then back to Fenner and Peaceful backing slowly to the front door.

"So yuh two threatened tuh gun Snoddy, huh?" he rumbled harshly. "Snoddy, yuh're stayin' in town, an' I'm backin' yuh. Fenner, yuh better be shore nothin' happens to Snoddy, 'cause if it does yuh'll find a murder shoved down yore throat an' a rope around yore neck."

Peaceful felt the swinging doors press against his back. He shoved cautiously through them, waited for Fenner to get out into the open, then stepped swiftly to one side.

Fenner started grimly across the street to the jail, but Peaceful halted beside the door, ears straining. Lint Pavey's deep voice boomed out vibrantly.

"Belly up, boys! The drinks are on me. We're drinkin' tuh our new sheriff. Wait a minute, Snoddy. You done a danged good job, an' yuh're drinkin' out of my special bottle."

Peaceful drifted down the front of the saloon, squinted through the smudgy, fly-specked window. Wild-eyed, excited punchers milled along the bar, elbowing, jostling each other to get to the bottles and glasses being shoved before them. Lint Pavey himself was behind the bar helping the barkeep. The big rancher bent out of sight behind the bar, and came up an instant later with a bottle of his private liquor. He pushed a glass already filled to the

brim to Joe Snoddy, and shoved the bottle back under the bar.

Peaceful grinned thinly, as he saw Whiskey Joe, an aged, watery-eyed barfly who haunted the Purgatory saloons, worm his way up beside Snoddy. His thin, bony hand speared out, snatched the glass of whiskey up as Snoddy reached for it, and gulped it greedily down.

A flare of rage contorted Lint Pavey's heavy face. He leaned across the bar, cuffed the little barfly halfway across the room with the back of his hand.

"Dang you, Whiskey Joe," he roared. "That was for Snoddy only. Private stuff. Get tuh blazes out of here, blast yuh, or yuh'll wish yuh never seen the inside of a saloon."

The big ranchman went down behind the bar again, came up with another glass of whiskey, and shoved it to Snoddy.

"Drink up, boys," he boomed. "Drink tuh Joe Snoddy's long life. An' drink tuh Tom Fenner, the arm-chair lawman. Shore, by blazes, that's it! I got a stuffed-up chair at the ranch. I'm cratin' it up tonight an' sendin' it down here. Fenner'll need a good chair after tomorrow, 'cause he'll have plenty time tuh set in it an' watch a good sheriff work. Snoddy, come on with me. I'll bandage yuh up, an' yuh can see the fun tomorrow."

Hard-faced cowmen guffawed loudly at Pavey's coarse humor. Peaceful chuckled bleakly, and turned across the street toward the little jail. Inside, he found Tom Fenner staring moodily at the top of his desk, and absently rubbing his badge with the cuff of his sleeve. The tall waddy slouched lazily across the lawman's desk, and grinned.

"Yuh're gettin' a present, Tom," he drawled dismally. "Jest heard Pavey say he's cratin' up a chair

tuh send to yuh so's yuh'll be comfortable tomorrow."

Fenner looked up, square face grim and bleak. "If he does I'll send it back so quick he'll think it hadn't got started here yet," he snapped grimly.

Peaceful nodded mournfully. "I reckon Pavey knows that," he said sourly, "but I got a hunch it won't keep him from sendin' it. I reckon yuh ain't been livin' right. Yuh shore got yore troubles, but I got a feelin' every danged one of 'em will land on my pore shoulders. It's allus that way when a peaceable gent like me minds another gent's business."

CHAPTER V.

MURDER.

THE purple haze of evening was deepening into the murk of darkness when Peaceful was jarred from the nap he had fallen into by a rapping on the jail door. His eyes opened sleepily, and he let his feet slide from the sheriff's desk to the floor. He grunted disgustedly, and twisted around in his chair.

Pancho, the Mexican teamster who worked for Lint Pavey, stood just inside the door, his teeth gleaming whitely against his swarthy skin.

"You sleep, no?" he grinned.

Peaceful's homely face screwed into a scowl.

"No," he growled. "Not as long as I live in this danged town. What d'yuh want?"

Pancho's grin widened. "The sheriff, hees here, no? The easy-chair for him I from Señor Pavey have brought."

The tall waddy shoved lazily to his feet, a crooked half smile coming to his wide mouth.

"Yuh can shore butcher English, huh, Pancho? Fenner ain't here, no.

He's out takin' Whiskey Joe home. That drink of Pavey's special brand that he swiped from Snoddy knocked him colder'n a coot. Bring the chair on in, as long as yuh've got it here. Fenner'll send it back, an' I shore ain't robbin' him of that pleasure."

The little Mexican chuckled. "The sheriff, hees get mad, no? Cuss pore Pancho like devil."

"Yeah," Peaceful grunted dryly. "You an' yore boss, too." He ambled over to the door when Pancho turned to the wagon he had pulled up outside. Curious townsmen drifted up, talking in an excited undertone among themselves. A red-faced, grinning puncher helped Pancho drag the crate into the jail, then straightened, wiping beads of sweat from his forehead.

"That chair weighs enough tuh stand a lot of settin'," he chuckled. "Wish Fenner'd hurry up an' open that box so I can see it."

Peaceful's homely face scowled gloomily. "Yuh'll never see it then," he growled sourly. "He swore he'd send it back jist as soon as it got here, an'—"

Tom Fenner stomped into the room then. Guffaws of taunting laughter ran through the men crowding up to the jail door. A man jeered loudly.

"Get tuh work, Fenner. Yuh got one day tuh show us how a real arm-chair lawman works."

"Shore," another mocked sneeringly. "Don't get out of it, neither, 'cause yuh might run intuh some outlaws."

Tom Fenner whirled on the crowd, compressed lips showing white against the dark flood of anger that surged into his face. A tremble rippled down his stocky body, as if he shook under the lash of his own rage.

"Go on an' yap, coyotes," he bridled hotly. "I've toted the star

here for twenty years. Yuh're all forgettin' that. Plaskett, I busted up the Meeker gang when they was set tuh burn down yore place. Knox, I got yore girl back to yuh when Red Shane's lobos rode off usin' her for a shield. Yuh're forgettin' them an' a dozen other things. But yuh'll be rememberin' danged soon. When Lint Pavey stops feedin' yuh free drinks an' cigars yuh'll wake up with a bad taste in yore mouths that'll last as long as Cuff Reeder is sheriff."

"Livin' off his past," a pinch-faced waddy scoffed sneeringly. "We'll have a fightin' sheriff after tomorrow. Not one who'll take a bribe an' then threaten tuh kill an honest man 'cause he saw the deal, like yuh done Joe Snoddy."

Fenner turned from the doorway woodenly, bunched muscles riding the blunt line of his jaw.

His lanky body slouching against the sheriff's desk, Peaceful let his cold blue eyes drift among the men milling outside the jail. Several of them were Block P men, hard-bitten hombres who looked more like gun hands than cow waddies; men Pavey had sent out to keep the town stirred up. Cuff Reeder was working through the mob, pausing now and then to say something that brought laughter from his listeners.

Fenner collared Pancho, shoved the little Mexican toward the big crate.

"Now, get, yuh grinnin' devil," he stormed. "An' take that chair with yuh. Tell yore boss he can—"

A big man broke through the crowd and stumbled into the jail. Fenner whirled, hand hawking down to his gun. Peaceful's eyes widened, then narrowed to slits. A chill finger traced up his spine, jangled a bell of warning that snapped his lean frame tense and alert.

Fear showed plainly in the man's nervous actions. He paced past the staring sheriff, and plopped his big body down into a chair. No face could be seen. Bandages completely covered his face below the felt hat he wore. A slitted opening in the bandages bared his mouth and nostrils, and two jetty fear-struck eyes stared from behind the mask of cloth. Something dark like the stain of blood showed where the man's upper lip should have been. And there was something familiar in the bandaged man that struck Peaceful like an invisible fist. It came to him with a rush—Joe Snoddy—although the words that followed were cloth-muffled and unrecognizable.

"It's me, sheriff, Joe Snoddy!"

Tom Fenner choked back an oath, clamped his hand around the butt of his six-gun. The bandaged man smothered a whimper of fear, shrank back in his chair.

"Don't kill me!" he quavered. "Fenner, it ain't tomorrow yet, an' yuh gave me till then tuh get out of the county. Yuh've got tuh hide me. *They'll murder me!*"

Fenner growled under his breath. Men elbowed through the doorway to clog the little jail room, their breathing suddenly hoarse, strained. Peaceful's eyelids crawled down, veiling the cold glint that kindled in their blue depths.

"If *they* don't tomorrow, yuh've had my warnin'," Fenner snapped grimly. "Who's *they*?"

Snoddy's black eyes darted around him nervously. They wavered under Peaceful's narrow stare, then jerked back to the lawman.

"The rustler gang," he choked hoarsely. "If yuh're the head of that gang yuh'll kill me for what I know. But if yuh ain't, yuh can prove it now. They're goin' tuh rob the express office!"

"*What!*" The single word burst explosively from Tom Fenner's taut lips.

Peaceful edged forward, face bleak, set in gloomy lines.

"It's the truth," Snoddy whined nervously. "I was goin' through the Devil's Sinkhole. Stumbled ontuh the gang an' heard 'em makin' their plans. They're goin' tuh hit the express office at ten o'clock, fifteen minutes from now. I heard one of 'em say they didn't need tuh worry about you. Then they saw me, an' chased me here."

A hard-faced puncher cursed harshly. "Hear that?" he grated. "Fenner's in with 'em!"

Fenner's square face grayed, went rock-hard. He gripped the bandaged man's shoulder savagely.

"That's a danged lie," he snapped. "This is another one of Lint Pavey's tricks tuh get votes. If yore face wasn't bandaged, Snoddy—"

Snoddy's voice took on a shrill note. "It ain't a trick, Fenner," he yelped. "An' my face is tied up 'cause yore pard bashed it in. Shore, I can see through yore game now. Yuh're lookin' for an excuse tuh keep from havin' tuh buck that gang. They're yore men, an'—"

Tom Fenner jerked away from the bandaged man. He jammed his hat on his head, spun around to glare hotly at the grim-faced townsmen.

"All right," he snapped bluntly. "I'm makin' yuh all depities. We'll go down tuh the express office an' if this whinin' polecat is tellin' the truth we'll have a little lead party for that gang when they strike. An' if they don't show up—"

Cuff Reeder laughed harshly, shouldered forward, flanked on either side by a Block P puncher.

"Maybe yuh're hopin' they don't show up, huh?" he droned meaningly. "Me an' Monk Grundy, here,

are stickin' on yore heels jest tuh be shore yuh don't try tuh warn that gang off."

Reeder's pale eyes flicked over to Peaceful's gloomy face. He thumbed to the other jasper beside him, a wizened, shifty-eyed runt with slender, bony hands brushing thonged-down Colts.

"Tote Horrell will ride yore trail, Peaceful," he said flatly. "He's like a leech tuh shake, so don't try no tricks."

The tall waddy's head shook sadly. "I ain't said a thing, an' here I am neck-deep in trouble. Dang it, I don't see how I keep goin' like I do."

The townsmen crowded through the doorway into the street, halted there grimly. Tom Fenner stalked stiffly after them, followed closely by Cuff Reeder and Monk Grundy. Peaceful shook himself from the top of the desk, grinned crookedly at Tote Horrell.

"Reckon I might as well go out tuh my fate," he drawled dismally. "Jedgment day is gettin' plumb close at hand. If I was a crook I wouldn't prod my luck too much."

Tote Horrell's lips curled. "Yeah," he sneered, in a thin, scratchy voice, "that's what I'm thinkin' about you."

Outside, the townsmen were in a tight knot, heading silently down the street toward the express office. A faint movement in the shadows in front of the jail caught Peaceful's eyes. He stepped closer, then leaped back as a huge, shaggy dog bared its teeth and lunged at him. Peaceful's narrowed eyes watched the dog, as it started down the street after the townsmen at a slow walk. A wild thought flared over the tall waddy's mind, and he turned, searching Horrell's pinched face.

"That's Lint Pavey's dog, ain't

it?" he asked casually. "The one-man dog he brags about?"

Horrell's hands dropped to the butts of his twin Colts, and an ugly light kindled in his eyes. "Shore, it is," he scratched out. "Now get goin', an' worry about yore own neck. Lint keeps it tied up, but it probably busted loose."

Peaceful headed down the street at a lazy pace, with Tote Horrell following him in deadly, close-lipped silence. Then up ahead the townsmen came to a halt, and the dog, following a dozen or so yards behind, halted, too. Peaceful heard Joe Snoddy's quavering voice blast out:

"I ain't goin', Fenner. Yuh'd like tuh get me down there when that gang hits. Then either you or yore men could get me shore. I'm goin' back tuh the jail an' wait."

Tom Fenner's stinging words lashed out. "Yuh crawlin' snake! All right, Snoddy, yuh can hide in the jail. I'll even lock yuh in. Nobody can get yuh then, 'cause I've got the only keys."

Angrily, the stocky sheriff stomped back to the jail with Joe Snoddy. They went inside, and Fenner reappeared an instant later, locked the heavy door carefully behind him. Peaceful's narrowed eyes watched the dog move out of the street to the plank walk. That crazy, half-formed thought clung to his mind. He tried to throw it out and failed.

Then he was at the express office. Fenner scattered the townsmen, deploying them so that the little frame building was entirely surrounded, then he took his place in the shadows of the general store directly across the alley, with Cuff Reeder and Monk Grundy close beside him.

Peaceful ambled lazily across the street, took a slouching position in the gloomy maw between the livery and the harness shop.

A minute dragged by. Lean muscles twitched into hardness over the tall waddy's frame. The sleepiness left his eyes, and was replaced by a cold, deadly alertness. Somewhere in the thick darkness one of the townsmen smothered a nervous cough. Another minute dragged by. Then—

BLAM!

From down the street rolled the muffled roar of a dynamite blast. Peaceful stiffened, leaped to the edge of the street, eyes darting to the squat dome bank a hundred yards away. Shadowy figures moving rapidly from the bank caught his eyes. Harsh words burst from his taut lips.

"They hit the bank! Dang it, I figured—"

He started out toward the middle of the street, then jerked to an abrupt halt as he felt the hard nose of a Colt jab into his back.

"Freeze, yuh walkin' graveyard!" came Tote Horrell's scratchy voice. "That's jist a trick tuh draw us up there so that gang yuh an' Fenner are roddin' can get down here."

Peaceful's lips flattened, muscles ridging along his lanky frame. He swayed backward slightly, eyes crawling into cold blue slits.

"Jist a trick, huh?" he muttered. And then he moved.

His right foot lifted, rammed down savagely. At the same time he twisted wildly to one side of the convulsive shot that roared from the skinny gunman's weapon. Horrell squalled, doubled over with pain that raked up his leg from where the boot heel had smashed into his toes. Peaceful's left hand reached out in the darkness, cupped the skinny killer's jaw, measured it. His right fist cocked, then shot forward. Horrell groaned, flopped to the ground in a limp heap.

"That is a trick," the tall waddy growled under his breath. "A peaceful gent has tuh know a few tricks tuh keep a town like this toned down." Then he leaped out to the middle of the street, gun snapping up from its pouch. He broke into a run. Several of the townsmen pounded after him, yelling hoarsely.

From the shadows of the bank a figure of gun flame licked out, followed instantly by a throbbing barrage of shots. Lead whipped past the running waddy. A man behind him cursed and changed his direction to the cover of the buildings flanking the street.

Peaceful's gun burst into a yammering roar. Behind him other guns blasted. More clearly now, he could make out the half dozen riders huddled at the side of the bank, throwing themselves into the saddles of waiting horses, their guns silent for the instant.

Then abruptly the darkness was flooded with blazing, rocketing lights. Peaceful knew a sudden blinding pain that raked across the side of his head, robbing him of all strength. He felt himself pitch forward, shock into the hard-packed street and skid to a halt on his chest. Vaguely, he heard the blare of hammering guns. Distantly, he made out the rumble of horses' hoofs, but that faded swiftly into an excited babble of voices.

He fought savagely to hold onto his fagged senses, then was abruptly conscious that someone was shaking him roughly. Gradually the blazing white lights ceased to whirl before his eyes, and Tom Fenner's anxious face materialized before him.

"Yuh hit bad, Peaceful?" the sheriff croaked hoarsely.

Peaceful struggled into a sitting position, then shoved dizzily to his feet. His narrowed eyes searched

the grim faces of the townsmen milling around him.

"Shore," he bit out gloomily. "If them skunks had turned loose only one slug I'd be the one who'd catch it. Only the slug that tagged me came from behind me, not from the bank!"

A man cursed caustically. "Perkins, yuh're loco. We was all shootin', but we kept our shots clear of yuh."

The tall waddy grinned dismally, a sour uptwist of thinned lips. "Then one of yuh shore done a bad job of tryin' tuh miss me," he intoned glumly. "Them skunks at the bank wasn't shootin' when I got nicked. They get away?"

Fenner cursed bitterly. "Clean," he growled. "That guy, Snoddy—I'm beginnin' tuh think he knows a lot more about this business than he spilled."

Peaceful's wide mouth tightened. "Me, too," he drawled mournfully. "My head is gettin' chock-full of ugly ideas, an' I shore hope Joe Snoddy is still alive tuh help me get rid of 'em."

He stalked grimly up the street toward the jail, and the townsmen followed closely. A few yards from the jail, Cuff Reeder caught up with the tall waddy, grabbed his arm.

"What happened tuh Tote?" he demanded harshly. "What'd yuh do to him, Perkins?"

Peaceful jerked his arm free. "Put him tuh sleep," he ground out mournfully. "He needed it. Yuh're gonna get a fistful of it, too, if yuh don't keep yore dirty paws off me."

At the jail, Fenner fitted a key into the lock, twisted it. Behind him the townsmen were grumbling among themselves in an ominous undertone.

"Snoddy can tell us who them skunks are," one of them gritted.

"They knew he was listenin' an' cooked that yarn up tuh throw us off. We'll round 'em up an' make 'em tell if Fenner is their boss."

Fenner twisted the knob, gave the door a shove. Grim-faced men shouldering up behind him got a glimpse through the open doorway, fell back cursing brokenly. Fenner's square face grayed. A hoarse whistle of pent-up breath exploded from his taut lips.

Joe Snoddy's giant body lay sprawled out across the jail floor. A pool of blood under the man's huddled body was slowly creeping toward the crated chair. Snoddy's bandaged face was slumped in close to his chest, as if staring at the long-bladed knife that protruded from his ribs.

"Fenner's knife!" A thin-lipped man cursed. "That paper knife he keeps on his desk all the time."

Another voice rasped harshly. "Murdered him when he brought Snoddy here tuh lock him up. Let's get that skunk, Fenner!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE CHAIR—SHE'S ROBBED!

A ROAR that sounded like the blood cry of a wolf pack lifted from the mob. Fighting, cursing men surged forward, clogging the jail door. Fenner was carried into the room by sheer weight of numbers. He fought savagely, but a gun barrel suddenly looped out in a puncher's swinging hand, cracked down on his skull. He slumped limply to the floor, as wild-eyed townsmen piled into the room.

"Lock him in his own jail!" a man howled hoarsely. "Tomorrow we'll elect Cuff Reeder sheriff an' he'll give this murderin' Judas a hang noose!"

Cuff Reeder's chunky body bored

through the mob, broke into the open near Fenner's heavy desk. He leaped to the top of the desk, yelled harshly above the stamping and cursing of the men.

"Get Perkins!" he brayed. "Don't let that sad-eyed donkey get away. He's in on this skunky job. Pancho, get this danged crate back tuh Pavey an' tell him Fenner won't need no chair where he's going!"

The mob turned, hard-faced men flushed with excitement, their eyes flecked with the red of kill fever. They shifted toward the doorway, then the ones in the lead jerked to a halt, throwing their weight back against those heaving behind them. Back to the wall, a gun in each big fist, Peaceful grinned gloomily.

"It's pay day for the gents that get too proddy," he droned dismally. "Shore, there's enough of yuh tuh down me, but I reckon there'll be a bunch of yuh that'll come with me tuh the peace of the Great Beyond. We're goin' tuh set here calmlike an' reason this thing out."

Back in the crowd a man sneered, his voice thick with fury. "Shore, yuh'll hold us here till yore gang doubles back an' cuts us tuh pieces! Plug the dirty son, somebody!"

But the townsmen hesitated under the deadly threat of those slowly moving guns in the tall youth's fists. Violent emotions straining within them darkened their faces, jerked nervously on their drawn lips, but they kept their hands clear of their guns. Only one man moved, and he was the Mexican teamster, Pancho, and he stepped forward slowly, fear on his swarthy face.

"Pancho, hees take the crate back, no?" he chattered. "The old woman, shees raise the devil weeth pore Pancho if hees not come home queek. You onderstand, Peaceful? Shees theenk—"

Peaceful nodded, grinning crookedly. "Shore," he chuckled dismally, his narrowed eyes shifting coldly over the mob. "Go on, Pancho, but be shore yuh don't get rash an' make your wife a widow."

Pancho dragged the heavy crate out of the jail, and a moment later his wagon rattled out of town. The mob shifted nervously, muscles tense, alert for the slightest instant the tall waddy would be off guard.

"Yuh can't get away with this, Perkins," one of the men rasped. "Fenner murdered Snoddy, an' he'll hang for it."

Peaceful's lips flattened grimly. "Fenner didn't kill Snoddy," he ground out, his voice suddenly hardened and flat. "But that jail door was locked, an' that proves that whoever done that murder was in here all the time."

Cuff Reeder jeered sneeringly. "The killer jist crawled through the bars, jabbed Fenner's knife intuh Snoddy, then crawled out again! That the way yuh figure it, Perkins?"

The tall waddy's cold eyes clouded with dangerous lights. "Shore, something like that," he drawled gloomily. "Only whoever done that killin' couldn't get out through that locked—" That same wild hunch flared over his mind again. It clung there, sent hot blood racing through his veins, as it slowly crystallized, became a clear, deadly picture. "Shore, that's it," his words cracked out. "The killer was here all the time after he done his murder!"

A bleak-faced puncher snorted sarcastically. "An' yuh're goin' tuh try an' make us believe that! Perkins, lies ain't gonna save yore neck or Fenner's."

Lights that were as cold as ice danced in the tall waddy's eyes, and

his homely face became more gloomy than ever.

"Shore, I knowed yuh wouldn't believe me," he drawled mournfully. "I reckon it's only a hunch at that. But, by thunder, I'll show yuh. I'll tame this town again if I have tuh kill a lot of polecats tuh do it. An' yuh can think this over while I'm gone. How come Whiskey Joe passed out after swipin' that drink Pavey set out for Snoddy if the drink wasn't doped? How come— By blazes, I'll show yuh! I'll round up that gang, an' bring 'em here, yuh fog-headed galoots! I'll—"

Cuff Reeder's harsh-toned voice lashed out. "Hear that? He's goin' tuh round up that gang. If that don't prove he's in with 'em—"

A gun suddenly blared from the rear of the mob. Lead ripped through the collar of Peaceful's shirt, slammed into the wall behind him. His guns tilted up, thumbs rocking back the hammer-dogs, as he side-stepped to the jail door. He paused there in the doorway an instant, gloomy face grim, cold eyes mocking. Then with a swift stride, he stepped back into the night, and jerked the door shut after him.

Behind him heavy boots thudded on the jail floor, as he raced wildly down the street. Over his shoulder, he saw the door swing open, spilling yellow light out into the street, as the townsmen fought through the doorway. One of them leaped into the clear, yelled shrilly.

"There he goes! He's makin' for the hosses."

A gun roared. But Peaceful was only a dim shadow moving swiftly through the darkness and the shot went wild. He skidded to a halt in front of the hitch rail. Three or four horses were tied there. He leaped to the nearest one, a long-barreled grulla, jerked the reins free,

and threw himself into the saddle. He swung the startled animal around, and kicked it into a run.

A dozen guns had joined into the Colt crescendo now, blazing away from the front of the jail. A hail of lead whined around the tall waddy. One of the slugs burned across the flanking of his bronc, and the animal squealed in pain and terror, lurching out in a wild burst of speed. Peaceful leaned forward, growling in the horse's neck.

"Shake some of the lead out of yore hocks, or we'll both get worse'n a bullet burn."

He thundered down the length of the street, and struck out across open range. For a quarter mile he held the bronc at full speed, then he came to a draw gouging into the range and sawed back on the reins, pulling the grulla to a bunch-footed halt. He slid quickly to the ground, looped the reins around the saddle horn, and slapped the horse into movement again. He grinned crookedly as the riderless animal pounded off into the night.

"Give 'em a good chase, hoss," he muttered. "Here they come now."

He broke into a run down the draw. The drumming of hoofs throbbed over the night air, mounting rapidly into the sound of muted thunder. Over the rim of the shallow draw, he glimpsed half a dozen horsemen pounding out of the town. He threw himself flat behind a clump of sage as they neared the draw, then chuckled softly as he heard a ringing voice peel out over the rattle of hoofs.

"He's makin' for the Sinkhole! We're gainin' on him!"

The riders flashed past the draw. Peaceful lurched to his feet, began running down the narrow gully again. The draw angled off toward the road leading to Lint Pavey's

ranch. Peaceful came to a panting halt when he finally struck the road, and hunkered his big body down to wait.

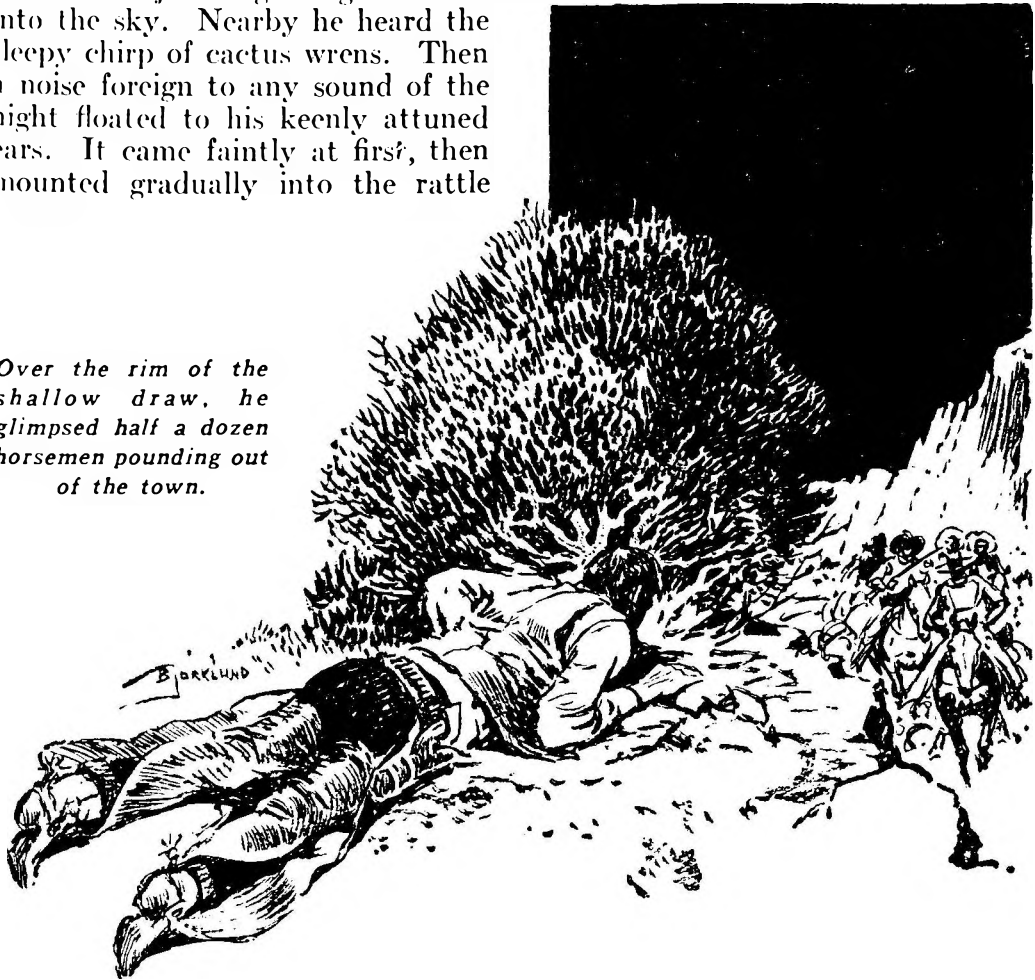
Minutes crawled by like hours. He pulled out his Colt, thumbed empty cases from the chamber and refilled it. Somewhere in the distance a coyote wailed at a thin sliver of a moon just beginning to climb into the sky. Nearby he heard the sleepy chirp of cactus wrens. Then a noise foreign to any sound of the night floated to his keenly attuned ears. It came faintly at first, then mounted gradually into the rattle

empty, as he stared into the muzzle of the gun that had leaped into Peaceful's hand. He leaned forward on the wagon seat, eyes narrowed, white teeth showing in a wide grin.

"Oh, eet's you, Señor Peaceful! I'm theenk hees the hold-heem-up man."

"Yuh jest keep thinkin' that," the

Over the rim of the shallow draw, he glimpsed half a dozen horsemen pounding out of the town.



and squeak of a wagon. He stood up lazily, and slid his Colt lightly back into its pouch.

The startled Mexican jerked his team to a sudden halt when the tall waddy stepped out of the darkness to the side of the wagon. His hand made a furtive movement under his serape, then slid into the open

tall waddy growled tonelessly. He edged forward and removed the gun from under the Mexican's serape, then stepped back from the wagon. "I'm gettin' plumb spooky, an' I ain't so shore yore feet are clean no more. Yuh're takin' that crated chair back tuh yore boss, huh?" he drawled flatly.

Pancho nodded quickly. "Si. Señor Reeder, hees tell me—"

Peaceful's curt nod cut him short. His narrowed eyes flashed over the crate, saw Lint Pavey's dog crouching beside it, teeth bared, growling softly. The tall waddy chuckled bleakly.

"Friendly mutt, ain't it?" he growled. "Follow yuh around much?"

The teamster frowned, shook his head. "He's Señor Pavey's dog. *Muy malo*—like the devil. Heem bust loose thees night an' I'm take heem home."

A chilly light crept into the tall waddy's narrowed eyes, and hot blood churned savagely through his veins.

"Yeah," he said gloomily. "You take heem home. An' when yuh see Pavey tell him Keno Harg might have said a lot of things afore he got himself killed. About that rustler gang for instance. An' tell him Fenner an' me'll be bustin' up that gang pronto. Maybe he'd like tuh be in town for the showdown."

Then he backed cautiously away, and started down the road toward the town. Pancho muttered something under his breath, and flicked his team into movement. Grinning, thinly, the tall waddy lengthened his strides.

He was hardly a hundred yards from the town when the rattle and banging of the wagon behind him pulled him to a halt. The wagon skidded to a stop when the teamster sawed back on the reins, and Pancho leaped to the ground, his swarthy face bright with anger.

"*Caramba!* You thief, *ladron!* You steal them. Give them back, or me, Pancho, will keel you!"

The tall waddy's homely face froze in a grim, hard mask.

"Yuh're loco," he growled harshly.

"What are yuh talkin' about? I didn't steal nothin'."

Pancho's voice raised in a yelp of fury. "The chair, eet is gone! Me, I'm see the lid fall off an' the inside of the box, she's empty. *Ladron!* Thief! The chair was in the box when I'm load it in the wagon at the jail, 'cause she's heavy like a ton. You steal Señor Pavey's chair, like you steal hees dog. For that, me, I'm cut you up like the peeg!"

He leaped forward toward the gloomy-faced youth, hand dragging something bright and glittering from the nape of his neck. The knife shot out in a wicked, flashing arc.

CHAPTER VII.

ELECTION IN LEAD.

PEACEFUL tried to fade to one side of that slashing blade of steel, but something rolled under his foot, throwing him off balance. For a sickening split second it seemed the knife in Pancho's hand hung suspended in midair, its point hovering a scant inch from his chest. And in that split second he twisted frantically around, spinning away from the stabbing blade. He felt the razor-edge knife slash through the front of his shirt, barely missing his chest. Then his left hand shot up, clamped around the little Mexican's wrist. He jerked savagely. Pancho lurched toward him, cursing and fighting to twist his hand free of the tall waddy's grip. Then Peaceful's balled fist clubbed down, smacked against the teamster's pointed jaw, and Pancho slumped to the ground.

Lips taut, white-edged, the tall waddy kicked the knife into the brush, and broke into a run toward the town. He came to a rutty path sloping off along the rear of the buildings flanking the town's single

street, and slowed his pace slightly, eyes narrowed.

Grim, anxious thoughts ran through his mind, as he made for the little jail. He palmed his gun, and drew the old Remington cap and ball he had taken from Pancho from under his belt. He reached the rear of the jail, crept along the side of it cautiously.

He came to the front of the building, peered tensely up both lengths of the street, then slid around the corner and dived for the jail door.

Several grim-faced townsmen lounging in the jail office whirled as the tall waddy framed himself in the doorway. A man halted a furtive attempt to grab his gun, as the two weapons in Peaceful's big hands flicked up.

"Don't try nothin' rash," the tall waddy warned sourly. "Bein' called a thief an' killer so much lately has made me plumb touchy, an' I got two eradicaters here that'll prove it's danged unhealthy tuh be around when a peaceful jasper gets on the prod. Set tight, yuh hotheaded yahoos. I said I'd have that gang here, an' I reckon they won't be long neither."

Tom Fenner lurched up to the door of the cell he had been locked in. His square face was gaunt, bitter, stained with crimson that had crawled down from broken skin where the gun barrel had landed on his head, but there were fires of rage blazing in his eyes.

"Get me out of this danged coop, Perk," he growled harshly, "after I tear it up an' hide the pieces."

Peaceful's lips flattened over clenched teeth, and he edged around the room to the cell door. He passed Pancho's gun through the bars, and the sheriff chuckled exultantly. The tall waddy's chilly eyes flicked over the townsmen. He saw none of the

Block P waddies, and a thin grin quirked on his lips.

"Shore, I know what yuh're thinkin'," he growled dismally. "Yuh're figurin' I rounded up that gang tuh bust Fenner out of jail. But yuh're wrong! *They're comin' here tuh murder Fenner an' me!*"

A grizzled old-timer, a veteran of a hundred fights with Indians and renegade whites, lurched to his feet, sending his chair crashing to the floor behind him. He started to say something, then clamped his jaws shut grimly, and his fingers started sinking down toward his gun. His hand halted just over his gun, as a faint rattle of hoofs floated over the night air.

Peaceful leaped to the front window, chanced a quick look through the bars. He whirled on the townsmen, his wide mouth hard.

"Take a look for yoreselves," he cracked out. "There's four masked gents headin' here, an' they ain't out for the night air."

The oldster grunted a curse, leaped forward and flashed a glance through the barred window. He spun around, face like chiseled rock.

"Perk's right, boys. They're headin' here shore's blazes. Fenner, get down out of sight, dang it. Yuh're livin' tuh stand trial. Perk, if this is a trick yuh'll be the first tuh eat lead."

The townsmen jerked out holstered guns, leaped into action. One of them slid behind the open door. Another dived into a small closet, let his gun muzzle slide through the slightly opened door. The other two dropped quickly behind the sheriff's heavy desk, faces grim.

Peaceful slid his Colt into its pouch, backed to the barred cell door, again. Fenner growled under his breath, hefted the gun in his square hand, crouched, waiting.

The four outlaws struck the open doorway with a rush, spilled into the room, guns high, alert eyes above the masks they wore red with murder lust. A tall, slope-shouldered jasper in the lead saw Peaceful by the cell door and grated out a hoarse curse of glee.

"Sweet meat!" he snarled. "We got sad-face, too! Here's where two gents who know too much take it the hard way. Let 'em have it!"

Their guns chopped down, then halted as harsh words rapped out behind them.

"Reach, skunks!"

The two townsmen behind the desk snapped to their feet; the man in the closet kicked the door back, finger tense on the trigger.

For a brief, measureless space of time, the four killers paused, eyes darting around the room. Their thumbs, already releasing cocked gun hammers, jerked as strained nerves snapped taut. The four shots blended as one, blasting the instant of silence into pulsating, throbbing gun thunder. Wild slugs *whanged* from the iron bars on either side of the tall waddy and the crouching sheriff. Peaceful's Colt leaped clear of leather, spouted flame and smoke.

The tall leader of the gang folded grotesquely, as if suddenly struck by a pile driver. A runty killer standing beside him snatched his mask off, and clawed insanely at his throat as he slid limply to the floor. Another sat down heavily.

The fourth cursed brokenly, spun, diving for the door. But the door had been closed behind him, and he crashed into it, bounced around with his gun spewing, only to smash back into the door an instant later, body flinching under the shock of hot lead.

The roaring of gunshots ceased. Peaceful straightened slowly from

the crouch he had fallen into. Then a man expelled pent-up breath.

"Blazes! Four skunks down an' I didn't have time tuh breathe!"

Tom Fenner's growling voice sounded from the cell behind the gloomy-faced waddy. "Peaceful, where the devil did yuh get this gun? Every shell in it was a dud."

Running boots clattered down the plank walk outside the jail. An instant later Lint Pavey leaped into the room, followed closely by Cuff Reeder and skinny Tote Horrell. Pavey's heavy face paled, then set in an expressionless mask, as he stared at the four dead men.

Peaceful stepped out from the bars, chuckled gloomily. "Looks like yuh'll have tuh hire some new hands, Pavey," he drawled mournfully. "I'm bettin' my socks the masked ones are yore boys. Monk Grundy there wasn't so bashful after he got tagged with a slug."

A glint of dark hatred rose to Pavey's black eyes, and he tried to mask it with the broad smile.

"So yuh cleaned out the whole gang, huh?" he boomed vibrantly. "Shore, it was a good job!"

"Yeah," the tall waddy moaned sadly. "A danged good job. We're goin' tuh have a showdown with the leader of that gang now, Pavey. What kind of lies yuh got cooked up, polecat?"

Cuff Reeder choked back an oath, and let his pudgy hand slide down toward his holstered gun. Tote Horrell's skinny frame seemed to draw into a knot, coiling down over his twin Colts.

"Perkins, are yuh tryin' tuh say —" The clashing of violent emotions choked his words short.

Peaceful nodded glumly. "Shore," he growled mournfully. "But don't lose yore head an' go buttin' intuh some bullets. Yuh rigged this skunky

deal pretty neat, dopin' Joe Snoddy an' puttin' him in that crate yuh wanted us tuh think held a chair. Yuh knowed Fenner would ship it back without openin' it, so yuh didn't worry about a slip-up. But that one-man dog of yores gave yuh away, killer. First he followed yuh here when yuh was bandaged an' dressed like Snoddy, then he followed yuh when Pancho headed back to the ranch with you in the crate, after killin' Snoddy an' tradin' places with him. An' in case yuh want tuh know it, polecat, Fenner or me didn't know nothin' for shore. I jist got a hunch, an' talked so's yuh'd think a lot of things, an' climb out of that crate tuh get that gang together in case you was their boss."

Lint Pavey's taut body suddenly exploded into action. His big hand flashed under his coat, reappeared gripping a roaring Colt. Peaceful rocked to one side of the rancher's quick shot, his own gun jumping and blaring. His slug smashed Pavey backward into Cuff Reeder. Reeder fought savagely to jump clear of the ranchman's falling body, but Pavey's weight dragged him to the floor. From the corner of his eyes, Peaceful saw Tote Horrell's Colts blur up. He started to swivel his gun toward the skinny killer, but a

blasting roar from behind him hammered Horrell back against the wall. Tom Fenner's deep voice boomed exultantly.

"Dang it, I knew if I'd keep poppin' these duds, one of 'em would go off. Reeder, set still, or I'll see if I can find some more good shells in this gun."

The grizzled old lawman caught sight of Peaceful moving lazily toward the jail door, bawled out angrily:

"Perkins, where in blazes are yuh goin'? Come back here an' get me out of this danged coop. By thunder, if yuh walk out an' leave me in here, I'll—" He broke off, sputtering as the tall waddy turned and stared gloomily at him.

"There yuh go again," Peaceful moaned sadly. "The minute I begin tuh see a little peace an' tranquillity for this town, yuh try tuh bust it loose with yore yellin'. Shore, I'm goin' tuk leave yuh there, Fenner. I've got a hunch it'll be plumb relaxin' for my troubled mind, tuh know where yuh are all the time."

Yuh've seen how easygoin' Peaceful Perkins is—until sidewinder killers start throwin' lead. Then he's ready to finish any sort of devilment a hombre wants to start. Yuh'll meet up with Peaceful Perkins again soon in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly. Don't miss his next big adventure.

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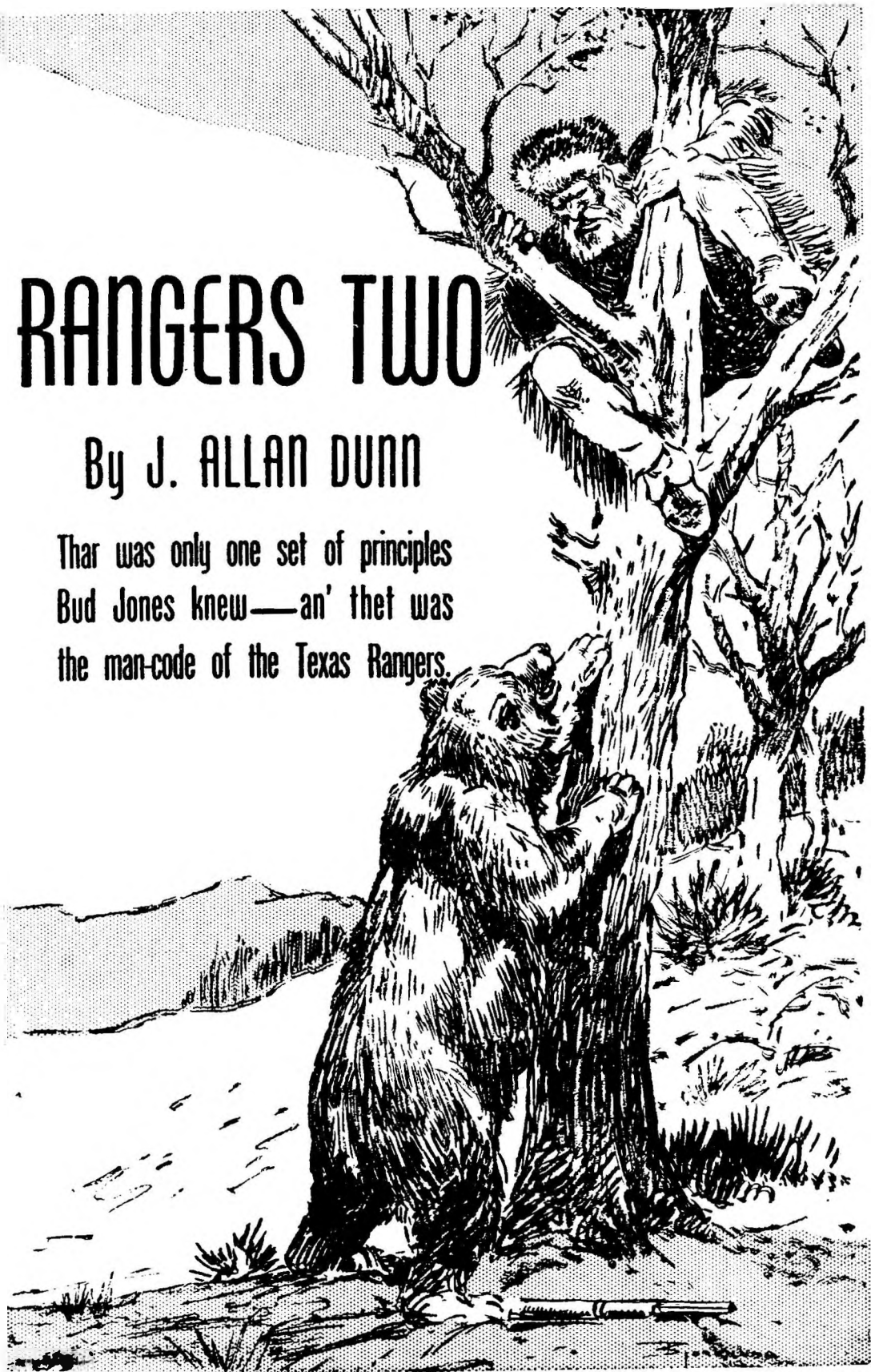
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RANGERS TWO

By J. ALLAN DUNN

Thar was only one set of principles
Bud Jones knew—an' thet was
the man-code of the Texas Rangers.



Rangers Two

THE big roan snorted and began to sweat. It trembled at the rank smell that came to its sensitive nostrils from the thicket, toward which its master, the young Ranger, urged it.

Bud Jones, of Company F, Texas Rangers, also caught the hostile odor and knew it was flung out in the hate and fury of a wild beast, that now coughed and grunted like a great hog. A beast that was the natural enemy of Pepper, the roan, and a dangerous foe to man, when aroused.

Bud had heard one rifle shot, a heavy report he knew was from a Sharps, and he had ridden forward in the expectation of seeing the man he sought. Now he feared that his friend, old in warfare between men, or of men and beasts, was in trouble.

He spoke to Pepper, patted his tense, wet neck before he drew from its saddle sheath the carbine that was part of his equipment.

Save for the double belts, six-gun at one hip, bowie knife at the other, the carbine under his left thigh, and his star of office, Bud might have been any wandering waddy, drifting through the foothills of the Sierra Diablo on a hunting trip.

There came more deep grunts, then the snap of breaking boughs. Bud flung one leg over his saddle-horn and slid to the ground, his carbine ready for action. He spoke once more to the roan and let the reins fall to the ground.

Pepper would stay there, mastering his fears, unless the bear charged.

It was a bear all right, a great cinnamon. Its face was masked with the liquid crimson that dripped from its muzzle, where the great

fangs gnashed together as it tried to reach the man who had wounded it.

The man was up a tree, none too far out of the reach of the cinnamon's swiping claws. He was a big man, with a mane of white hair that waved over his shoulders from his coonskin cap, a white beard low on his broad chest. He had a nose that stood out like a great beak and eyes, as blue as the Texas sky, that blazed from under bushy eyebrows white as wool.

He was dressed in the buckskins of early days, dark-tanned, and fringed at the seams. Bud knew that he had worn them when he was once a Ranger, when he was known as Kiowa Kenyon, the scalp hunter. Nowadays he was called a honey hunter, but he was still powerful, still active. Kiowa was the man Bud was seeking—and here he was up a tree—talking back to the bear in no uncertain manner.

"Yuh thick-skulled varmint! This is a fine predickamint fer yuh to put me in. I've ha'f a mind to come down an' karve yuh apart, hand to hand an' knife to claw, if yuh warn't so tough, an' r'arin', an' big. Yuh got the best of me, yuh cinnermon-colored limb of Satan, but I ain't through with yuh yit. Not by a blame sight!

"I wish to Sam Houston I *was*," he almost groaned in a changed voice. "Sarves me right fer huntin' b'ar without dawgs. If I had Belle an' Charger here they'd nip yore hams an' give me a chance to git down an' grab my six-gun yuh slapped offn me. Nigh to torn the hip offn me."

The bear stood upright, snuffing at the scarlet stream that dripped from its mouth. It was an enormous brute and the mighty claws that flailed the air less than two feet below the bough where Kiowa

crouched, close to the trunk, had already torn away a lower branch.

Unlike a black bear, it could not climb the tree. Kiowa was in no present danger, the bear had neither scented nor seen Bud, and the Ranger could not help but enjoy the spectacle of the bear raging at Kiowa, and Kiowa talking back to the bear.

What puzzled Bud was how Kiowa had made a poor shot with his trusty Sharps .50. It had brought down many a buffalo with a single slug. It could have killed an elephant. And Kiowa's sight, still keen enough to follow the flight of a bee, was better than Bud's.

"It ain't nothin' to be 'shamed of," Kiowa went on aloud. "Kit Carson was treed, so was Cody, an' Boone, but it plumb annoys me jist the same. It hurts my dignity, b'ar, the more so becoss yuh're a rival in the honey business—on'y you destroy fifty times what you eat, you greedy scalawag. Dad burn yuh—*leave thet rifle alone, yuh overgrown polecat. If yuh tech Lucy Ann, I'll skelp yuh alive!*"

Kiowa's voice rose in real alarm. The bear had dropped to all fours and was nosing the rifle Bud knew Kiowa must have dropped as he swarmed up the tree barely ahead of the bear.

Close by was the holster of pumahide that held his six-gun with its long muzzle and wooden butt trimmed with brass. The bear had torn that loose from the old scalp-hunter's belt as Kiowa climbed out on the limb.

The bear, Bud knew, could swipe a man's head from his shoulders in one blow, moving too fast for sight to follow. A couple of swats at Lucy Ann, as Kiowa called his rifle, and it would be ruined for keeps.

Kiowa had not seen Bud; he was too busy with the bear. Bud knew

the old-timer might prefer not to be rescued, even by a friend, but the bear might keep him there for hours, might destroy his weapons.

Bud sighted back of the cinnamon's shoulder, watching the play of bone and muscle under the shaggy hide. He squeezed trigger evenly.

Brom!

The bullet split the bear's heart. The animal reared, whirled, facing Bud. The Ranger fired again, at the base of the neck, and the cinnamon went again to all fours, slashing at turf and dirt, its horrible head, soggy with the crimson tide, swaying from side to side, lower and lower.

It made a desperate attempt to charge Bud, but its vitality was broken. A dark torrent gushed from its mouth. It fell on one side, biting at a bush with lessening vigor as the hot glow faded from its hoglike eyes, and with a great sigh that lifted its side like an enormous bellows, it subsided and lay still.

Kiowa Kenyon came down from the tree in a giant swing, his big hands grasping the bough on which he had crouched. His eyes were angry. The first thing he did was to pick up and examine his rifle, then his lion-skin holster and the six-gun. He was tall and straight as a pine. The claws of another bear were strung as a necklace about his throat. His skin tunic held scattered beads of old ornamentation, squaw-sewn.

"Thet was good shootin'," he said slowly, almost grudgingly. "First one did the work—well, dog my cats ef it ain't the young Ranger! Yuh like to make me fall out of thet tree when yuh fired, Bud Jones. It ain't many I'd like to find me thetaway—an' it's the first time it ever happened. But thet b'ar dropped his head jist as I fired. I got him be-

low the eyes, whar the skull curves out. Bullets won't go through thar, they skid offn it. So I had to skid up the nearest tree. It was a close call, at thet. How come yuh happened along, timely as the last match in a norther."

"I was lookin' fer you, Kiowa. Heerd a rifle shot, an' it sounded like your Sharps. This is right in your territory, so I figgered it might be you."

"Yuh sure figgered right, son. Right in my favor. Yuh're a cure fer sore eyes, b'ar or no b'ar. Thet feller was after a honey tree I was markin' down. Thet's how come the argyment. I reckon yuh heerd me argyin' some, as yuh come up," Kiowa added sheepishly.

Bud dodged the issue. "I heerd the b'ar mos'ly," he said.

"Yuh lookin' fer more *bandidos* an' bad men?" asked Kiowa. "Yuh remember Cuchillo Luis an' Pedro Torno? They was sure *malos hombres*. I ain't had no excitement, to speak of, sence you left."

"I'd have thought tacklin' thet b'ar the way you did was some excitin'," said Bud.

"Shucks! I was skeered ha'f to death." Kiowa prodded the carcass with his foot, grinning out of his beard. "He'll weigh nigh to ha'f a ton. I kin use the skin, the meat an' the fat. Reckon *yuh* won't want 'em. But I'll fix up them claws fer yuh as a trophy. Yuh don't have to wear 'em; keep 'em as a souvenir. It's yore b'ar."

"I'm hopin' to locate some outlaws," Bud told him. "I got orders not to bite off more'n I kin chew. I want to find out where them outlaws be, an' then git in tech with headquarters. I thought you might help me."

"Proud to try, son, proud to try.

You bit off a heap at the posada thet time, an' got away with it."

"You helped, Kiowa."

"Got thar in time to lick the dish, didn't I?" Kiowa flung back his head and laughed, slapping his thigh. "But it was yuh sot the table, son. I'm with yuh, fer what I'm worth."

That was what Bud Jones had ridden long miles to hear. The old scalp-hunter was worth a great deal to his mission.

Bud had met Kiowa only once before, and then by accident, but he had often heard of Kiowa—who had been one of General Sam Houston's own hand-picked recruits. Kiowa had earned his name on account of the bounty he had made from Kiowa scalps—"a good way to make a livin' them days," according to Kiowa, "an' to git even fer all the ha'r raisin' the Injuns done to us."

Kiowa was almost a myth. The Mexicans thought he was a ghost who could not be killed. That was a legend handed down from the breeds who remembered his prowess.

He was a bee hunter now, catching bees and letting them loose to mark their lines of flight, sure of finding his honey tree where the lines crossed. Now and then he would appear in the Mexican quarters of a settlement town, stalking grim and gaunt and gray into a cantina, demanding a jug of mescal, and paying with a slug of native silver.

He was a recluse and a hermit. It was said he lived among the rocks close to a place where he had a vein of soft horn silver that he whittled out with his knife.

Bud and Kiowa had fought together, when the old-timer had rallied to the aid of the youngster. Kiowa allowed that Bud Jones was a true Ranger, that he was worthy to be a member of the famous organization got together after the fall of

the Alamo and the creation of the Republic of Texas to preserve law and order.

"When I jined up, most of us was old enough to be yore dad," said Kiowa. "But I hear yuh jine in yore teens these days, an' yuh do well enough. In the old days we strung up every Mex we run across to the nearest tree. Now they're makin' citizens out of 'em, but they ain't changed none, to my mind."

"I'm not after Mexicans this time, Kiowa."

"Help me skin this b'ar an' cut him up then," said Kiowa. "I got an old jinny mule thet'll pack what we need of him up to my place. Yuh ain't ever been thar, have yuh? An' yuh'll be the first one ever to see it. Yuh'll find it snug, but yuh won't find it easy. Ha-ha-ha-ha! An' then yuh kin tell me all about them out-laws yuh're after."

Bud was not the expert that Kiowa was, but he was good enough to be a great help and they made short work of the bear's carcass. Kiowa skinned out the skull, showed Bud the curving bone where the .50 slug had struck and ricocheted without splintering or penetrating.

"Didn't even give him a headache," said Kiowa. "But it made him plenty mad. Mebbe I'd better give up b'ars, an' stick to bees."

He laughed again heartily, and they set the fat and meat they wanted apart from the rest, then stretched and pegged the gigantic hide.

It was still daylight and nothing would interfere with the skin until they got back with the jinny mule.

Old man and young, Rangers both, they walked away together, both erect as pines. If Kiowa carried his shoulders more stiffly, and was less limber in his long stride, it was hardly to be noticed.

Pepper, relieved at the disposal of the bear, reins back of the saddle-horn, followed at their heels up into the hills.

At last Kiowa stopped on a natural terrace where the ground was rocky. The back wall and the front cliff were of seamed stone, pitted by ages of wind and frost.

"She's within fifty foot of yuh, son," said Kiowa. "Meanin' my shack. See if yuh kin locate her?"

Bud shook his head. He imagined he might find the shack if he searched long enough, now that he had been brought up to the ferrace, but there was no sign of human habitation visible. He said so.

Kiowa laughed. "Ain't many looked fer it, I reckon. None ever found her. She's snug like I told yuh, stone-walled an' log-lined. I got a flue fixed so the smoke drifts out through brush. An' thar's a nice little spring handy, right in my kitchen, which is likewise the bedroom, parlor an' dinin' room. I got a stable, too, though thet ain't so elaborate. We kin leave yore hoss thar, while we go down with the mule. She's been restin', an' yore roan's been travelin'. When we git back I'll show yuh the Casa Kiowa."

II.

The Casa Kiowa was just as Kiowa had described it, a log hut built within stone walls, with a timber floor and a timber roof covered with stone slabs. The windows were cunningly masked, with bladders instead of glass to admit the light. There were cunning crevices for ventilation that could also, Kiowa pointed out with pride, be used for defense.

The door was well built of stout cedar, hinged with iron straps, fortified with a great bar. Its exterior

was cleverly faced with thin slabs so that it could not be distinguished from the boulders that looked like the natural cliff.

Inside, the chimney itself was made from an existing flue, extended and enlarged in places. It had its own draft and was protected from all winds. There were bunks, two of them, built one above the other, well bedded with blankets and furs. More skins were on the floor and Indians blankets. Antlers hung on the walls. There was an iron stove whose pipe ran into the chimney, and there were pieces of solid, home-made furniture, shelves and a cupboard, all the work of the old ranger's hands, ingenious and practical.

He showed Bud rich specimens of native silver, both peacock, horn and wire. "Thet's my bank," he said. "Never need fear it bustin', an' thar's plenty of deposit. I don't have to buy much, so I save it. Once in a while I buy me a jug of mescal fer my rheumatiz in the winter. I recollect yuh don't like no kind of fire water. Some day I figger I might find someone to leave the secret of thet mine to, when I go over the Great Divide."

His keen eyes rested for a moment on Bud with a look of affection. "I ain't in no hurry," he added whimsically as he poured himself a liberal drink of the fiery mescal and gulped it down like water.

"I'm host," he said. "I'll do the cookin' while yuh tell me why yuh're here. Later on, yuh kin help me clean up. Soap's scarce, but we got sand, an' plenty water."

Bud had already marked the hollow in the floor where the planking had been fixed to frame the slightly bubbling spring of cold, clear water. Kiowa had fixed himself well for his latter years, the young Ranger told himself. He saw no books and won-

dered if Kiowa was often lonely. The two hounds, Belle and Charger, which had made friends with Bud, would be good company. Bud did not know then that Kiowa could not read nor write. He rolled himself a quirly, struck a match.

"It was thisaway," he began. "There ain't sech a lot to it, so far. Cap'n Halstead sent fer me an' showed me a dispatch thet told how a man called Jack Glynn had escaped from State prison at Huntsville. Glynn was on the convict farm, it seems, but he brained a guard with a shovel an' got clean away. He was caught first at the time of the train robbery on the Texas & Southern, two years ago. His hoss fell while he an' some others was makin' their gitaway, an' kicked him—"

"I've heerd of thet," said Kiowa. "I don't claim to git all the news but I did hear 'bout thet robbery. Two passengers an' the conductor was killed. They should have hung this Glynn."

"Reckon he claimed he didn't do the shootin' an' they couldn't prove he did," said Bud. "But he sure murdered the guard. The leader of thet robbery was Pecos Wade, an' he got away, with three more. Cap'n Halstead said Glynn was supposed to be headed this way, likely to jine up with Pecos, who's known to be operatin' somewhere in this neck of the woods."

"I've heerd of him, too," said Kiowa dryly. "Wouldn't wonder but what Cap'n Halstead was right."

"There's descriptions of both of 'em in the book," Bud went on, referring to the private volume issued for Ranger's use, called the 'List of Fugitives From Justice,' but it's easy fer a man to disguise hisself. Glynn was bearded when they

picked him up an' jugged him. Ha'r was probably long. They shave 'em an' crop 'em in Huntsville. So I ain't too sure of pickin' 'em up by sight, either of 'em."

Kiowa stroked his own white beard but said nothing. Bud had a hunch he knew more about Pecos Wade than he had mentioned.

"Cap'n claimed this was more'n a one-man job," said Bud. "But he couldn't spare a man to go with me. Thar was only three troopers in camp, two wounded, an' one with a lame hoss. We got a lot of territory to cover, an' only thirty-four in the company, you see. Our patrol goes all the way from El Paso to Presidio Rio Grande, south an' east to the river from the Sierra."

Kiowa nodded understandingly.

"So the cap'n said fer me jest to locate Glynn an' Wade, an' then git in touch with him. He allowed Glynn an' Pecos together again would sure stir up some deviltry. We hear Pecos has been runnin' off stock an' done some highway robbery."

"Done more than thet, I wouldn't wonder," said Kiowa. "Bank was looted over to Milltown a week ago. Town marshal's been chasin' round in circles ever sence. He allowed it was no use to call in a Ranger. Too fur to send, too much time lost by the time he got here, if he came. Some truth to thet, mebbe, but the time's been lost, jest the same. I don't aim to mix up in sech things, locally. I wouldn't be thanked. A lot of 'em think I'm cracked anyway. Mebbe I am, but I kin still git around. So—"

"I thought of you," said Bud. "I didn't mention it to the cap'n, in case I couldn't locate you, but I figgered if I did, thar would be two of us. Both Rangers—"

"An' we might do more than jest locate 'em?"

Kiowa's eyes shone brightly. They seemed to hold all the fire of his long-vanished youth.

"This is only my second time in this territory," Bud said. "I'm the only one in the troop to have been down here. I thought I'd talk it over with you before I went scoutin' round. Trouble is, most people hate to give out information about outlaws, fer fear of gittin' mixed up in trouble. It's hard to tell how fast Glynn would travel, hidin' out. He might be here now, might not git here fer a week."

"Long as yuh're askin' me fer advice, son," said Kiowa, plainly pleased at the idea, "I'd say this: Outside of yore star, thar's things thet stamp you fer a Ranger. The size an' quality of yore hoss an' yore 'quipment fer instance. Ain't no doubt yuh've been noted an' word gone ahead. If I was yuh I'd go on to 'Royoville first thing tomorrow, an' start your inquiries. No need to say yuh've spent the night with me. I'll mosey down thar mysef, an' trade a silver slug fer some stuff I want. I'll meet yuh here round sunset. Don't have to tell yuh not to git trailed back here. An' I might have some news fer yuh."

"Thet's jest fine—"

"An' I might not have," added Kiowa. "Don't count on too much. The idee is thet thar's a general storekeeper in 'Royoville who'd sell to Satan, if he thought thar was fo' bits profit in the deal. I'm pritty sartin he suplies Pecos. Pecos may have got word to Glynn—thet wouldn't be hard—an' likely Glynn'll head fer this store—run by Fruchen—to git his bearin's. If yuh showed up thar, Fruchen would go deaf an' dumb. He trades some with me an' thinks I'm loony. Now then, grub's ready!"

Yuh're sure yuh don't want a sniffer of mescal? Then we'll eat. B'ar huntin', not to mention climbin' trees at my time of life, gives me an appetite. If yuh see me in 'Royoville, I don't know yuh, remember!"

III.

Bud did not gain any worthwhile information in Arroyoville. It was obvious that Glynn would not be found in, or known of, in the respectable part of the community. The town marshal was small help. He seemed, as often happened in such cases, to resent the Ranger's interference as belittling to his own dignity. He had little to say about Pecos Wade, save to suggest that the marshal of Milltown was too dumb to catch a stranded fish, and that he himself could have done much better; also that Pecos would know better than to try and pull anything like that in Arroyoville.

He was not very convincing. Bud had a notion that he might know something about Pecos and Fruchen, but was not going to mix in with anything of the sort unless it was forced upon him.

Bud rode out of town through the Mexican quarter. It was, he knew, useless to expect anybody there to help him. He wore his star out of sight under the flap of his shirt pocket, but he felt that he was spotted as a Ranger and therefore an enemy, and that the word was buzzing before he had even entered the vicinity.

That end of the job was Kiowa's.

Bud started out for the return trip, taking it easy, leaving the road to trail across country. He had plenty of time. If anyone was curious enough to trail the Ranger, Bud meant to fool him.

He was riding along a wood lane

where trees grew thickly, when he heard ahead the sound of a dispute. The words were in Spanish, which Bud understood perfectly, but he did not pay much attention to them, not greatly concerned about the quarrels of Mexicans.

Then he came to a turn in the lane just in time to see a big man in *paisano* attire knock down a much smaller one, whose straw sombrero rolled off and showed thin, gray hair. The smaller man was a peon and seemed the owner of a burro whose pannier baskets were empty. The peon had apparently taken produce to town and was on his way home.

He held up his arms and begged for mercy as the big man raged at him, calling him filthy names and kicking him viciously. The blows hurt. The peon tried to cover up, crying weakly. He was due for a bad crippling. But Bud pricked Pepper's flanks, and, as the roan cleared the distance in a few leaps, unnoticed by either the brutal attacker or his victim, the Ranger slid to the ground.

He spoke in Spanish.

"Stop that, you devil! Do you want to kill him?"

The big *paisano* had been so intent in his anger that he swung about in surprise. He was clean shaven save for a narrow mustache. His head was bound in a bright bandanna beneath his sombrero. His nose was hooked and his whole expression that of a fiend, mad at being interrupted.

"It's my business," he replied. "I'll kill the dog, if I want to. Who'll stop me?"

"I will," Bud told him.

The *paisano* snarled and made a swing at Bud. He was a powerfully built and active man, and he knew how to fight. He used fists, feet and knees, closing in and fighting foul,

trying to throw Bud, getting more and more savage as he found himself being bested by one he thought was a lad.

Bud drove home body blows, broke the clinches and let the other carry the attack while he punished him with hard jolts to the face that closed one eye, pulped his lips and then flattened the hooklike nose.

The *paisano* went wild with fury. He flung himself at Bud, striving to trip him, clinging as Bud started to break free and finish the job.

The young Ranger was giving out a well-deserved beating and had no mind to gun-whip the other, much as he might deserve it. The *paisano's* left hand clutched Bud's shirt, twisted in the fight, his right fumbled at the back of his belt. He had a knife, but he had not tried to use it at the start, perhaps believing he could soon finish off the younger man.

Bud set his forearm under the other's jaw, pressing back against his throat. He brought up his right fist in an uppercut that packed all his power, just as he saw the *paisano's* face lose its desperate fury, changing to hate, that was suddenly tinged with fear.

Bone smacked against bone. The *paisano's* grip relaxed. His eyes grew dull and he flopped to his knees, then on his face, not quite out, but hurt and dazed. He had dropped the knife and he groped for it. Then he gave up, staggered off the narrow road into the brush, half-blind, thrashing through the bushes in his effort to escape.

The peon had picked himself up. He held a hand to his side, another to his head. He was breathing with difficulty, but he was grinning.

"*Por Dios, señor,*" he said, "that was such a fight as I have never seen. It was worth the ribs he

broke. He did not know who he was fighting. But when he found out, he ran like a coyote."

Bud looked at the peon closely. "What do you mean, *who* I am?"

The peon pointed. Bud looked and saw that the flap of his pocket had been almost torn off. It dangled by one end and the silver star inside the circle showed plainly.

"He felt that, señor, then he saw it. You speak Spanish well for a gringo, señor, so did he."

"What do you mean by that?"

"He looks like a Mexicano, señor, but I do not believe he is. His Spanish was not so good as yours. I did not know him at all. He spoke nicely when we met, asking me what I had taken to town, and how much I got for it. Then he asked me for the money. He laughed, and called it a loan, but he is a ladrone. When I told him the truth—that there were only a few pesetas left after I paid what I owed in town, he cursed me, and attacked me. If it had not been for you, Señor Rangero, he would have kicked me to death and enjoyed it. He has the eyes of the devil. But you saved me. All that I have is yours."

Bud cut him short. He was beginning to get a hunch that did not please him, beginning to think that he might have held Glynn, well disguised, at his mercy, and let him go.

It was useless to try and chase him on the roan. The brush was a maze of thorny, dense chaparral, so thick that a rabbit, if once in it, could defy a fox to reach it. To make the attempt on foot was equally foolish. Bud felt like kicking himself. Glynn had adopted a clever masquerade. It might have been the first that came to hand, but it was efficient. It had thrown off the Ranger completely by the fact—not noted in the book—that Glynn spoke Spanish.

It was nothing to be ashamed of, but Bud felt like a greenhorn. No wonder the other had wanted to get away when his hand met, and his half closed eyes marked, that silver star. He had dived into the chaparral in fear of his life, lest Bud discover he was not as swarthy as his stained face appeared, that under the hair on his chest his skin was white. If that was revealed, he knew he would be taken.

The Ranger would not hesitate to use his six-gun against an escaped convict with a recent murder added to his list of crimes.

Glynn did not know that Bud would not have shot a man in the back, but he had scuttled off and now was lying hidden or wriggling on through the stiff growth.

No doubt he had been on his way to join Pecos but could not resist the chance of robbing the lone peon. He was probably penniless, Bud reflected. Even if he had seen Fruchen, the storekeeper was not the type to give him any money, according to Kiowa, though he might have given information.

Bud picked up the knife, and his hunch was confirmed. It had been crudely made from a file, fitted with a rough wooden handle. The file had come from the machine shop in the State prison at Huntsville. It was so stamped on the end that had been driven into the handle and partly split it, so that Bud had no trouble in getting it out.

He tucked it away, feeling himself glowing red from shame, though it did not show on his deeply tanned face.

"I do not think you need be afraid of him any more," Bud said to the peon. "But he is a bad one, with bad *compaños*. Perhaps you have heard of one of them called Pecos Wade, who looted the bank at Mill-

town? Perhaps you know where he may be found? 'This one will join him. There is a reward,'" Bud added as he saw the peon's face begin to grow sullen and stupid, his eyes vacant. "A big reward—"

It was no use. More than the hope of any reward, was the fear of revenge from the outlaws or their friends. Added to that was the peon's natural hatred of a gringo—unless he was a bandido—and his native dislike of a Ranger. He had told Bud that all he had belonged to his rescuer, but that was only lip service. He did not mean it.

"I have never heard of him, señor," he said.

Bud knew he was lying. Even if he succeeded in forcing him to talk he would only lie some more.

The Ranger mounted and rode on, disgusted, glad he did not have to report to Captain Halstead right away, before he got a chance to vindicate himself. He would have to tell Kiowa—they were working together—and that was bad enough.

IV.

Kiowa evidently knew short cuts that a man on foot could make. Bud careful not to show himself on the skyline, seeking always to cover his trail, found the old Ranger waiting for him. He made a clean breast of his encounter.

"I wouldn't worry none about it if I was yuh," said Kiowa. "I'd have been fooled. If I checked off all the mistakes I made when I was a Ranger I wouldn't feel none too proud of my record. Yuh was right in figgerin' him as Glynn, if it was a trifle late. But not *too* late, son."

Bud felt hope rising within him. Kiowa went on.

"I hung around thet store. I could tell by the way Fruchen acted

thar was somethin' in the wind. He tried to git rid of me, but he knew I had the silver with me an' I wouldn't buy nothin' until I had a drink or two. Then I got plumb sleepy, acted like the lick hit me, went to sleep in a corner. I heard a few things, an' come to the conclusion this hombre had slid out the back door. Thet was all we wanted to know. The idee bein' to let him jine Pecos, an' nab the lot. Thet right?"

"If we kin find them."

"I've got a notion we kin. You see, son, this Pecos has a hide-out in the Sierra. I got a general idee whar from seein' sign. I didn't reckon him my meat at the time, an' I knew if I nosed round, I might git shot on general suspicion. But I've kep' my eyes open. Now thet I've jined up, again as a Ranger so to speak, along of you, thet risk is worth takin'."

"You know whar the hide-out is?" asked Bud.

"Pretty close. I figger I kin lead us to it. Pecos ain't quite as smart as he reckons he is. One thing, he don't use dry wood when he builds a fire, like I do. Another thing, he ain't fixed it so his smoke don't show. I've seen it a score of times. I've got pretty good eyesight or I wouldn't be a bee hunter. I might be able to show it to yuh right now. It's a good time."

They went out on the terrace together, and Kiowa stabbed his finger at where a shoulder of the Sierra butted into the clear gold of the sunset.

"Thar she is, son. Kin yuh make her out?"

Bud's eyes were keen, but it took time and the pointing finger of Kiowa before he could make out the faint, thin brown plume of smoke, rising in the still air.

"Thar she be," said Kiowa again. "It'll take us a couple of hours to work up thar. It'll be moonlight. Reckon we'll find 'em at home, listenin', mebbe, to Glynn explain to 'em how he got marked up. Reckon yuh *did* mark him, son?"

"I'll know him next time," said Bud grimly. "Thar'll be five of 'em."

"Five ladrones agin' two Rangers. Thet's easy odds. Let's grub up, an' then we'll go. We won't be able to ride, I reckon, though they may have a hoss trail lined out, but it 'u'd be plumb risky fer us to try an' find it. Seein' thet Glynn'll have told 'em thar's a Ranger about, they may have a lookout."

They worked to the west of the mountain's shoulder and saw again, this time against the rising moon, the smoke plume that betrayed the hide-out. They wormed their way through fissures and along ledges, until they came to one where the mouth of a cave showed like an inserted V.

Kiowa squatted on his heels, chuckling. It had been a stiff climb, but he was as unwinded as Bud.

"Thet gulch we jest come down," he whispered. "Lot of green brush thar, greasewood an' sech. Yuh go cut a heap of it with thet bowie of yours, an' fetch it here."

"You goin' to *smoke* 'em out," asked Bud. He doubted if he would have thought of it. This was the time when the old-timer had the right ideas.

"We *might* walk right in an' say howdy. I did thet to a b'ar once, when I was brash, an' almost got hugged to death. We kin sneak up right close an' listen to make sure they're to home, an' then we kin invite 'em to come out. But I don't

see no sense in bein' too danged impetuous with a bunch of cut-throats. I used to figger it was the thing to do when I was young. I rated myse'f a bravo, an' didn't realize I was jest bein' plumb loco. Yore cap'n said somethin' about not bitin' off more than yuh could chaw, didn't he?"

Bud grunted in reply.

"Cut some sod, if yuh kin find it," Kiowa went on. "I'll scout around fer some shale or flat stones. We got to plug up thet chimney, too, son. Yuh kin do thet while I fix the wood. Wind's risin', an' it'll blow the smudge jest right."

Bud got the green brush, plenty of it, found some sod, packed all to the end of the ledge. Kiowa had found his flat stone.

"The way's cl'ar," he said. "I kin hear 'em talkin', way inside, but I don't figger the cueva's very deep. Don't look like they have any lookout. I've located their hosses. Heerd *them*, too. They're in a stone corral below, to the right."

The stone slope was weathered and slick where Bud climbed it with his sod and flat stones, but he found a seam here, and a ridge there, and made it all right.

He capped the vent, started to slither back to Kiowa when a voice challenged him. He looked up and saw a man above him, revealed by the moon, backed by the stars. They had a lookout, after all.

It was not really a challenge. The man took no chances. He had a rifle, and Bud, on his belly, diving for his six-gun, saw the jet of flame from the muzzle.

It sounded like the crack of a whip in the quiet night. It echoed in the heights as Bud's arm seemed to have been lashed by the blow of the whip.

It was his left arm, but the lead

had hit the bone. Bud's nerve ends seemed to curl up, and faintness came upon him that he fought off. All his senses seemed failing him and he called on his will. One more shot and he was done—a plain target in the moonlight, already injured.

Brang! Brom!

Two reports this time that almost—not quite—blended. Bud had got his six-gun out—it seemed to anchor him—and then his weakness passed and he snapped a shot upward. He heard the outlaw's second slug thud and splinter stone within a foot of him, but he had fired first.

The man flung his rifle into the air. He pitched forward. Bud watched him sliding over the dome-like rock, saw him launch out into space, beyond the ledge.

As Bud landed on the ledge he saw the brush on fire, the wind blowing it, sending reeking fumes of greasewood inward. Kiowa called to him.

"Figgered yuh'd git him, son. I see him come overhead, dead as a herrin'—deader now, sence he hit. Fire's goin' fine. Reach me some more of thet stinkwood. This is an old Comanche trick, son. It works."

The fire made little noise. Kiowa shouted through the crackle of the flame.

"Two Rangers talkin'. Two—savvy? Speak to 'em, Bud, jest to reassure 'em."

"I'm the one you met in the wood lane, Glynn," Bud shouted. "Best come out. Four of you, an' two of us, waitin' fer you. I got your lookout."

He was aware that his left arm was badly hurt, but this was no time to think of it. Kiowa piled on more brush. Bud fetched up the last of it, wondering if it would be enough. They heard coughing and cursing.

"We're comin'," said a voice, and spat out oaths.

"Cursin' don't do yuh no good. You need what breath yuh got," warned Kiowa. "Come out with yore hands up."

"We got to wait till it dies down—we're chokin'," cried a voice.

"Nothin' to the way yuh'll choke with the noose around yore craw," said Kiowa. "We'll let her die down a bit."

They had to, for lack of brush. But the man who stumbled through was in no shape to fight. His eyes were streaming, the rank smoke filled his lungs.

Kiowa cracked him over the head with the butt of his six-gun, and the man subsided. So with the next.

"Here comes Pecos," he said to Bud. "Tame as a starved yearlin'. But, jest the same, I'm takin' no chances—"

But Pecos could neither see nor breathe. He lay gasping on the ledge while Kiowa took rawhide strings from his pocket and tied him, passing on to the others.

"Glynn's *your* meat," he said to Bud. "Here he comes."

Glynn came, stooping low. He had a cloth over his head, soaked in water. He flung it off as he

reached the open. The moon shone full on his distorted face.

"I'm takin' you with me," he cried as he dived at Bud's legs, brought him down, fighting on the narrow ledge.

Bud had but the one arm, but its hand held his gun. He cracked it down on Glynn's skull, and Glynn's grasp clamped convulsively as he heaved himself forward, and they rolled over.

Bud saw the gulf below. Glynn had gone limp, but Bud, above him, was on the verge. Then a strong hand gripped his belt, held him, dragged him off. Glynn, senseless, was going over the lip of the ledge, to join the other outlaw.

"Close call, son," said Kiowa. "Thunderation, yuh're hurt! We got to fix thet arm."

"I'm all right," said Bud weakly.

"It ain't too bad," said Kiowa. "I'll fix a turnikay now, an' we'll plug it when we git back with these hombres. Their hosses is right handy. We snagged 'em, Ranger. Shake! You still got one good arm."

The Rangers allus git their man—an' Bud Jones of Texas is a real Ranger. Thar'll be another story about him soon in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly. Don't miss it.



CHANGE TO

Mint Springs

AND KEEP
THE CHANGE!



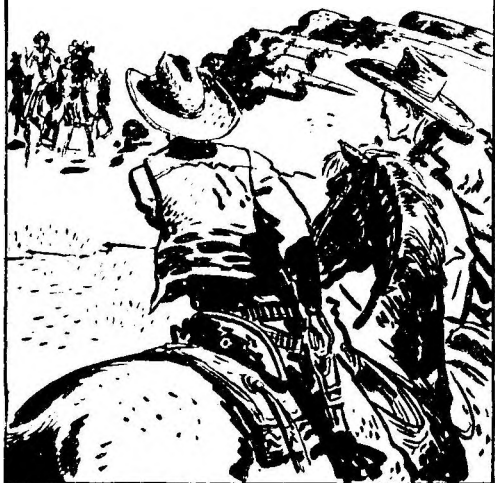
Ask for this quality Kentucky Straight Bourbon. It's easy on your pocketbook.



A PRODUCT OF GLENMORE

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Dusty



1. The stage carrying the Silver Hill Mine pay roll had been held up too often. So Dusty Radburn was sent to guard the mine messenger while he fooled the bandits by bringing the dinero through a mountain pass. There they were attacked by four gunmen.

Radburn



2. Dusty knew that somewhere there had been a leak in the mine manager's scheme. Blazing away with their six-guns, he and the messenger charged at the outlaws. The messenger pitched from his saddle, dead. One bandit fell. Dusty had a borrowed horse for Rocket was lame.

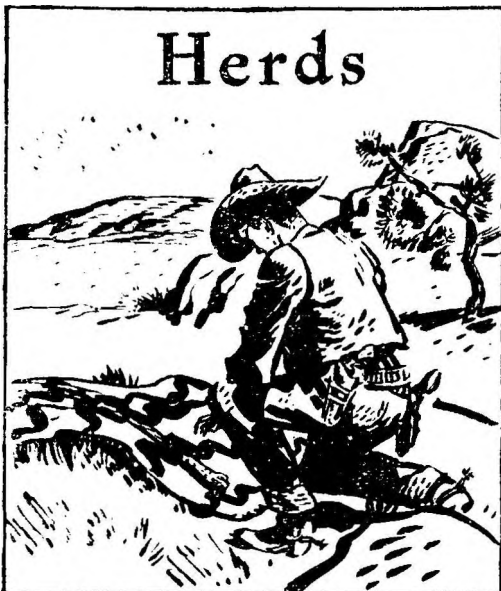


3. The three surviving bandits charged at Dusty. His horse screamed and fell, a stray bullet through its heart. Out of the saddle rolled Dusty as the cayuse dropped to its knees and fell heavily on its side. As he hit the ground head-first, he grimly held fast to his right-hand six-gun.



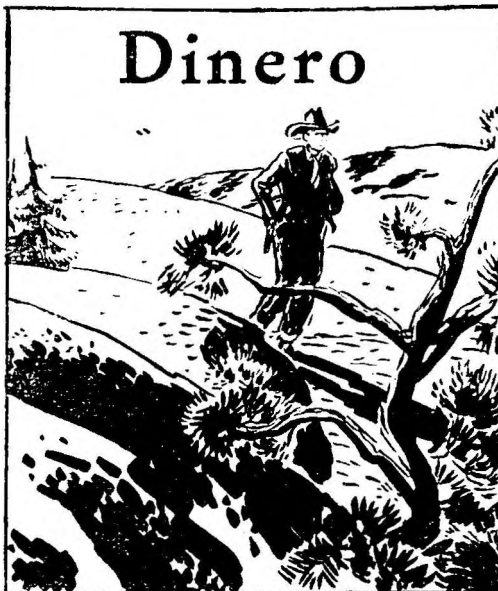
4. In falling, Dusty hit his head and was stunned. When he recovered his senses, he sat up on the ground. Near him lay the six-gun he had held when he fell; the other was in its holster. The bandits had gone. "Lot o' good it done to send me to herd thet dinero," Dusty growled.

Herds



5. In the pass, he found the saddle roll in which the messenger had carried the pay roll. The blanket had been opened; the satchel containing the pay roll was gone. "They got it, the polecats!" he husked. "Thet mine dinero the game little messenger give his life tuh save!"

Dinero



6. There was no sign of the dead messenger's horse, so Dusty grimly followed the trail of the bandits on foot. "They won't travel fur afore they divvies up the dinero," he figured. The bandits' sign led him into rocky country, with jack pines growing between boulders.



7. After plenty of scouting, Dusty located the three bandits. Hiding behind a boulder, he spied on them. They were squatting, about to divide the loot, with one of them starting to open the pay-roll satchel. Scraps of a cold snack lay on the ground. Their horses were nearby.



8. While the bandits waited eagerly for the divvy, Dusty stepped out from behind the boulder, hands resting on gun butts. Yells of surprise burst from the three bad men. Two jumped up. The jasper with the satchel set it down in a hurry. "Elevate!" Dusty barked. "Reach!"



9. But, seeing no gun in his hand, the two bandits who had jumped up went for their six-guns. In a draw too fast for the eye to follow, Dusty's twin Colts cleared leather. The third bandit was just rising. With guns in Dusty's hands and the hands of the two bandits—



10. Dusty's smoke poles thundered. A bandit pitched forward and sprawled on the ground, twitching in death. Another reeled back, dying, his six-gun exploding into the air. The third bandit was now jumping about and going for his guns. He didn't see that his pards were down.



11. In a blaze of gunfire, Dusty and the surviving bandit shot it out. With a gun spitting orange-yellow flame in each hand, Dusty's foe came surging toward him. But Dusty crouched, and the leaden messengers of death flew over his head. Dusty's aim was truer.



12. The bandit's knees buckled and he fell as one of Dusty's slugs drilled him dead center. He lay on his side, his life ebbing fast. With a final effort, he tried to lift his guns to line them on Dusty, but his muscles wouldn't respond. His arms fell back. He was dead like his pards.



13. Mounted on one of the bandits' horses, Dusty rode for the Silver Hill Mine. On his saddle, he carried a bandit's blanket roll. In that roll, he had hidden the unopened satchel containing the pay-roll dinero. "I'll take it to the mine manager," he said. "He's lucky to git it."



14. He rode to the mine office and strode in. There he met Sims, the mine manager. "Hyar's yore pay roll," Dusty told him, handing him the satchel. "We was held up in the pass. Yore messenger was kilt, but I had a hull lot better luck." To Dusty's surprise, Sims laughed.



15. Opening the satchel on a table, Sims dumped out nails and scrap metal, making it sound and feel like money. "The real pay roll came on the stage," Sims bragged. "I circulated rumors of a messenger bringing it through, knowing they'd reach the bandits. Clever trick, eh?"

WW-6D



16. Dusty thought of the messenger who had died doing his duty for this fat-head, to say nothing of Dusty's own close call. Drawing off, he floored the mine manager with a terrific haymaker. "Cap Hollins'll back me up in this," he told himself. "And the mine owners will, too."

Next Week:
Dusty Radburn Rides
The River



USIN' SHOOTIN' TOOLS

By ARTHUR L. RAFTER

Salt Lick Butch tried punchin' cows,
But was fired, by the Bar Q boss,
For pullin' a gun, in bunkhouse rows,
An actin' mean to a hoss.

Butch swore that he'd never work again,
For work was meant for fools.
He'd foller the trail of other men,
That lived by their shootin' tools.

He knowed that the stage from San An-
tone,
Carried money to Silver Lake,
So he figgered to hold it up alone,
An' git him a man-sized stake.

He shoves two boulders from off a ledge,
That starts some little slides,
An' blocks the road, to the canyon's
edge,
Then he hears the stage, an' he hides.

When the driver sees that the road is
blocked,
Yuh kin hear them brakes a mile,
An' the old coach slides, with the hind
wheels locked,
Till the lead-hoss touches the pile.

Butch shoots from on top of a rocky
shelf,

An' the guard's short shotgun roars,
Then the passenger, an' the driver his-
self

Chip in, with their .44s.

But Butch, who ain't leavin' much in
view,

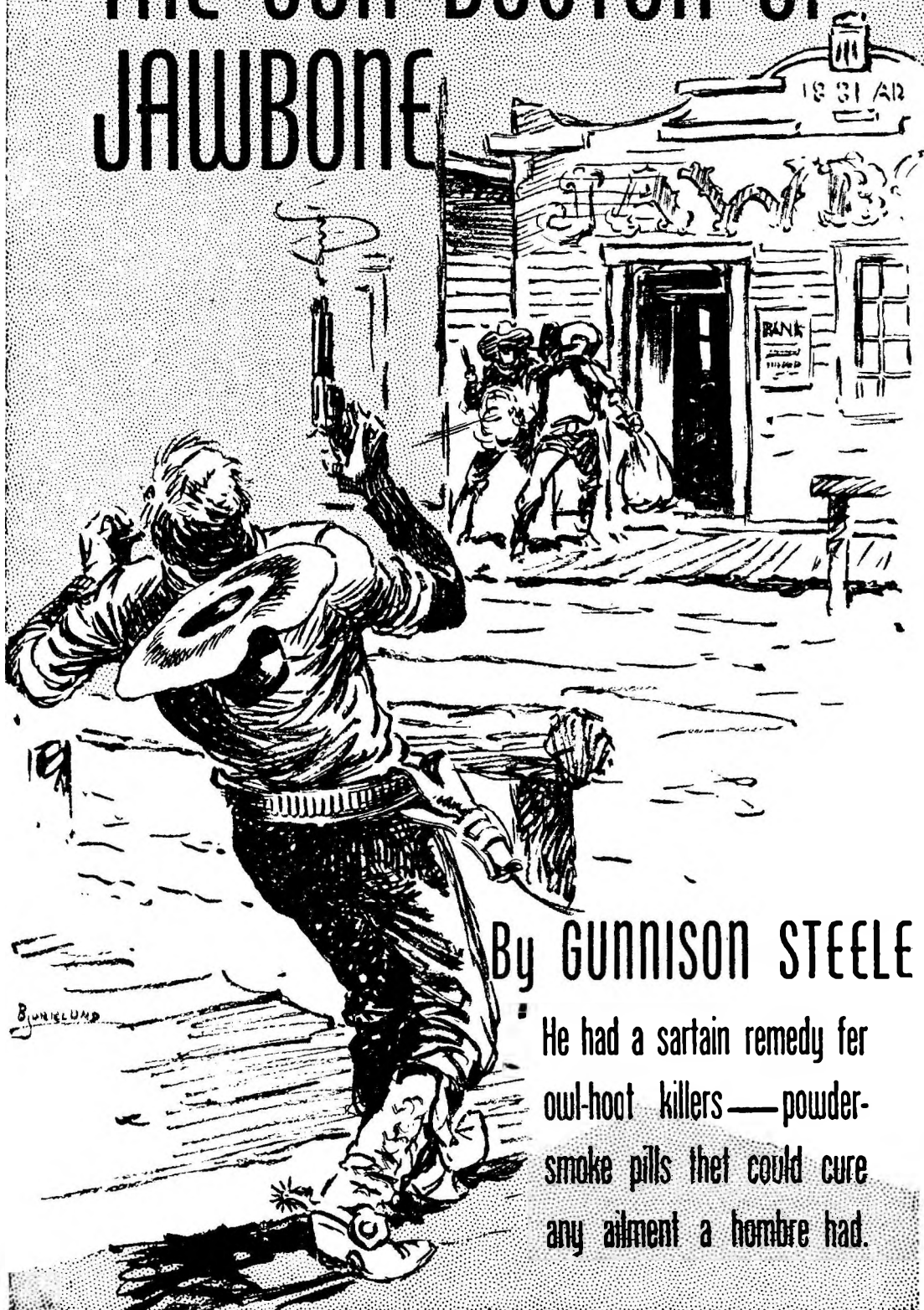
Jest the top of his bullet head,
Gits the passenger, an' the driver, too,
An' they're stretched on the seat,
stone dead.

The last man left, the wounded guard,
Butch plugs as he crawls to the rocks.
By shootin' the lock, an' poundin' hard,
He opens the money box.

Then stuffin' the dough in a heavy bag,
That hangs on the pony's back,
He mounts an' cusses the frightened nag,
An' heads it up the track.

But a dead man slumps in front of him,
From off of the driver's seat,
An' the pinto bolts for the canyon's rim,
An' they drop a thousand feet.

THE GUN DOCTOR OF JAWBONE



By GUNNISON STEELE

He had a sartain remedy fer
owl-hoot killers—powder-
smoke pills thet could cure
any ailment a hombre had.

The Gun Doctor Of Jawbone

A SINGLE gunshot, sounding flat and harsh in the hot silence that held the cow town of Jawbone, echoed among the drab, sun-warped buildings.

Regretfully, Sheriff Johnny Queen rolled his scarred boots from the desk top and slid his lanky, muscular body through the doorway, his smoky blue eyes probing quickly along the narrow, rutted street.

A few bronses stood at hitch racks. A gnarled, white-bearded oldster was running along the boardwalk across the street, a long-barreled old Peacemaker in his hand, yelling something in a high, quavering voice as he pointed toward a building that bore across its false front the words: **JAWBONE STOCKMAN'S BANK**

Johnny Queen's eyes, quickening with alarm, swiveled to the bank building. And at that instant three men leaped through the doorway of the bank. All were bearded, gun-belted hombres, evil-eyed and reckless-faced. At their head was a massive gent with a mass of red whiskers curling fiercely about his hawkish features and blazing eyes. In the right hand of the big man was a smoking six-gun. In his left he clutched a bulging gunny sack.

On the boardwalk before the bank the three paused, their reckless eyes raking the street. Then a fourth man spurred a gaunt roan from an alley alongside the bank, leading three saddled, riderless mounts.

The fiery-eyed oldster across the street scooted on braking boot heels, and his old Peacemaker snaked up.

"Danged bank looters!" he squalled, and jerked the trigger.

The red-bearded owl-hooter

laughed. Writhing red flame spewed from his gun muzzle. The oldster dropped his gun, clawed at his scrawny breast, then wilted to the ground.

The three bank looters leaped quickly into saddles and thundered wildly along the street.

Before this, Sheriff Johnny Queen had leaped into the street, his .45 snarling savagely. Despair and self-blame were in his heart as he felt the kick of the gun in his hand, for he knew that he'd let Curly Jack Slade and his gang of badlands' raiders catch him napping. Already the four outlaws were almost out of gun range. Only by sheer luck, he knew, would one of his bullets find a mark. But his .45 didn't stop its stuttering roar till the chambers were empty.

And suddenly he saw one of the owl-hooters reel in the saddle. It was the one who had led the horses from the alley, a slender, yellow-haired, reckless-eyed youngster. The wounded outlaw swayed wildly for an instant, fighting to stay in the saddle. Then all at once he seemed to go limp, and a gray keyser of dust plumed upward as he hit the ground.

Not often, Johnny Queen knew, did the owl-hoot breed stop to aid a wounded comrade. But these three stopped. Curly Jack Slade, the massive, red-whiskered gent, dragged his bronc back on its haunches. He whirled the animal and spurred back along the street, leaped down beside the motionless figure. The other two outlaws whirled and rode back, their guns blazing.

Sheriff Johnny Queen felt a sinking sensation in his stomach as his gun clicked on empty chambers. He stopped, undecided, helpless rage hammering at him. Swirling dust and gun smoke all but hid the outlaws from view. Bullets snapped

savagely about his ears and plunked into the dust at his feet. With an empty gun, he knew it would be suicide to stand there in the street and face that murderous fire.

He turned, leaped across the boardwalk and gained the shelter of a doorway. Bitter-eyed, he watched as Curly Jack Slade lifted the lithe body of the wounded outlaw in his arms and leaped back into the saddle of his own giant dun; watched as the bank looters thundered on along the street, their fierce yells floating defiantly back, and streaked away across the wind-lashed plain.

Already Johnny Queen's long legs were carrying him at a run toward the bank. As he started into the bank he collided with a fat, bald little man. Lige Bean, the banker, let out a fear-filled squawk. Then, as he saw the tall, red-haired young sheriff, he seized his arm and started gibbering.

"Cleaned out!" Lige Bean stutted. "I'm ruined—the whole county's ruined!"

Johnny Queen shook off his clammy, clawing hands. "Talk sense," he snapped. "What happened? How much did they get?"

The paunchy banker seemed dazed. "I looked up, and there they were," he muttered. "They had guns in their hands. What could I do? They got everything in sight—money I'd brought in to loan the valley ranchers so they could stock up on winter feed. The loss will ruin a lot of folks!"

Lige Bean's fat-rimmed eyes fixed accusingly on Johnny Queen. "The law's supposed to protect folks and their money. Where were you while this was happenin', Queen?"

Swift anger and resentment flared in Johnny's heart, but he fought back the hot words that rose to his lips. "I cain't be everywhere and

see everything," he said. "Where's Bill Cole?"

Lige Bean's arm trembled as he pointed toward a barred cage labeled "Cashier." A chill feeling in his heart, Johnny Queen opened the door of the cage and went inside.

A shaft of murky light, spearing through a window, fell across the motionless, grotesquely doubled body of a tall, dark-haired young gent on the floor. Smoky eyes hard, an icy band clutching at his heart, Sheriff Johnny Queen bent over the still figure.

The dark-haired youth was dead, with a bullet hole squarely between his eyes.

Swift anger, and a desolate feeling of loss, rushed over Johnny Queen. Bill Cole had been his friend, one of the best friends he'd ever had. As if from a vast distance, he heard the nasal, complaining voice of Banker Bean, talking to the dozen or so men who had crowded into the bank.

"A man murdered—and my bank cleaned out," Lige Bean said bitterly, "while our kid sheriff dozes in his office. When Curly Jack Slade's hellions killed old Sam Gunter, and folks elected Johnny Queen sheriff in his place, they said Johnny Queen'd have Slade's gang behind bars in a little while. But Curly Jack Slade's still free, still killin' and robbin'—"

Johnny Queen straightened, strode from the grilled cage and stood spread-legged before the paunchy banker.

"Runnin' off at the mouth won't help, Bean," he said tautly. "Like I said, I cain't see everything. But Curly Jack Slade's gone too far this time. I aim to see that he pays for this killin', and fer gunnin' old Gabe Runnels, layin' out there in the street."

"Thet's been said before, youn-

ker," spoke up a wiry, gray-bearded rancher. "Curly Jack's got a good start. And yuh know well as I do, once them owl-hooters get into the Devil's Garden yuh couldn't find 'em in a month of Sundays. It's been tried too many times. Them devils have got a hide-out off there in the badlands, and it's plenty well hid."

"That's right," Johnny admitted grimly. "But I reckon there's more ways than one of skinnin' a skunk."

"Meanin' what?"

"Mebbe nothin'," the red-headed sheriff grunted. He turned to a bow-legged, towheaded young hombre who had just come into the bank, and said: "Shorty, you swear in a posse, pronto, and trail after them bank looters!"

Shorty Barrow was Johnny Queen's deputy, a hundred and twenty pounds of havoc for law-breakers. Now he frowned puzzledly at Johnny's order.

"Sure, boss," he said. "But—ain't yuh ridin' with us?"

Johnny shook his head and said: "I'm stayin' here!"

"But, boss, I don't savvy—"

"Just do as yuh're told," Johnny Queen said curtly, and turned and stalked from the bank.

Outside, he was aware of the tense, questioning silence in the bank behind him. But he paid no heed. Hard eyes staring straight ahead, so that he wouldn't see the sprawled body of old Gabe Runnels across the street, he strode to his office, went inside, closed and locked the door. He didn't want to see or talk to anybody for a while.

Through a window, a few minutes later, he watched Shorty Barrow lead half a dozen gun-belted, grim-eyed men out of town. He knew that the odds were ten to one that the posse wouldn't find Curly Jack Slade's hide-out. A dozen times,

during the last few years, posses had trailed Slade's raiders into the hilly, canyon-slashed expanse of country that was known as the Devil's Garden. And there amid that desolate, rock-ribbed world, they'd always lost the trail.

Failure to capture Curly Jack Slade had been the bitterest disappointment of old Sam Gunter's life, which had been abruptly terminated a year ago by a hail of bullets from the guns of Curly Jack Slade and his gunnies here on Jawbone's main street. And young Johnny Queen, elected sheriff in Gunter's place, hadn't had any better luck. Slade was as cunning as a wolf, and as cruel and ruthless. Matching him in savagery was Curly Jack's younger brother, Jard Slade, a youth who was wolf-wild and utterly bad.

Curly Jack Slade, it was said, loved but one thing in all the world—his kid brother, Jard.

That explained why Curly Jack had risked his life a few minutes ago to rescue the owl-hooter Johnny had shot from his saddle. That wounded outlaw had been young Jard Slade.

Johnny Queen sat there in his office and hour or so, staring moodily from a window along Jawbone's dusty street. By now the sun was dipping toward the blue hills that rimmed the valley, glinting on the tense, bearded faces of the few men who stood in compact groups on the street and talked in low tones. The recent robbery and killings had left Jawbone in a vile humor. Johnny could see the puzzlement and resentment on the faces of the men as they looked occasionally toward the sheriff's office.

He could guess what they were saying and thinking. They were saying that maybe they'd made a mistake in electing a kid sheriff. They were asking each other why

Johnny Queen sat in his office, doing nothing, when a robbery and a couple of murders had been committed.

But Johnny Queen sat there, his freckled, hawkish features hard and bitter, till the sun sank down into its nest of hills. Then he got to his feet and went outside. He strode along the street, staring straight ahead, and along the shallow gulch that cradled Jawbone. Five minutes later he rapped on the door jamb of a dilapidated cabin that huddled back under the low cliffs.

A slender, dark-haired young fellow with thin, pale features appeared in the doorway, and leaned against a rude sign that said: "James Lanning, M. D."

Young Dr. Lanning had come to Jawbone only a few months before, but during that time he and Johnny Queen had become friends. Lanning grinned in a friendly fashion when he saw the red haired young sheriff.

"Howdy, sheriff," he said. "You think I've got Curly Jack Slade and his gunnies hidden here?"

Johnny shook his head, asked: "How's business, doc?"

"Lousy," Lanning admitted ruefully. "Thought I had some patients a little while ago, but they belonged to Jake Renfro, the coroner. What's on yore mind, sheriff?"

"Trouble with you is," Johnny Queen grunted, ignoring his question, "yuh don't git out and look for business."

"Yeah? Yuh got any suggestions?"

"Shore have! I got a sneakin' suspicion that a sawbones might find some patients over east apiece to-night—say, over on Badger Creek."

"Badger Creek?" Lanning asked puzzledly. "Heck, I ain't heard of no sickness, nor any gun trouble, on Badger Creek."

"All the same," Johnny insisted, "it might be a good idea for yuh to ride over that way tonight. Yuh mebbe won't be back till mornin'. So I'll just bed down here at yore shack, in case some hombre comes lookin' for a sawbones durin' the night. Savvy?"

"I savvy yuh're up to somethin' crazy," the young medico said slowly. "But seems like yore wild hunches usually pan out. Reckon I'll be headin' for Badger Creek!"

Johnny Queen nodded, turned and trudged back along the shallow gulch toward Jawbone.

II.

Two hours later, lying on a bunk in the Stygian blackness of Lanning's cabin, Johnny's lanky body suddenly tensed. Many times during those seemingly endless hours, as he wondered bitterly if his queer hunch had been wrong, he'd thought he heard stealthy, sinister noises about the cabin. But now he knew he couldn't be wrong.

A moment before he'd heard a low thud of hoofs outside, which had stopped abruptly. Now, as he lay motionless, there came a sharp sound, as if somebody had rapped on the closed door with a gun muzzle. Johnny didn't move, and a moment later the rapping came again, louder, sharper.

Then Johnny sat up. He was never wider awake, but when he spoke his voice sounded dull with sleep, with no hint of the knowledge that if the crazy gamble he was taking failed he would die quickly.

"What d'yuh want?" Johnny asked sleepily.

"Wake up, sawbones," a low, guttural voice called. "I got a patient fer yuh. My kid's bad sick. Open up!"

Fierce triumph rioted through Johnny Queen as he swung his feet to the floor. He knew what was about to happen. But his hands were steady as he pulled on his trousers, shirt and boots. His gun belt, with its two black-handled .45s, hung on the back of a chair, but he didn't touch it. He went to the door, opened it.

The thick, shadowy figure of a man stood there on the narrow, rickety porch. The man's dilapidated hat was pulled low over his features, and one of his hands was behind him.

"Where do yuh live, mister?" Johnny Queen asked. "And what's wrong with yore kid?"

"A bronc throwed the button and broke his arm," the man grunted. "I live over south eight-ten miles. Yuh ready to ride?"

Johnny leaned closer, trying to see the man's face. Sudden suspicion in his voice, he said. "I don't know you, mister. And yuh're actin' mighty—"

The burly man's hand came from behind him, and the muzzle of a gun in the hand jabbed roughly into Johnny's stomach.

"Just do as I say, sawbones," the man snarled, "and mebbe yuh won't get hurt! Like I said, I got a patient fer yuh, and yuh're comin' with me, pronto!"

The pseudo-medico shrank back in apparent fright from the gun. "Put up that gun, man," he quavered. "I've never failed to go wherever duty called me, wherever there is pain or sickness to alleviate, without the use of force. I'll go with you."

"You danged right yuh will!" the burly hombre snapped. "Git a move on, and don't try no tricks—or I'll cut yuh in two!"

Johnny said faintly: "Wait till I

get my bag, then I'll go saddle my bronc."

"I've got a bronc for you. But be shore and get yore tools and pills, 'cause yuh'll mebbe need 'em!"

Five minutes later, mounted on a wiry roan, Johnny Queen and his burly captor left the gulch and struck out across the plain, toward the ragged line of hills jutting like the hackles of a wolf against the western horizon. The squat, silent hombre rode slightly behind Johnny Queen. A moon had soared into the sky, and its silvery light glinted coldly on the gun in the owl-hooter's hand. And on the outlaw's hard, wary features.

For Johnny knew that this big, black-bearded gent was a member of Curly Jack Slade's killer gang. He knew that the outlaw was carrying him into the night-shrouded hills, thinking he was a doctor, to patch up the owl-hooter who had been wounded in the gun fight that evening—young Jard Slade. He knew, also, that the odds were about five to one against his ever seeing Jawbone again.

Johnny Queen's smoky eyes were cold and bitter in the shadows. He had been fully aware of those odds—but even now he didn't regret the gamble he had made. It had been just a wild hunch—a hunch that, as soon as night came, Curly Jack Slade would be wanting a medico to save the life of his wounded kid brother. And the nearest medico would be Dr. Jim Lanning, in Jawbone. So Johnny Queen, sheriff, had for the night become a medico.

He knew that to allow himself to be kidnaped and carried to the outlaws' hide-out in the Devil's Garden, was a crazy thing to do. But he also knew that that was probably the only chance, slim though it was,

that he would have to avenge the death of young Bill Cole, and to recover the bank money that meant so much to the valley ranchers who had elected him sheriff.

They left the plain, rode up into the foothills. Then the pine-clad hills gave way to twisted ridges of granite that writhed like monstrous snakes about them. They rode in and out of deep, pitch-black canyons, across warty hogbacks and weirdly carved lava beds. This was the Devil's Garden, that desolate expanse wherein Curly Jack Slade's raiders had been able to hide and laugh at the law for years.

Then, after traveling what seemed like miles, Johnny Queen realized that they were leaving the Devil's Garden. The canyons became less deep. The bare granite ridges and lava beds gave way to gentle, pine-studded hills. Johnny realized that they had just made a circle through the badlands, and emerged on the southern side.

"Here we are, sawbones," the burly outlaw growled suddenly. "Roll off that hoss—and don't try no tricks!"

Johnny Queen stared keenly about. They had emerged into a clearing—and in the clearing was a dark, two-story, fortlike old house. Amazement stabbed at Johnny, as he recognized the place. This big old house, built many years ago, had for the last several years been used by a giant, half-wild hombre named Judd Pitt as headquarters for his wild-horse ranch. Nobody knew much about Judd Pitt, for he was surly and hostile toward all visitors, but it had been suspected that Pitt's wild-horse operations were just a blind for other, more sinister things.

Now suddenly Johnny Queen knew the truth—Judd Pitt's place

was in reality the much-hunted hide-out of Curly Jack Slade's killer gang. Judd Pitt was probably a member of the gang.

"Didn't you hear me? I said, pile off that hoss!"

The squat outlaw had dismounted. Now he stood beside Johnny, gun in hand, scowling up at the redhead. Slowly, Johnny Queen dismounted. There was a cold, heavy feeling in his heart. Now he knew that the hunch he'd played had brought him to almost certain death. So far as, he knew, none of Slade's killers had ever got a good look at him—it wasn't likely that they would recognize him as a sheriff instead of a medico.

But with Judd Pitt, it was different. Johnny Queen had stopped by Pitt's place only a couple of months ago. If Judd Pitt got a good look at him, hell was sure to pop!

"Well, what yuh waitin' on, sawbones?"

"That hurt kid," Johnny asked, watching narrowly for a lessening of vigilance on the killer's part, "is he here?"

"You'll find out what's here," sneered the outlaw. "Yuh mean, yuh still ain't tumbled to what's up?"

Johnny Queen feigned puzzlement. "You said yore kid had busted an arm. Yuh mean—"

"I mean, git into that house! And hang onto that pill bag, 'cause we'll need it. I just hope we ain't too late, or we'll both be skinned alive!"

The gun muzzle in his back, the little black medicine bag that Dr. Lanning had left him clutched in one hand, Johnny walked stiffly toward the house. Now he could see that a thin sliver of light seeped from a blinded window.

They crossed a rickety porch,

along a dark hallway. Johnny Queen slowed his pace, his lean muscles bunching. Once surrounded by Curly Jack Slade's cutthroats, he knew that his chances for life would be slim. Even if he weren't recognized, the outlaws wouldn't ever let him go back to Jawbone with a knowledge of their hide-out.

But the burly gunman seemed to sense his intentions. The gun muzzle gouged deeper into Johnny's back. And at that instant a door opened before them, and a shaft of light streamed out. The gunman shoved Johnny into a lighted room.

Johnny Queen's smoky eyes knifed about the room. Four men, besides himself and his squat captor, were in the big, rudely furnished room. Curly Jack Slade was pacing the room like a caged beast, an ugly light in his round, reddish little eyes. A gaunt, hawk-faced hombre stood beside a window across the room. Judd Pitt, the wild-horse hunter, sat hunched in a chair.

Pitt was bigger even than Slade, with hairy, bulging muscles showing through his tattered clothes. His lips were loose, pouting, cruel. His eyes were the color of dry mud.

The fourth man lay on a bunk against the wall. His pale, reckless young face was haggard and pain-lined, his chest swathed in crimson-stained bandages. This was Jard Slade, Johnny knew, Curly Jack's kid brother.

Judd Pitt's huge, bald head was jutting forward questioningly as he peered at Johnny Queen. That icy band clamping tighter about his heart, Johnny tugged his sombrero lower over his lean, freckled features, hoping desperately that Judd Pitt couldn't see well enough in the murky light to recognize him.

Curly Jack Slade confronted

Johnny Queen and the burly outlaw. "What took yuh so long?" he growled fiercely.

Obviously, the squat killer was deathly afraid of the big outlaw boss. "I got back quick as I could, chief," he whined.

Curly Jack's cougar eyes flicked to Johnny. "Yuh Dr. Lanning?" he asked.

Feigning anger, Johnny Queen blurted: "What if I am? I told this quick-trigger gent I'd come, without havin' a gun in my back. What d'yuh want me to do?"

"Just do as yuh're told, saw-bones," Curly Jack snarled, "and mebbe yuh'll go back to Jawbone. That kid over there's bad hurt. He's got a slug in his belly, put there by that skunky sheriff in Jawbone. That's why I had you brought here—to save the button's life—and yuh'd better do it. Savvy?"

Johnny Queen savvied—a good many things. The burly outlaw had pouched his gun. Johnny could feel the eyes of the other three outlaws upon him. There seemed to be a puzzled, troubled look on Judd Pitt's flat, dark features as he looked at Johnny. Suddenly, the room seemed freighted with menace and violence.

"Well, what're yuh waitin' on?" Curly Jack growled harshly.

The little black bag still in his hand, Johnny started slowly toward the bunk where Jard Slade lay. He could feel the impact of Judd Pitt's muddy eyes as they followed him. The thud of his boot heels sounded loud and harsh in the room. He stopped beside the bunk, but hardly saw the white, pain-haunted face against the dirty blanket.

For suddenly he was aware that Judd Pitt had got to his feet. An icy, warning tingle raced along his

spine. At the same instant Judd Pitt's guttural, snarling voice lashed out:

"Hell, that ain't no sawbones—he's a sheriff. He's the gent that gunned the kid!"

Ten seconds of tense, death-weighted silence held the room. Then, as if a spell had been broken, Johnny Queen sent his lean body curving to one side, half-whirling to face the four outlaws. He knew he was too late, knew that, unarmed as he was, he didn't have a chance.

He heard the roar of a gun, saw flame leap out at him from Slade's hand. Red-hot pain slashed at his head, and the room seemed to explode in a million zooming lights. He felt himself falling. He didn't feel any jar when he hit the floor.

Johnny Queen didn't lose consciousness. He knew he was lying on the floor, his eyes closed. A surf-like roaring was inside his head, but his brain was strangely clear. He could feel moisture streaming over his face.

Anger, and hate for Curly Jack Slade's killers, roared through Johnny Queen's brain. He bunched his muscles, tried to fling his lanky body upward. But he couldn't move! His whole body felt numb, paralyzed.

Despair hammered at him. Then he became aware of loud, harsh voices in the room.

"Blast you, Beeler!" he heard Curly Jack Slade squall. "I send yuh after a sawbones for the kid, and yuh bring back a sheriff. I ought tuh—"

"How could I know he was a lawman?" another voice asked sullenly. "He was at the sawbones' shack, wasn't he?"

"Yuh oughta made sure," the outlaw boss raged. "Now the kid'll die,

and it's all yore fault. The button's worth a dozen like you. Damn you, Beeler, I aim tuh kill yuh!"

Beeler's scared voice yelled: "Wait, boss—don't—"

The words ended in a strangled moan. A gunshot blasted, and the bitter sting of powder smoke touched Johnny's nostrils. He didn't feel quite so numb now. He could feel the druglike lethargy leaving him. Slowly, he opened his eyes a trifle.

Tension held the three remaining outlaws who were on their feet. Curly Jack was reloading his smoking .45, anger and worry twisting his heavy features. The gaunt killer still stood near the window. Judd Pitt stood with apelike shoulders hunched forward as he looked at Curly Jack.

Johnny Queen felt something under his fingers, and knew that he still clutched the little black satchel. Sudden hope surged over him. The three outlaws weren't paying any attention to him. Apparently they thought he was dead. A slight movement, a tiny noise, and he *would* be dead, Johnny knew.

Curly Jack crossed to the bunk, stood looking down at the unconscious youth, cursing tonelessly.

"I done my best, kid," he said. "And if Beeler hadn't of bungled, I'd of saved yuh. Now, Jake, what in blazes yuh standin' there for? Mebbe there's still time to get a sawbones and save the button."

The lanky Jake didn't seem scared. He drawled: "You know better'n that, boss. The kid was due to be dead two hours ago. Even if this gent had been a medico, 'stead of a sheriff, he couldn't of saved the kid!"

Johnny Queen could feel new strength flowing back into his body. Stealthily, he tried moving his fingers, and found that he could. Hate

crawled through his brain. He wanted to leap up, and batter with savage fury at the three killers. But he knew that would be suicide. He forced himself to lie motionless, listening to the snarling talk of the outlaws.

Everything except his slim, sinewy fingers were motionless—they were working cautiously, silently at the clasp on the black bag!

"Why'd yuh gun pore Beeler?" Judd Pitt muttered puzzledly. "Beeler was a good feller—he didn't mean no harm."

"Beeler had it comin'," Slade snarled. "The kid'll die, just because Beeler didn't bring a saw-bones!" The outlaw boss' voice trailed off in a torrent of curses.

"What yuh aim to do with them bodies?" Jake asked. "They give me the jitters, layin' there like that."

"Take 'em out!" Curly Jack ordered harshly. "Take 'em out and bury 'em!"

Judd Pitt shuffled obediently across the room, stooped, and with ridiculous ease lifted Beeler's limp body to his shoulder. Jake started toward Johnny Queen.

But by now Johnny's fingers had loosened the clasp on the black bag. Like a striking snake's head, his hand darted into the bag, came out clasping the slender-barreled .38 Colt that he had cached there earlier in the night.

At the sudden movement, Jake rocked back on his heels, a startled curse spewed from his lips. His eyes seemed to bulge from his head as Johnny Queen reared up. Then, gibbering crazily, Jake grabbed for his gun.

But it never cleared leather. The gun in Johnny Queen's hand blasted, and a red funnel of flame and lead lashed upward into the gaunt out-

law's stomach, smashing him backward across the room.

Then the room exploded in a cyclonic fury of roaring guns. Braced on muscular legs, a fierce thrill of satisfaction lanced through Johnny Queen as he triggered his hot, kicking gun.

Over their momentary surprise, guns were in the hands of Curly Jack and Judd Pitt now. Two to one—but Johnny Queen didn't flinch or try to escape. A cold grin on his freckled young face, powder smoke curling snakishly about his lanky figure, he faced the killers of Bill Cole in a blazing showdown.

And Judd Pitt wilted suddenly, like a massive tree that had been chopped down.

But still the gun thunder beat through the old house. Still red tongues of gun flame crisscrossed the room, and lead screamed with waspish fury. Johnny felt a bullet sting his side. He felt another slug burn a fiery path across his throat. But still he didn't flinch. He laughed, bleakly, triumphantly—and at that laugh, the courage went out of Curly Jack Slade.

Slade flung away his gun, and cowered back against the wall.

"Don't kill me!" he whimpered. "I know when I'm licked. I . . . I give up!"

Johnny Queen held his fire. "That's fine, Slade," he said. "I'd rather see you hang, any day, than die by a bullet!"

"Yuh tricked me," Curly Jack whined. "Yuh made Beeler think yuh was a doctor!"

"I *am* a doctor," Johnny Queen grinned through the crimson that streaked his freckled face. "A gun doctor—with a prescription of powder smoke and lead instead of pills. It's a lot more effective with skunks like you!"

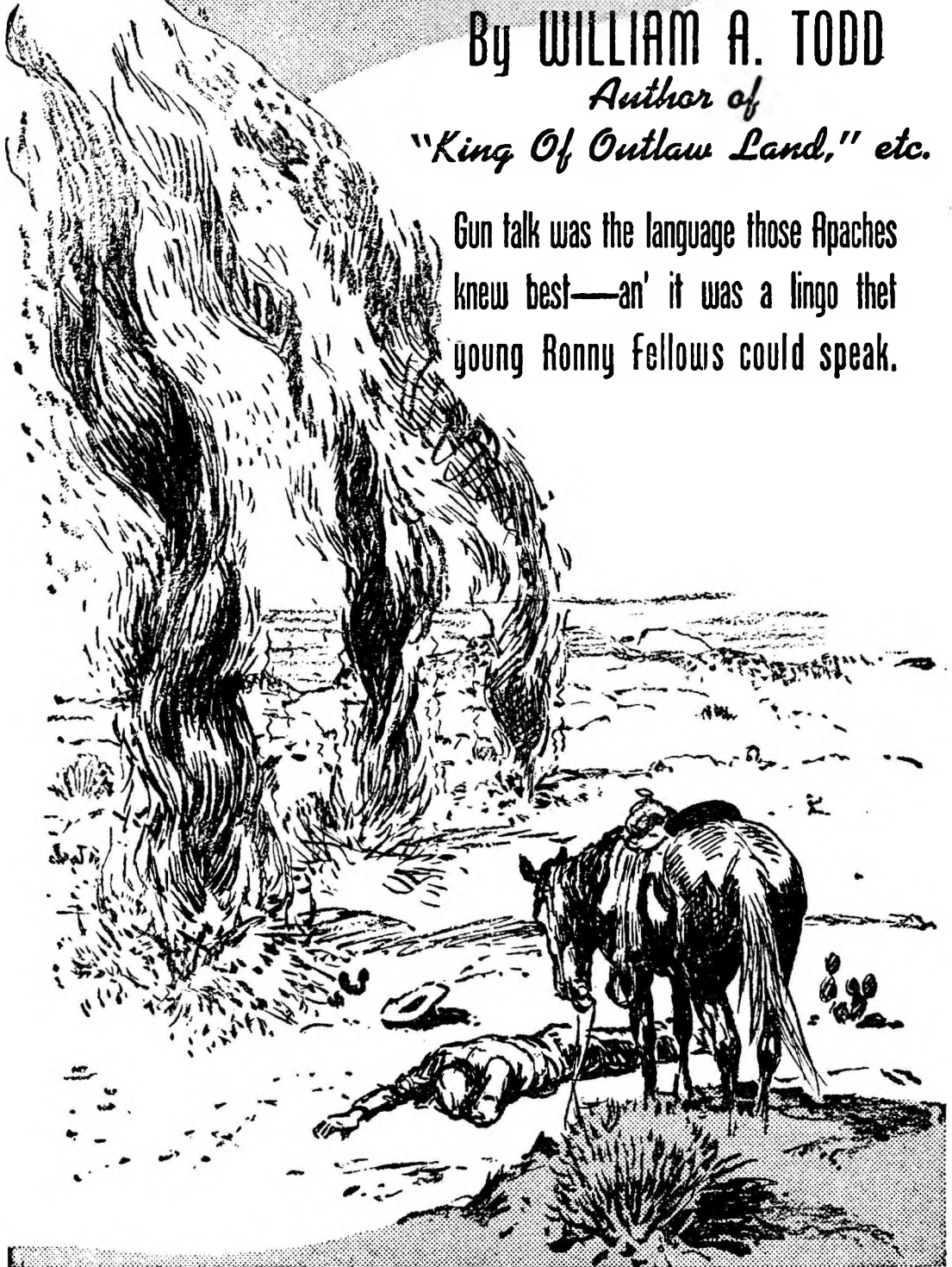
VENGEANCE IN THE DESERT

By WILLIAM A. TODD

Author of

"King Of Outlaw Land," etc.

Gun talk was the language those Apaches knew best—an' it was a lingo that young Ronny Fellows could speak.



Vengeance in the Desert

CHAPTER I.

SMOKE SIGNALS.

AT the bottom of the cold clear spring lay the ugly corpses of three diamondback rattlesnakes and a poisonous Gila monster. The reptiles had been killed not two hours before while sunning themselves on the boulders surrounding the desert oasis. Empty .45-caliber cartridges and a forked stick lay about. And there were the tracks of at least half a dozen men who had lost no time in clearing out.

When young Ronny Fellows swung down from his tired roan pony, he accepted the criminal act with quiet resignation.

"I reckon I don't drink," he muttered. "Curly Pike an' Jack Lynx certainly know that somebody is trailing them. This poisoned spring is just one more good reason why I'm going to salivate them."

He fished the carcasses out of the water and bailed the spring dry with the skirt of his yellow rain slicker. It would be hours before the pool filled again. Even then the liquid might not be safe for men and animals. And he couldn't wait until the next morning to obtain a healthy drink.

Swinging to his saddle, Ronny turned the thirsty roan up a stiff short climb to the top of a barren ridge. There he halted to survey the westward expanse of sun-scorched dunes and volcanic hills.

The pursuit after the two foes that he had sworn to exterminate didn't appear inviting. He had been trailing them for seven solid

days, sometimes losing their tracks only to find them again. He had sighted the riders more than once. But they had escaped either in darkness or mountains.

Now, the end was near. The fugitives had very little food left. Their broncs were exhausted. Curly Pike and Jack Lynx knew no more about the cactus country than did Ronny Fellows. Unless the two fugitives received aid soon from lawless whites or Indians, they'd have to hole up and fight.

Standing in his stirrups, Ronny stared into the dizzy heat curtains of the desert. He shielded his blue eyes from the glare of the sun by the back of a hand. But he couldn't spy his foes. They were evidently keeping to the low troughs and hiding their route behind rock ridges. Only their tracks let Ronny know where they had gone.

The cowboy touched spurs to the roan and started down the slope into the sands. He was willing to ride through fire and brimstone to settle his bullet account with Curly Pike and Jack Lynx.

"They've got to die, cayuse," he said to the bronc, and made ready for a long hard trip.

The feud between the waddy and the fancy-dressed Curly Pike and half-breed Jack Lynx had started in far-away Wyoming, where their ranches were close together. Indian trouble stirred up by the Pikes had run Ronny's father out of the State. And when Ronny rode south with his father and a bald-headed cook, Curly and Jack Lynx followed for the purpose of robbery and vengeance. Only a week before, Curly and Jack Lynx had joined up with outlaws on a raid on a settler wagon train. The two crooks had hoped to blame the Rocking F outfit for

the job, but Ronny had been too quick for them.

There had been a fight under a cloud of smoke from a prairie fire, and when it was over Ronny failed to find the bodies of Curly Pike and Jack Lynx. Ronny hit their trail, knowing that they were traveling with some Mexicans and Apaches who had survived the battle. The waddy figured that his foes had the beginning of a tough gang, and he couldn't let them grow in numbers.

"We can stand just as much heat an' hunger as them, partner," Ronny told his bronc. "But we better watch out for a bushwhacking. That's the only thing that can stop us."

But the Rocking F puncher didn't realize what he was up against. Never having crossed the desert before, he didn't know about soft sands, burning heat, thirst, deceptive mirages, and dry storms. He forgot that his two foes were traveling with Indians who could get water out of cactus and food from strange birds. They knew how to protect themselves and find their way.

Ronny had only his young strength and a determined will. He was tall, with keen eyes and a good square chin. In ten-gallon hat, red flannel shirt, and batwing chaps, he looked the part of a crack cowhand. His father had taught him more about handling guns than most men learn in a lifetime. And he had a good deal of horse savvy.

When the going soon appeared hard on the roan, Ronny began throwing away equipment, such as saddlebags, slicker, ropes, and cooking utensils. His chaps and mackinaw were next to go. He left these items where he thought he'd pick them up on the way back.

After ten miles he dismounted to

lead his bronc, and then he found out how hot the sands were. By noon his eyes hurt and his throat was as dry as ashes. Long before sunset he had seen three mirages, and had laughed at them, because he remembered stories about desert travelers who had been fooled by them. But the last picture in the sky was of a mountain lake surrounded by pines. That worried him to the point where he shook his fist and cried out in exasperation.

He was constantly on the alert for his foes. He skirted deep arroyos and rocky hills where their prints led, thinking they might be waiting for him. Picking up the trail later, he realized he was losing time. Soon he began to wonder if the desert stretched on forever.

With the setting of the sun, Ronny no more resembled the cowboy who had left the oasis than a professional rodeo rider does a ragged shepherd. He was staggering. He had begun to talk to himself. His arms ached from leading the roan. His legs had no feeling. And when the sun went down, he fell in a heap and lay for an hour, resting.

"Curly an' Jack Lynx are just as bad off," he tried to tell himself. "They can't be much farther. When the moon comes up I'll find them."

Instead of a moon, a wind stirred and blew harder and harder until the night was filled with flying sand. Ronny crawled into the lee of a rocky slab and hobbled his bronc. The wind increased so that he had to place a bandanna over his mouth to breathe.

The sand storm reached its peak just before midnight and Ronny gave all his attention to saving the roan pony. Terrified, the animal tried to get on its legs and run.

Ronny shielded its eyes and nostrils with a shirt. The brone tried to bite him. For hours he fought the horse while the wind and sand tore at him in a blackness that completely blinded him.

When the wind lost its howl, Ronny was so weak that he could hardly crawl off the horse's neck. His tongue was swollen and his lungs seemed to be hot furnaces. He couldn't think. He lay until dawn, vaguely aware that stars had come out, and that the storm had passed. With the rising sun he stirred and rubbed his smarting eyes.

The desert appeared to have changed. Where there had been a dune the evening before, now it was gone, and a sinkhole off to the east was filled in with sand. There were no tracks. He could only tell direction by the sun.

"Curly Pike an' Jack Lynx are no better off," the cowboy said grimly, staggering to his feet. "They ain't far. They've got water an' I need it."

His roan was almost completely covered with sand. Ronny had to dig the animal's rump out. It was a job to get him up. The puncher doubted that the horse would be able to follow him. He worked over it for a full hour and then started out, leading the animal by a halter. He left his saddle, bridle, rifle, and cartridge belt, keeping only his six-gun and a pocketful of extra shells.

He didn't get five miles. The horse collapsed. Buzzards circled overhead. Ronny couldn't bring himself to shoot the animal. He fell beside it, and then he realized that he, too, was finished.

For a long time the waddy lay there, the sun beating down on him. He tried desperately to gather strength enough to think. His brain reeled. There were moments when

he wanted to cry out in desperation, but his swollen tongue wouldn't let a word escape his lips. His memory went back to his father and the bald-headed cook that he had left far behind in the prairie country. He thought they were beside him, then he knew they were not.

He soon began to imagine that he was back near the oasis, waiting for the poisonous water to clear. He tried to crawl toward it—and ran into a pile of dry mesquite limbs, cactus and desert weeds that had been blown against a pile of rocks. The needles stung him like points of fire. He rolled back, eyes open to the blazing sun, and then an idea came to him. *Fire!* He was lost and dying. He had to have help, no matter who gave it to him. He thought of Indians, and smoke, and signals.

Ronny's swollen, trembling fingers went to his pocket. It was agony to extract matches and light them. He tossed the flaming sticks into the dry mesquite and brush. Smoke clouded and drifted upward. He crawled away, gasping for life, searching for more brush. He found it and lighted it. And again he struggled on, until he had three spirals of smoke lifting into the sky. After that Ronny passed out.

But the three fires he had lighted formed the Indian signal calling for help.

Two hours later Ronny regained consciousness. Wet rags were being pressed against his burning lips. His head was pillowed on a blanket, and he was shaded by a slicker propped above him on sticks. He licked at the precious drops of water and a voice chuckled near him.

"I reckon yuh can't kill a good waddy," some one said. "Easy now, hombre. Yuh ain't goin' ter

have more than one swig. Thar's some medicine mixed with it, so don't complain about the taste."

Ronny's opening eyes found a blurred leathery face above him. The Rocking F puncher tried to gasp that he wanted water—all he could get. But the stranger went on squeezing drops of liquid into his open mouth. It was slow torture to get so little. And, as the water loosened Ronny's tongue, he groaned in exasperation and tried to reach for the man's canteen.

"More!" Ronny gasped.

"No more now," the hombre with the leathery face said. "Go ter sleep. That roan o' yores needs some extra doctorin'."

By some strange twist of mind, Ronny suddenly thought it was his father, Rustler Fellows, talking to him, and that Schooner, the bald-headed Rocking F cook was present.

"Rustler!" the puncher gasped. "Schooner! Don't let them get away. Curly ain't far across the dunes. The half-breed is with him. Watch out for the Apaches. Nail them!"

The leathery-faced hombre bent close. "What's that?" he asked. "Did yuh say rustlers was near? Or were yuh talkin' ter two fellars called Rustler an' Schooner?"

"Nail them quick, Rustler," Ronny groaned, shutting his eyes, and he fell into a deep sleep.

The stranger's eyes narrowed suspiciously. He got up, went to the roan pony stretched on the sand, and looked hard at its brand. Then, he went back and searched the cowboy, but found nothing to identify him.

"Mebbe I shouldn't save him," the hombre growled. "It must be Rustler's kid. But he might lead me to him."

And the man stole Ronny's six-

gun, emptied the chamber of shells, then put the weapon back. He searched the puncher for extra cartridges.

CHAPTER II.

TREACHERY.

IT was dark before Ronny woke up from tortured dreams, and for a few moments he didn't know where he was. A blanket protected him from the night chill. A fire crackled near him. He turned to see a stranger cooking beans, bacon, and coffee.

The man was small, with iron-gray hair and a small mustache. His face was burned to the color of old leather. He had a short straight nose and a firm chin. His eyes were pale blue in the firelight. There was nothing of the outlaw about him, but he didn't look like an easy-going citizen. His clothing didn't identify him, for he wore leather chaps, a checkered shirt, and a black short coat.

"I figured it about time fer yuh ter take notice o' things," the stranger said, grinning. "Hungry, ain't yuh?"

Ronny swallowed. His throat was no longer swollen, but sore. Had this stranger been dropping water and canned milk into his lips for hours? And had he rubbed Ronny's eyelids with bacon fat? It was a cinch that he had saved Ronny's life, and Ronny knew it.

"I'm hungry all right," the cowboy admitted, tossing the blanket off. He got up, swaying on his feet. "I don't know how I can thank—"

"Aw, forgit it, partner," the gray-haired hombre interrupted. "Yuh ain't the first tenderfoot that I've had ter nurse. But yuh're the first what ever sent up Injun smoke. Whar did yuh learn about that?"

"I ain't forgetting what you've done," Ronny declared, and he

swayed forward, holding out his hand. "Will you shake?"

The grayhead turned swiftly to the fire without taking Ronny's palm.

"I said to forgit it!" he exclaimed. "The coffee is done." He pretended to save the pot from boiling over. "That was a close call," he chuckled. "Go take a look at yore roan."

Ronny dropped his hand. "My roan!" he gasped. "You didn't save him, too?"

He forgot that his handshake had been refused as he turned to see his pony snoring peacefully on the other side of the campfire. An empty canvas water bucket lay near the animal. There was a pack horse and a saddle bronc sleeping not far away.

"Yuh was tellin' me how yuh learned about them Injun smoke signals," the hombre fixing grub said to Ronny.

The Rocking F puncher turned to the fire.

"I was born near Injuns," Ronny said. "Shucks, that was nothing. But I never learned anything about deserts. Schooner warned me, but I thought he was just spinning one of his windy yarns."

The grayhead dished out food in tin plates. "Who is Schooner?" he asked.

Ronny sat down.

"He's our cook," he said. "I left him an' my pop a week ago back east." The Rocking F puncher looked curiously at his host. "Which way did you come?" he asked. "Did you see anything of a fellow dressed in woolly chaps an' a yellow silk shirt. He was riding with a half-breed. There were some Apaches an' Mexicans with them."

"Was they friends of yores?" the stranger inquired casually.

"My friends!" Ronny exploded. "They're outlaws! I'm gunning for

them!" He caught himself and studied the grayhead. "You couldn't be any part of their skulduggery, could you?"

"Never seen 'em in my life," the man replied, grinning. "Ain't it a pretty tall order for one young waddy like yuh ter be after so many bad ones?"

Ronny looked off into the starlit desert night. He realized that he had bitten off more than he could chew. He had merely left a note for Schooner and Rustler that he was striking the trail of Curly Pike and Jack Lynx. He had told them not to worry, but they must be worrying plenty, for he had been long gone. Were they out searching for him?

"I reckon I've failed," Ronny muttered to himself. "Curly Pike an' Jack Lynx got away. Mebbe I was a fool. I should have waited for Rustler an' Schooner." He turned to look at his roan. "But I'll pick up the trail o' those coyotes again," he said. "Jist as soon as I've paid my debt to you, hombre," he added, looking at the grayhead. "What's your handle?"

The stranger chuckled. "Yuh don't owe me nothin', so yuh can't pay no debt," he replied. "But until yuh're able ter take care o' yoreself, yuh kin call me Badger."

"Badger?" Ronny questioned. "It's your last name?"

"Silver Badger," the man answered. "Now, let's tie inter this chow."

Before the meal was over, the mysterious Silver Badger had wormed the entire story of the feud between the Rocking F and Curly Pike out of Ronny Fellows. The man offered no explanation for his own presence in the desert. He let Ronny do the talking. And the

Rocking F puncher accepted Badger as a true friend.

"My pop ain't no cattle thief," Roony told him. "He's the best maverick hunter in the West. Some folks don't really know the real meaning of his name. He got out an' rustled for a living. That meant catching wild steers. It didn't mean stealing branded stock."

"Shore," the grayhead said. "But how did that Schooner fellar git his name."

"From the prairie schooners," Ronny said. "He's a queer hombre, but there ain't no bad in him. Some folks say he sells whiskey to Injuns. But it ain't so. An' he ain't no hoss thief. My pop, Rustler, keeps a strict eye on Schooner. We'll all have a fine ranch some day in the Mesa Verde, but it won't be until I fix Curly Pike an' Jack Lynx."

Silver Badger gazed solemnly at the dying coals of the campfire.

"I reckon I know whar yuh might find them fellars," he said slowly.

Ronny felt an electric shock go through him.

"Where?" he demanded.

Badger chuckled. "Jist me an' yuh couldn't tackle 'em," he said. "But if we was ter connect up with yore pop an' that bald-headed cook, then we might do somethin'. Thar's a big outlaw town north across the desert. Yore enemies must be joinin' up with them wolves. If we four could pass ourselves off as a tough gang o' cattle thieves, we might git inter that outlaw hide-out an' settle the hash o' Curly Pike an' Jack Lynx."

"Shore we can!" Ronny cried. "When do we start, Silver Badger? We can't lose no time going back for Rustler an' Schooner. I left them eight or nine days ago. I'll get into that outlaw fort myself, if

you don't want to come with me. Can we leave tonight?"

Silver Badger scowled. "You've got more courage than sense, hombre," he growled. "Not yuh or yore bronc will be able ter travel until tomorrow night. An' I said as how we'll need this Rustler hombre an' the Schooner gent to help us."

Ronny climbed to his feet.

"I'm fit as a fiddle right now," he snapped. "I can't afford to lose two weeks chasing back for Rustler an' Schooner. Mebbe they wouldn't figure the way we do about that outlaw hide-out. No sir, partner, we can start by ourselves right now."

"Don't yuh figure that yore pop might be out huntin' this desert for yuh now?" the grayhead asked.

Ronny's eyes widened. "They might!" he exclaimed. "But I told them to let me go alone." He halted, thinking. "If Rustler an' Schooner are out looking for me," he said, "we'll find them back at the waterhole that Curly Pike tried to poison. That ain't far, Silver Badger. Let's ride."

The gray-haired hombre gathered up the supper plates.

"Yuh won't ride that roan fer another day," he said. "We need water, cowboy. Yuh catch some sleep. Where is that oasis? I'll ride back tonight on my hoss. I'll tell Rustler an' Schooner whar yuh be."

Ronny suspected no treachery. He went to his roan, spatted it awake, and looked the animal over. In one glance he saw that the horse wouldn't be able to carry him. But it could travel on its own feet.

"I'll walk, friend," he said. "You go on ahead. Me an' the roan will hoof it to the desert spring. It's right on the edge o' the sands. It's due east by the stars an' sun. You can't miss it."

Silver Badger chuckled.

"That's almost forty miles," he said. "Yuh won't make it in the hot sun, Ronny Fellows. I'll leave yuh my last water fer tomorrow. Yuh wait until I return. I'll come back tomorrow night in the dark. Wise hombres only ride in the dark in the desert."

No amount of argument would make the stranger change his mind. He gave Ronny a canteen of water and some grub. Then the grayhead saddled a sleek buckskin, mounted and waved a hand.

"Tell pop an' Schooner I'm all right," Ronny said. "Wait! I better write 'em a note."

He scrawled a few words on a piece of brown wrapping paper saying that he was waiting for Silver Badger to bring them to him. Handing the note to the man, Ronny watched him ride off into the night. Then he lay down and slept like a log, dreaming of meeting up with Curly Pike and Jack Lynx in a nest of gunmen.

The hot sun awakened him.

He passed that day under a slicker propped up on sticks, sharing the water with his roan, eating sparingly, and dozing. Strength flowed back into his body. He could hardly wait for night and the next morning, when Silver Badger was expected to return. Ronny wondered what kind of stronghold those outlaws north of the desert lived in. He realized that the task to find Curly Pike and Jack Lynx would be a tough one.

Such thoughts made him pat the butt of the six-gun thrust down under his trousers belt, and he drew the weapon to practice sighting targets.

As he did so, he noticed that daylight came through the holes in the chamber, where brass-studded cartridges should have been. His six-

gun was empty. How had that happened? In his delirium had he thrown his shells away? There were none in his pockets.

Ronny sprang to his feet.

"Silver Badger!" he exclaimed. "He didn't trust me! Mebbe he double-crossed me! Who is he? Why does he want to mix up in my fight with Curly Pike an' Jack Lynx? Why was he so interested in Rustler an' Schooner?"

The sun was sinking into the western sands, and the sky was angry red.

Ronny trembled with excitement. The questions and suspicions that raced through his mind about Silver Badger made it impossible for him to wait the night out. The gray-haired hombre who had saved his life was up to no good. What friend would leave a man without bullets in the desert near outlaws? What was the coyote's game? Was he a trail wolf, himself? Was he gunning for Rustler and Schoner?

"I'm a fool!" the Rocking F puncher exclaimed. "I'm the worst tenderfoot that ever crossed sand! I've got to find Rustler an' Schooner!"

Ronny roused his sleeping roan. He gave it the last drop of water in the canteen. The animal was still in no condition for a long journey with a weight on its back. But he could walk as well as the puncher. If they didn't start out of the desert this night they might die of thirst in the next two days. Ronny was certain that Silver Badger was not returning.

Leaving his saddle and taking only the empty canteen and his six-gun, the Rocking F waddy started out in the twilight. His direction was due east. He figured it by the Big Dipper that appeared in the dark sky above. It had taken him

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a day and a half to enter the sandy waste. He knew he'd have to move twice as fast to reach the oasis before dawn.

CHAPTER III.

GUN SPEED.

THE hombre who called himself Silver Badger had sighted the oasis late in the afternoon, after traveling half the night and most of the day. He had taken his time in order to be in good shape for a gun fight. He wanted his buckskin to be fresh, so he had not mounted the animal when the sun was burning down on the sands.

Badger didn't try to sneak up on the waterhole. He spotted it by the flight of birds in the sky, and then by the clump of cottonwoods. Swinging to the saddle, he trotted toward the ridge that formed the border of the desert. He wasn't certain, but he was pretty sure that eyes were watching him from the rocks.

As he climbed the ridge he talked to himself, figuring that his voice might be heard.

"Waal, mebbe I didn't find no gold this trip," the grayhead said to himself. "But thar's always another trip. I reckon I'll have ter git a job some place an' pick me up another grubstake."

His buckskin topped the ridge, and Badger halted, looking down at the oasis. He wasn't surprised to find two hombres reclining in the shade of a palm tree. They appeared to be waiting for the sun to set before continuing their journey. Two brones grazed lazily near them.

Badger shouted a friendly greeting and the pair at the spring stared at him. Then they waved, as if they were ready to accept him as a peaceable stranger. But the gray-

haired rider wasn't deceived. He knew that they expected him and were on guard.

As his buckskin jogged down the slope to the spring, Badger studied the pair. He figured the tall, granite-faced hombre in black silk shirt and long black trousers tucked into cow boots for Rustler Fellows. Two guns were tied down on Rustler's thighs. It was not hard to spot the resemblance between the maverick hunter and his son, Ronny. But Rustler had a deadly cold seriousness that the youngster lacked.

The other hombre at the spring was a dirty baldhead in ragged flannel shirt and greasy denims. A bulge under his shirt told where he carried his weapon. He had a foxy face and grinned toothlessly. At first glance this Schooner appeared capable of all the many crimes that gossip attributed to him. He could easily be a horse thief and whiskey peddler. And it was odd that such an immaculate person as Rustler Fellows would associate with him.

"It's shore good ter meet up with white men," Silver Badger called, swinging down from his horse on the left side, which put the animal between him and the two hombres at the spring. "I ain't had nobody but Injuns ter talk—"

Out of sight of Rustler and Schooner, Silver Badger jerked a six-gun from his holster. He moved under the neck of his brone and stabbed the weapon into aim at the pair. He caught them hands down, dead to rights.

"Yuh're both under arrest," Silver Badger snapped, eyes glinting. "One false move an' I'll ventilate yore outlaw hides. Hoist yore arms an' flatten out on yore faces."

It was Rustler Fellows whom the lawman watched the closest. Except for a tightening of his lips, the

maverick hunter betrayed no surprise. He was standing up, arms hanging loosely at his sides. He didn't move. He stood silent, studying his captor coldly.

But the bald-headed Schooner couldn't control his emotions.

"Under arrest!" the Rocking F cook shouted fearfully. "What have we done, an' who aire yuh?"

Silver Badger moved slowly forward, right hand holding his gun, left hand going to his shirt pocket, from which he extracted a United States marshal's badge.

"Quit the kiddin', Schooner," the marshal said. "I know all about yuh two varmints. Yuh've been mixed up with more than a half dozen Injun rebellions in yore time. The law got word yuh was headin' fer Painted Desert. We know that the Apaches are gettin' ready ter take the warpath. Yuh two an' a dozen other white outlaws plan ter lead 'em. Yuh got plans ter massacre every settler in Arizona an' set up an Injun government all yore own. But I'm stoppin' yuh two right now."

Rustler Fellows leaned forward, a hard grin on his lips.

"Lawman," the maverick hunter said, "you've been listening to your own nightmares. Me an' my cook are hunting for a Rocking F puncher, who happens to be my son. He's trailing two varmints that might be mixed up in some devilment. I'm a peaceable rancher looking for a new range. Put up that gun before you get strung up for murder."

Silver Badger chuckled harshly.

"Yuh can't talk me out o' nothin', Rustler," he said. "I know all about your reputation. Yuh claim ter be a maverick hunter, but yuh're the fastest gunman west of the Pecos.

I'll shoot if yuh don't git them arms up."

To the lawman's surprise, Schooner began to laugh uproariously.

"This takes the cake, Rustler!" the baldhead ejaculated. "The desert rat don't know that Ronny's coverin' him from the rocks back yonder. If he don't drop his gun, he'll get a bullet in the back o' the head."

Silver Badger's eyes slitted. "The trick won't work, Schooner," he said. "I left that puncher miles west o' hyar without no cartridges. I'm countin' three. If yuh ain't down on yore face, I'll sink lead into yore brisket. One!"

Rustler Fellows raised his arms.

"Yuh win, lawman," he said. "I'm powerful obliged to know what's happened to Ronny. He had us plumb worried. He took after Pike an' Lynx without telling us. He left a note, which yuh'll find in my saddlebag. We lost his trail three times. We figured he passed here, but there was no proof. If you left him without ammunition, he'll be coming back."

Rustler Fellows turned around while Schooner watched him open-mouthed. Slowly the tall gunman sank to his knees to stretch out on the earth, so that the lawman might come up and snake his guns from their holsters.

It was the first time that the Rocking F cook had ever seen Rustler Fellows belly the earth for any hombre. Rustler was a fighter to the last. He had survived a dozen range feuds and gun scraps. All his life he had been a lone wolf, building up ranches by catching unbranded stock and burning his own sign on their hides. No matter what men said about him, he was not a thief, and he was not yellow.

But now it looked as if Rustler Fellows had turned color. It wasn't the first time that the law had tried to nail him for crimes that he had never committed. He had left Wyoming so that he wouldn't have to stand trial for shooting Curly Pike's father in a fair duel. He had announced his intention to build a ranch in a country where there would be peace. But a sleuth had followed him, and now he was quitting.

Schooner's face twisted with contempt. He raised his arms on high, but he had something to say.

"Yuh can't arrest me fer nothin', John Law," the Rocking F cook growled. "Yuh ain't got no evidence agin' me. Yuh try ter take me back ter a judge an' I'll git yuh fired from yore job."

The gray-haired marshal stepped forward, six-gun cocked.

"Git down on yore face like Rustler Fellows," he snapped. "We got all the evidence we need agin' yuh, Schooner. Yuh've sold yore last moonshine ter Injuns, an' yuh've stole yore last hoss. Yuh've left yore fire ashes on every reservation where there's been Injun trouble. Yuh won't do it in the Apache camp this time. Yuh know too much about Injuns fer yore own good."

Schooner turned his back to the lawman.

"Yuh make me sick," the cook said, and broke at the knees to hit the earth.

The marshal was watching Schooner closely to see that he didn't slip a six-gun from under his shirt. Silver Badger was convinced that Rustler Fellows had given up. And when the maverick hunter suddenly twisted on the earth, the lawman failed to understand what Rustler was doing. It wasn't until Rustler had hand on gun butt and

hammer drawn back that Silver Badger realized that the man was going to shoot through the bottom of the holster at him. Rustler never would have had time to draw. His weapon blasted the bottom of the leather casing out.

Crash! With the roar of Rustler's gun, Silver Badger was trying to jerk his own weapon into aim at the maverick hunter. But too late! Rustler's bullet hooked the lawman in the right side, tearing through his cartridge belt and an inch of flesh. The force of the slug spun Silver Badger around, and his own shot went wild. He fell in a sprawl.

Rustler Fellows was on top of him in a wild-cat spring. The maverick hunter's fist crashed into Silver Badger's jaw, stunning him. Rustler snatched the lawman's weapon and stabbed the barrel into Badger's belly.

"Easy now, hombre," Rustler said coldly. "I don't want to have to dig yore grave. Jist spread yore arms out, an' Schooner will patch up that wound before yuh know what hit you."

Dazed, Silver Badger could do nothing but gulp. Words wouldn't come. He lay in fear of death while Rustler stripped him of gun belt, holster, and handcuffs.

Schooner stumbled up. "Thunder an' lightnin'!" the cook cried out. "Yuh shot a marshal, Rustler. We'll swing as shore as turkey. I know a fellar what did the same thing once, an' the law followed him fer ten years until they caught him."

"Keep yore stories to yoreself, Schooner," Rustler growled. "Get my first-aid kit from the packs. These handcuffs will be better on the law himself than on us."

Silver Badger squirmed as a twinge of pain followed the passing away of numbed feeling.

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"Get off me, outlaw!" he shouted. "Yuh can't git away with this. Yuh're resistin' arrest."

The maverick hunter tossed away the captured weapon, caught the lawman by the shoulders and whirled him over on his back. Putting a knee into his spine, Rustler caught Badger's wrists and handcuffed them.

"Jist pipe down before I lose my temper," Rustler said. "Now, what did you do to Ronny?"

"Yuh won't git no facts out o' me, outlaw," Silver Badger snarled. "I ain't the only marshal in these parts. We're watchin' that Apache tribe close. Yuh'll be caught afore yuh git far."

"Fix him up, Schooner," Rustler ordered the cook. "I'll saddle the hosses. We'll back track this hombre my moonlight. He might have Ronny a prisoner down in the desert."

Schooner bent to wash the wound in Badger's side.

"This is more than I figured on, Rustler," the cook said fearfully. "I've always been awful careful about tanglin' with lawmen. They don't mean nobody no good. I've got a heap more use fer Injuns. What are we goin' ter do with this gent?"

"Leave him here without gun an' ammunition, like he did Ronny," Rustler snapped. "He might have sent my son on to that outlaw camp unarmed. Ronny doesn't give up easy." He showed a note to Schooner. "This was in the marshal's pocket," he said. "He must have tricked Ronny into writing it. I don't trust no man any more, Schooner."

The cook blinked and looked up.

"Not even me?" he asked timidly.

The maverick hunter scowled and turned to his saddling. There were

many things about Schooner that Rustler had never been able to find out. Back in Wyoming, the cook had been in the habit of taking long vacations without pay, during which times Rustler suspected him of associating with Indians. The maverick hunter had more than once found whiskey in Schooner's possession, but he had never caught him selling it to the tribes. Schooner was a good cook, and he was loyal. But Rustler was certain that the man stuck with his outfit only for protection from old outlaw friends. And Rustler sheltered him as he would any stray animal that needed help and friendship.

CHAPTER IV.

WAR-DANCE BULLETS.

THAT night Ronny Fellows started across the sands and volcanic rock. He didn't have to lead the roan. The animal followed him willingly, as if anxious to get out of the waste land to water and grass. And the puncher was grateful, for he didn't know whether he'd be able to walk the distance.

High-heeled cow boots were not built for hiking. His feet were still sore from the trip in. He had to conserve his strength. He couldn't stop to rest, because it meant a loss of time. And the puncher didn't want to get caught out in the desert in the hot sun without water and grub.

It wasn't long before the moon came up, and the sands caught its beam like a mirror, lighting up the desert. Ronny could see for miles. But he didn't expect to spy riders. The Rocking F waddy was certain that he was alone in a vast waste land, and he moved on grimly, trying to keep his thoughts on other things than aching muscles and his craving for cool water.

So he didn't see the horsemen who trotted up from the south until they were drawing close. It was his own bronc that discovered their presence. The roan halted and nickered.

Ronny turned quickly, saw that the animal was gazing south, and followed its stare. Then the puncher caught the reflection of moonlight on rifle barrels. He counted six riders. That fitted the number in Curly Pike's band. Rustler and Schooner certainly wouldn't be traveling with that many men.

The Rocking F waddy dropped a hand to a gun butt. His heart skipped a beat. He had no ammunition. He was helpless. His only escape lay in mounting the roan and riding for his life. But perhaps the night travelers hadn't seen him yet. They were due to pass him about one hundred yards to the west.

Trembling with wild excitement, Ronny leaped and caught the roan's halter. He hurriedly drew it into the dark shadow of a dune. There he threw the animal by hobbling its front legs with a leather belt. He lay on its neck, blindfolding the critter to stop it from calling again to the riders' broncs.

For breathless minutes the Rocking F puncher listened in the silent night. There was no sound of the passing riders. Perhaps they had turned in another direction. They might have seen him and halted in fear. Their cayuses could have detected the presence of Ronny's bronc and warned the strangers.

Ronny fought against an urge to get up and crawl to the top of the dune to find out what was wrong. He was afraid to leave the roan, for it might nick again. Had his foes passed without making a sound? No! Ronny heard the tinkle of a spur. It was close! He turned quickly.

The figure of a man was creeping up from the west behind his back. There was a six-gun in the fellow's hand. He couldn't see what the shadow of the dune held. Ronny lay motionless, and then his horse flicked its tail.

"Freeze, hombre!" a harsh voice ordered. "I see yuh!"

Ronny's hand went to his six-gun butt. Did he yet have a chance to hurl his empty weapon at the skulker, knock him down, and ride for his life? No, more hombres were coming around the other side of the dune.

"Have yuh found him, Egg?" someone called.

"He's hidin' in the shadow," the man named Egg said. "If he don't talk, I'm shootin'."

Ronny gritted his teeth. They certainly weren't Curly Pike and Jack Lynx. He was grateful for that.

"Save your lead," the Rocking F puncher told them, and he raised up from his bronc. "You ain't got no quarrel with me."

"Come out o' the shadow," they ordered.

Arms raised, Ronny walked into the moonlight, and half a dozen men closed in on him. He noted their hard faces, their double-slung six-guns, and the fact that they were taking no chances. The hombre known as Egg rammed him in the belly with a gun barrel. Another searched him, taking the Colt from Ronny's shirt. They went through his pockets.

"He ain't got nothin' but this cutter," the tall hombre who searched him growled. And then he spoke to Ronny: "What are yuh doin' out hyar ternight?"

Ronny forced a bold front.

"I'm jist gazing at the moon," he snapped.

Egg looked at the hobbled roan. "He ain't got no saddle, water, or grub," he said. "Mebbe he ran inter trouble."

A sharp-faced runt pressed forward. "Waal, he's too fresh fer his own good," the man snarled. "Sink lead into him. We can't take no chances. Thar's more ridin' ter-night, an' we ain't wastin' time."

Egg glowered at the Rocking F waddy. "Who aire yuh?" he asked. "This ain't no time ter be funny, stranger. We mean business."

Ronny's mind went back to Silver Badger's tale about an outlaw hide-out in the north. These riders were heading in that direction. By their looks and actions they were part of the owl-hoot tribe. They could be coming up from Mexico or a raid on ranges around Flagstaff. It was obvious that they knew how to travel in the desert. And their drawn faces and muddy clothes told that they had ridden fast.

Death was groping for Ronny and he knew it. Only a fool would remain silent or test their threats. Bluffing was the only course left open to him.

A hard grin twisted his lips.

"I was striking north to make a few bullet bets, hombres," the cowboy chuckled mirthlessly. "But first a sand storm tackled me. An' then a hombre who said he was a friend left me an empty gun an' a powerful big grudge."

"I don't believe him," the sharp-faced runt growled.

Egg holstered his weapon.

"I went through that storm myself," he said, studying Ronny curiously. "This hombre is tellin' the truth. But I'm asking him what town he expected to draw his cards in north o' this desert."

A tension gripped the riders, and Ronny felt it. He realized that his

answer meant life or death. Silver Badger hadn't given him the name of the outlaw hide-out, but Ronny knew enough about owl-hoot camps to bluff it over.

"It might be called a roost, strangers," he said, "where the owls sleep. I don't talk Apache, or I would have asked the Injuns. It's no place for sheepherders. An' the game they play there has a boothill limit."

A chuckle went through the crowd.

"We'll take yuh with us, kid," Egg said. "An' if yuh ain't right, yuh'll pay the limit."

The sharp-faced runt protested. "He ain't told us nothin'!" the outlaw cried angrily. "He might be one o' them marshals that's spyin' around here."

"That's what I like about him, Rod," Egg growled. "He don't talk too much. No marshal would git caught in Painted Desert without water an' cartridges. This kid has heard the rustling of the leaves along some northern trail. I kin tell by his lingo. He's lookin' fer work. An' we need all the gunnies we kin git." He turned to Ronny. "Git aboard one of our spare critters. Let yore bronc foller yuh. An' keep yore trap shut."

A fresh horse meant freedom to Ronny Fellows. He eagerly strode around the dune with the gun-hung gang. And he noted that the sharp-faced runt kept close behind him. The band moved through volcanic rock and came to their cavy. Ronny waited for them to mount the saddle broncs, and then picked a wiry sorrel pony for his mount. He was forced to ride bareback, but Egg tossed him a bridle.

"I'll trade it for yore gun," the outlaw chuckled.

Ronny said nothing. He realized that Egg was not completely con-

vinced that Ronny was a lawless fugitive from distant parts. Egg had further plans up his sleeve to test the Rocking F puncher. And so did the sharp-faced runt, who let Ronny ride ahead of him.

The band started across the sands at an easy trot, and Ronny noted that their horses were better than his mount. It would be hard to bolt away. They'd bring him down with rifles before he got far. He was doomed to remain with them, even if it meant entering the outlaw camp where Curly Pike and Jack Lynx had gone.

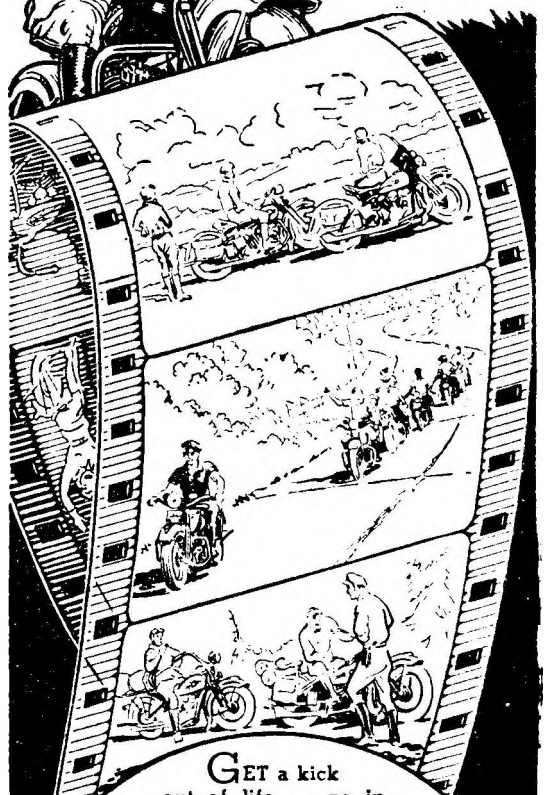
For hours the men rode northward without speaking, but always on the alert for foes. Egg led them, guiding them by the stars. At times he seemed to recognize high rocky ridges. Once he turned in the saddle to call back:

"Ten more miles, boys! If we run into Injuns, let me do all the talkin'. Keep yore guns in yore holsters."

The order surprised Ronny. Knowing nothing about the country, he didn't realize that they were entering the Apache reservation. Past experience had taught him that most outlaw gangs traded with rebellious Indian tribes, who gave the toughs scouting information and helped out in big raids. All his life, Ronny had lived near Indian trouble, and he had sometimes wondered why his father didn't try to get away from the tribes. There were many things about Rustler that Ronny didn't know, and there were more things about Schooner that neither of them knew.

As the journey wore on the Rocking F puncher's alarm for Rustler and Schooner mounted. He sensed that the desert had been watched for a long time by the outlaw gangs. Was Silver Badger one of the scouts? And would he try to capture Rustler and Schooner? Ronny realized that if he was going to make

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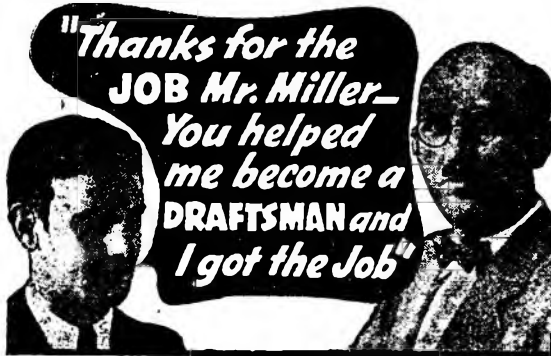
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a play to escape he would have to do it soon.

But he never got the slightest opportunity. Soon the sand dunes gave way to more volcanic rock. Prickly pear grew thicker. Clay hills appeared. And then came mountains.

Egg ordered the band to ride single file as he wound toward gulches and draws on the high slopes. Ronny tried to drop to the rear, but the sharp-faced runt stopped him. The Rocking F puncher began to fear that the gunman was going to shoot him in the back.

Up climbs, up slide rock, through breaks and onto benches, the outlaw riders wound their way. They ascended steadily, while the moon passed from the night sky.

Gray dawn began to show in the east. The air grew chill and Ronny shivered. He was tense, watching every turn for an opportunity to send his bronc racing off the trail and down into a perilous canyon where he might flee between boulders and crags.

The brones topped a ridge and started down a steep trail, into a deep valley filled with thick mist.

Ronny heard drums. At first he thought his ears were tricking him. But, as the sound swelled, the Rocking F puncher realized that he was listening to a dozen Indian tom-toms, and the odor of smoke stung his nostrils.

He could see nothing of the valley below because of the thick mist, some of which was smoke from fires. His pulses swelled and a cold alarm took hold of him. He realized that the sound of the drums meant that a dance was taking place in the valley below—a war dance lasting through the moonlit night. It meant that a tribe was going on the war path.

The farther down the trail the horses descended the louder grew

the pounding of the drums. Soon fiendish shrieks cut through the dim light. Shots sounded. The drums throbbed faster. Gray dawn was flooding into the valley, and the dance was at its highest peak.

A wind stirred and the mist lifted, showing Ronny a large Indian encampment. There were a dozen big fires, around which half-naked warriors were prancing, brandishing weapons. There were at least two hundred Indians taking part in the ceremony, and twice as many more clustered about big barrels of liquor and roasted steers. Among them moved white men with rifles cradled in their arms. Herds of broncs grazed the valley floor along the bank of a stream.

Ronny saw Egg draw a six-gun, point it up, and shoot three times.

From the valley came a roar of welcome from a score of throats.

"They're ready, boys!" Egg called to his riders. "When they hear our news, they'll go loco."

The Rocking F puncher's heart caught in his throat. He didn't have to be told that an Indian uprising was in the making. He could see it in the painted faces of the braves and hear it in the frenzy of their yells. He had heard Schooner tell yarns about tribes that swept across entire States, scalping, burning, and stealing. Once they got going, they were like a prairie fire, and there was no stopping them. It was liquor and the wild talk of bad white men that usually aroused them. And behind the crazed horde those whites usually rode, gathering loot.

Desperation swept him. He couldn't let it happen. This was the country where he and Rustler meant to build a ranch for all time. They had a spot picked back near the Mesa Verde, on the borders of

the Navaho reserve. But give these Apaches a chance and they would ride across those territories, enlist new warriors, and strike the Mesa Verde like a murderous plague.

He could understand now why Curly Pike and Jack Lynx had ridden westward. They had heard of this uprising. They were joining it—they and other evil men.

And at that moment Ronny spied his foes. Curly Pike and Jack Lynx stood with a group of gringos at a whiskey barrel. Curly's white sombrero, calfskin vest, and woolly chaps were easy to recognize. He had always been a fancy dresser and a braggart. Now he swayed on his feet from too much liquor.

Near Curly Pike stood the half-breed who always watched after him during his sprees. Ragged, coppery-faced, Jack Lynx had his eyes on the steep trail down which Ronny and the riders were coming. Jack Lynx never missed a thing. And he must have recognized Ronny's red shirt.

Ronny saw the half-breed pluck Curly's arm, and Curly turned swiftly to stare at the riders reaching the valley floor. Curly didn't hesitate a moment. It might have been that the whiskey fuddled his brain. He went for his six-gun with a yell of alarm.

Ronny ducked low on his bronc. "Look out!" the Rocking F waddy shouted. "There's lead coming!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth before Curly's weapon flamed and roared. It was long shooting. The bullet went over Ronny's head with a whine. He dived off his bronc into the shelter of boulders and scrub oaks. At the same time he saw that Egg and the other outlaws were doing the same.

Curly's voice echoed wildly from the camp.

"It's Ronny Fellows an' Rustler

an' Schooner an' a gang o' lawmen! Don't let 'em talk with the Injuns, men! They'll double-cross us!"

A shout of anger swept through the Apache camp. Guns blasted, and lead smashed into the brush and rocks around Ronny. He could hear Egg yelling madly for the white men to stop. But Egg's voice was drowned out in the thunder of guns. His friends in the Apache camp were powerless to prevent the panic and rage that gripped the Indian camp.

CHAPTER V.

GRINGO AGAINST INJUN.

IT was after midnight when Rustler and Schooner found the tracks of the outlaws who had captured Ronny. The discovery was no accident, for the outlaws had been riding from south to north, while Rustler and his cook were traveling from east to west. In the bright moonlight the Rocking F boss spotted the print in the sand easily, and he halted short.

"Looks like a gang of riders are heading up to that Apache camp," Rustler said, and he dismounted.

Schooner made a sour face. "We better keep away from it," the cook protested.

Rustler got down on his hands and knees to examine the tracks.

"There were seven riders an' three spare bronses," he said. "Do you think they could have Ronny?"

The Rocking F cook looked across the dunes and volcanic ridges to the eastward. The desert was silent and inviting. The scent of night flowers filled the moon-bathed night. The air was cool. There was no hint of treachery or the blasting heat that would come with the dawn. But to the north, Schooner knew that there was death, and he shuddered.

"I hate to admit it, Rustler," the cook said, "but those riders must be cutthroats. It's one chance in a hundred that Ronny is with them. I don't figure that we're goin' ter find him, because we've lost the trail o' that marshal. We've only got one hope. That is ter send up smoke signals in the dawn. An' that will bring them Apaches howlin' down on us like stingin' hornets."

Rustler moved to his bronc. It was a powerful brindle gelding that had served him for years. He called the horse Maverick. There was no other mount that could beat it at the job of chasing wild steers out of brush. And the animal had proved its worth in outrunning more than one gang of trail wolves.

"Schooner," the Rocking F boss said, studying the bald-headed cook, "how much do you really know about that Apache uprising? This is no time to bluff, an' I want an honest answer."

Schooner squirmed uneasily in his saddle. He knew that Rustler Fellows had never trusted him completely as far as Indians went.

"I'm downright insulted, Rustler," the cook grumbled. "If yuh think that I trekked ter the Southwest with yuh jest ter jine up with an Apache uprisin', it ain't so. I'm jest as anxious ter see yuh build up a fine ranch as Ronny is. How would I know anythin' about Apaches? I might know somethin' about Crows an' Utes, but not Apaches. I ain't got no use fer 'em. They don't mean nobody no good. Yuh kin trust most tribes, but not them."

Rustler scowled and mounted his bronc.

"Go find Ronny," he said. "I'll trail this outlaw gang."

The baldhead's eyes narrowed and his jaw thrust out. No matter

what a lot of men thought about Schooner, he was not the fool that he pretended to be. At times he was dangerous. In more than one gun fight the cook had showed surprising courage and superior ability. He would take a good deal of bossing, but there was always a limit. And it seemed that he had reached the end of the rope now.

"Yuh're dead wrong, Rustler," Schooner said fiercely. "I ain't goin' after Ronny, because he's gone to the outlaw camp, or else he's daid, an' yuh know it. Both yuh an' me are in a bad jam. Yuh shot that marshal, an' I'll have ter share the blame. Fer a good many years I've taken yore wages, Rustler, an' I know more about yuh than any other hombre."

Rustler turned in the saddle, stiff as a post, his face a mask.

"What's the rest of it, Schooner?" he asked. "You want to get something off your chest. Go ahead."

The cook didn't back down.

"Yuh've been a lone wolf all yore life," the baldhead said. "Yuh never could settle down on a ranch, an' yuh never will. Yore veins can't stop itchin' fer other places. Yuh've fooled Ronny plenty. Yuh've tried ter make him a good father. Yuh've never let him know all yore reputation. But I know that yuh're a gun fighter first, last, an' always. Yuh ain't happy unless yuh're in trouble. This plan o' yores ter build a ranch whar yuh won't ever have no more enemies is a fake. Yuh left Wyomin' because the law was gettin' too strong. Yuh know jest as much about that Apache uprisin' as I do."

Rustler's lips tightened and a deadly cold light sprang into his eyes.

"Do you mean I'm a killer and an outlaw, Schooner?" he asked. "Do

you mean that I'm planning to join those raiders north of here?"

"Yuh might be figurin' on ditchin' me an' Ronny," Schooner replied fiercely. "Mebbe yuh figure that Ronny will be better off without yuh around. But he won't. He thinks yuh're the finest thing in the world. Yuh've got ter stick by him. Yuh've got ter keep foolin' him. If yuh don't, he might turn killer himself. He's too fast with guns. It's time yuh taught him how ter live in peace with his neighbors."

The maverick hunter's features twisted into a grim smile.

"That's good advice, partner," he said. "You might take some of it yourself. But it don't find Ronny for us. An' it don't settle the hash of Curly Pike an' Jack Lynx. If any hombre up in that outlaw camp has harmed a hair on Ronny's head, I'll finish him. I don't need your help. You go find Ronny in the desert, if he's here. I'll get him out of the outlaw camp, if he's there. We'll all meet back by the spring tomorrow night."

Schooner picked up his bridle reins.

"I won't argue," he growled. "Yuh don't want me with yuh. Yuh still don't trust me. Yuh think I'll turn Injun on yuh. Go on, Rustler. I'll see yuh back at the spring tomorrow night, if not before."

Pricking his pony with his spurs, the cook rode off to the west.

Rustler watched the baldhead go. The Rocking F boss realized that Schooner had some plan in mind. It might be that the cook meant to beat Rustler to the Apache camp and take matters into his own hands. Although Schooner kept going due west, the Rocking F boss doubted that he would keep moving in that direction long.

With a chuckle, Rustler set spurs

to the brindle gelding. He knew that he could beat Schooner to any point. As long as the moon lighted the desert the Rocking F boss could follow the sandy tracks as easily as he could a stage road. The outlaw gang had made no attempt to hide their prints.

So Rustler rode swiftly in the cool night air.

He expected any moment to sight the outlaw band, but the trail led on hour after hour. The big brindle cayuse was forced to slow its grueling pace. The sands were not good footing and the rows of rock ridges and buttes put steep grades across Rustler's route.

He saw the stars change in the sky above. The moon sank to the horizon. And still he rode on. His old maps told him that he was near the northern border of the desert, but there was no indication of mountains or forest.

When the moon vanished he was left in deep darkness and drifting mists. It was almost impossible to follow the outlaw trail. He was aware that the ground was not as sandy. He found more prickly pear, and his bronc began climbing long weary slopes.

"I've reached the end!" the maverick hunter exclaimed. "There's no use following trail. I'll find that camp without it."

Giving his bronc its head, he spurred it on faster to the long climb. The mountain fog rolled down on him. He saw the first gray fingers of dawn reach into the eastern sky. With the faint light he saw the mountains ahead. His horse began choosing draws and gullies for a route.

Rustler figured that the camp would be hidden deep in the canyons and chasms. Fearing a bushwhacker's bullet, he drew a rifle

from his saddle scabbard and levered a cartridge into the firing chamber. He bent forward in the saddle, listening with the ears of a wolf.

The gray light in the east was changing to pink when he heard the first beat of Indian drums. And the sound sent a cold shiver through the maverick hunter. His long experience with tribes informed him what those drums meant. A war dance had continued throughout the night. Liquor had been drunk. Boasts had been made. The braves would have whooped themselves into an uncontrollable fury against ranchers and settlers, and there would be no talking with them. They required only a leader to send them on the trail of massacre and plunder. Crazed with liquor and the excitement of dancing, they would stop for nobody.

Rustler rode hard up the slopes to the crest of a ridge, all the while listening to the steady pounding of the ceremonial drums. Then three shots echoed. His heart caught in his mouth. Had there been trouble in the camp? Had some drunken white got into an argument with a brave? It was no time to boss Indians. One false move and the outlaw gang would suffer the same fate that they planned for law-abiding settlers.

The maverick hunter was near the top of the ridge. He checked the speed of his brindle, swung down from the saddle, and ran the last few yards on foot. Before he saw the valley below, half hidden in mist, a chorus of shouts drifted toward him. Then, without warning, there were more shots. A thunderous howl of hatred swelled from the Indian camp.

Rustler went over the ridge top and halted, trying to make out what was happening below him. He could

see campfires, wigwams, and scores of painted braves. The shooting continued. Men were running right and left. A fight had broken out. There was no doubt of it. Who was the fool that had started it?

Then the Rocking F boss saw the source of trouble. There were a half dozen riderless brones coming back up the ridge trail with stirrups flying. Their owners had thrown themselves among the boulders and scrub foliage at the foot of the ridge. They were being fired upon by Indians from the camp one hundred yards away.

"Ronny!" Rustler exclaimed. "He's with those men at the bottom of the trail!"

The maverick hunter started down the ridge, rifle blazing at the Indian horde in the camp. A hair-raising fighting cowboy yell broke from his throat. He wanted to stop the braves from charging the band in the boulders and scrub growth below him. His only method was to make the camp believe that they were being attacked by a posse of ranchers.

CHAPTER VI.

TWO MYSTERIOUS HOMBRES.

AT the foot of the trail, Ronny Fellows was seeking safety behind an enormous granite crag. He hadn't seen his father on the crest

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of the ridge. His attention was focused on the Indian camp where howling bedlam reigned. He knew it was the result of Curly Pike's mistake in calling six desert riders lawmen and spies. For Curly's shots had sent the dancing Indians into action, and the outlaws in the camp were trying to stop them from murdering the desert men.

But there was no stopping the excited Indians, who lusted to kill whites. The tribe charged the foot of the ridge trail with war whoops and blazing guns.

Ronny heard Egg's voice yelling orders for his small gang to shoot for protection. And suddenly the six riders were rearing up from behind their boulders to send a deadly fire into the tribesmen. Without a weapon, Ronny Fellows waited for the first white outlaw near him to go down. It was Egg, who fell with a scream.

The Rocking F puncher sprang across a patch of open ground and fell on Egg's shuddering body. Snatching the dying outlaw's six-gun, Ronny leaped up to take his place. He saw another of the desert riders go down kicking at his left. Then the sharp-faced runt to the right fell with a howl of agony.

It was almost sure death to show himself to the Indian guns, but Ronny figured it better to die by bullets than a scalping knife. He swung up behind a large stone, throwing away his ten-gallon hat. Six-gun cocked, he faced his foes.

A dozen painted braves were coming on the run not twenty yards away. There were a score more behind them.

Ronny picked the leaders and fired. He saw the first one drop squirming, then another. Bullets went past his ears. His gun blasted again, and another Indian went down. Lead clipped through his

hair as he shot again, emptying his weapon.

He ducked to reload with a last vision of white men fighting Indians at close quarters in the camp. Ponies had broken loose from the picket lines and were stampeding across the valley. Wigwams were falling. Braves had grabbed burning fagots from the fires and were hurling them into the faces of hated gringos.

Ronny thumbed fresh cartridges into his weapon from the dead Egg's cartridge belt. He was aware of a cowboy yell behind him up the ridge, and he jerked his head in that direction. He spied a figure darting down the trail, two six-guns in his hands, shooting hard into the Indian camp.

"Rustler!" Ronny exclaimed.

A surge of hope went through him and he sprang to his feet, crying the fighting challenge of cowboys. As he sighted his weapon over the boulder he saw the Indians scattering. Fear had broken their attack. They were racing for lost ponies. As they went they shot down the last of the outlaw gang in their camp. Ronny saw white men fighting back as they went down to death.

"Where's Curly Pike an' Jack Lynx?" he cried out.

He knew that the Indian retreat would not last long. As soon as the braves discovered that Rustler was alone, the braves would rally and return. They were panic-stricken by the fire of the gringo outlaws in their own camp, but those men were polished off. The tribe would have only Ronny and Rustler to battle with. The Rocking F puncher knew that retreat was the wisest move. He must stop Rustler and flee back over the ridge to the desert.

But something halted him. As he watched the Indian horde sweeping westward across the valley to the mountains, one of the copper-faced braves turned back. There was something familiar about the fellow. He was not completely Indian. There was white in him. He raced for a stray pony, sprang on its back, kicked the animal into a run toward a fallen wigwam, and leaped earthward.

"Jack Lynx!" Ronny cried out, and darted from behind his shelter.

Crash! Ronny fired to attract the half-breed's attention. He shouted the name again. But Jack Lynx refused to heed him. The half-breed was jerking back the folds of the wigwam, from under which crawled Curly Pike.

Ronny was within fifty yards of them, and the pair turned to meet him. The Rocking F puncher dropped to a knee. He couldn't afford to miss. He had waited too long for the opportunity. He fired with deadly intent as Jack Lynx darted to the left. It was Lynx that Ronny feared the most, and it was at the half-breed that he shot.

A harsh scream echoed and Lynx went down.

Curly Pike sprang for the pony, shooting desperately at Ronny. But Ronny flattened against the ground, taking his time. His gun blazed and Curly dropped, squirming.

"Ronny!" It was Rustler's voice from the bottom of the trail. "Let them go!"

"They ain't dead!" the Rocking F puncher cried, leaping to charge his foes. "They're faking."

At that moment, Curly Pike twisted up from the earth, teeth bared, a six-gun in his hand. His trick had failed. He knew it. He yelled with savage fury as he fired.

But Ronny's six-gun was first,

throwing lead across the fifteen yards into Curly's chest, and knocking the outlaw backward into death.

Crash! Rustler's gun blasted behind Ronny, and Ronny saw Jack Lynx rear up on his knees, six-gun twisting from his hand.

Ronny ran on to their bodies.

Rustler came up, catching him by the shoulders.

"We've got to get away!" the maverick hunter cried. "The tribe

Ronny chuckled. "That might be what you think, pop," he said. "Take a look-see at the ridge top."

Rustler's eyes went up the slope, and he saw a score of mounted men wearing uniforms. With them were two familiar figures. One was the



Ronny dropped to his knee and fired with deadly intent as Jack Lynx darted to the left.

will gather back in the hills. They'll take after us."

"Is Schooner waiting with the bronses?" Ronny asked, looking back.

"We'll meet him at the spring to-night," Rustler said, turning.

dirty, bald-headed Rocking F cook. The other was a bowlegged hombre with sandy hair. They swung to saddles and started with the troops down the trail to the valley.

"Federal cavalry," Ronny said. "Where did you get them, Rustler? I figured it was you that made the Injuns run. I reckon when they saw those gun fighters, the tribe figured it was time to hit for Mexico."

Rustler gritted his teeth, for the bowlegged hombre with the sandy

hair was the marshal that he had left at the spring.

"I didn't fetch the troops, Ronny," the maverick hunter said. "It was Schooner. Where he got them, I don't know. But I do know that I'm up against it hard."

"How do you mean?" Ronny asked.

But Rustler didn't answer. He was waiting for the riders to come down the trail. As he did so, he unbuckled his cartridge belt and laid his guns and holster on the earth. His face was a cold mask as Schooner and the bandaged marshal led the troops toward the Rocking F boss.

Schooner was grinning.

"Good work, Rustler," the bald-head called. "We never figured yuh could stop an Injun uprisin' all by yore lonesome. That's why I left the handcuff key back at the spring with the marshal, so he could ride fer these troops."

Ronny bent forward, eyes wide. "What's that, Schooner?" he asked.

Rustler said nothing.

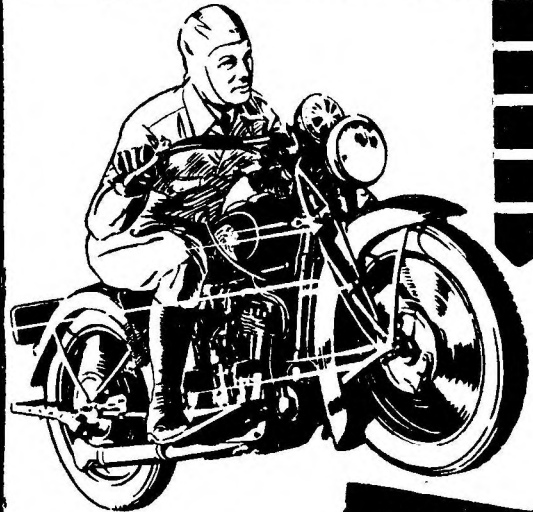
Schooner swung down to earth. "The game is up, Ronny," the cook chuckled. "Yore pappy ain't no rancher or no maverick hunter. He's one of Uncle Sam's secret Indian agents. Yuh should have got wise-ter him all these years. He ain't never stayed put in one spot. He's been follerin' Injun trouble clear from Wyomin'. An' the government sent him down hyar with a heap bad reputation ter git mixed up with the Apaches. But Curly an' Jack got wind of it an' beat him ter the trick."

Ronny turned to look at his father. Rustler hadn't changed expression.

"Where did you learn all this, Schooner?" the maverick hunter asked quietly.

"When the government hired me ter take care o' yuh, Rustler," the bald-headed cook replied. "They knowed I was a boss thief an' a no-

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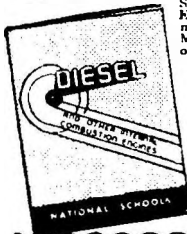
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good hombre, jest the way yuh did. But they figured it better ter pay me wages. So they plumb reformed me. An' they told me my job was ter see that yuh got three squares a day an' yuh didn't try ter bite off more Injun trouble than yuh could chew. But I couldn't let yuh know, because you're a lone wolf, Rustler, an' even Uncle Sam knows yuh don't want nobody mixin' in yore affairs."

Rustler looked at the wounded marshal.

"Why did you try to arrest me at the spring?" he asked.

The marshal squirmed uneasily.

"I didn't know nothin' about yuh bein' an Injun agent," he confessed. "All I've been hearin' is that yuh're an outlaw an' yuh was headin' this way ter lead the Apache uprisin'. I got the troops ready ter stop yuh. Then when yore cook left me the handcuff key an' I went fer the troops, they had sealed orders ter do what yuh say."

Ronny drew a deep breath.

"Well," he said, "it looks like I'm the only hombre with the Rocking P outfit without some mystery about him. But you both can keep your jobs. I'm going back to the Mesa Verde to start a ranch. I'm fed up with Injuns an' outlaws. When Schooner wants a job as a cook, I'll hire him. An' as for you, pop," he added, turning to the maverick hunter, "I might need a wrangler one of these days."

Rustler chuckled.

"This is my last assignment," he said. "I'll take that job now."

Schooner made a face. "Yuh mean that Ronny ain't goin' inter the Injun agency service?" he asked.

"Not after the reputation he made for himself here," Rustler replied. "He'd have as much chance of being an undercover agent as a grizzly bear with a brass horn. But when it comes time to elect a sheriff back in the Mesa Verde, I reckon you'll find him rooting for the law."



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WE'RE a-settin' round a mail-bag an' readin' what's in it when all to onct Jim-twin Allen lets out a beller like a range bull thet's swallered a scorpion.

"What ails yuh, White Wolf?" Bud Jones calls him by the name we all knows him by best. "It can't be bad as all thet."

"It's wuss," growls Jim-twin. "The more I sees o' some eddicated folks, the gladder I am thet I never went through college. What d'yuh think of an amachoor thet sends in a story without no home address?"

"He ain't no dumber than the one

thet jest says he lives in Chicago or Philadelphia," says Dusty Radburn.

"The Boss went all over thet a spell back," Peaceful Perkins reminds us. "I don't see no reason fer gittin' some amachooors ringy by bringin' it up ag'in."

"Thar's a durned good reason, Peaceful," Jim-twin horns in. "The Boss is always gittin' checks sent back 'cause the mailman can't find the amachooors they was mailed to. An' when Uncle Sam can't find an hombre, it's time thet hombre not only named the range he's grazin'

on, but what section he's gen'rally found on."

"In other words," we adds, "give the hull street address an' everything thet'll help the mailman. D'yuh know, we got stories right in the corral now thet we'd send checks fer if we knowed whar to send 'em?"

"'Less it's in a small town whar everyone knows everyone else," says Bud Jones.

"Even then, it's safer to tell more'n the name o' the town an' State," we chips in. "Waal, hyar's hopin' them amachooors got keerless an' cheated theirselves tonight." An' we starts readin':

SLIM EVENS A SCORE

By Roderic Brusius—Age 19

Oshkosh, Wisconsin

Slim Donovan rode down the dusky trail, swaying back and forth in his saddle, forming a perfect silhouette in the moonlight. In his mind were thoughts of the events which happened a year ago in the cow town of Hillsboro.

His brother, Dave Donovan, then a deputy sheriff, was killed in preventing the murder of an old miner who was being fleeced in a crooked card game. Bull Baker, who committed the crime, was never put under arrest because he ruled the town with a band of outlaws whom the sheriff and honest citizens were afraid of.

Slim, as he rode into town that night, was there to even that score. As he entered the batwings of the Ace Saloon and peered around cautiously, he recognized Bull by his oxlike build and a vivid red scar that marked his under chin. Seated at a card table, Bull and his henchmen were taking some greenhorns' money.

Slim took a drink at the bar, then sidled over to watch the card game. As he moved, he was a picture of smoothness and precision, with his broad shoulders and lean hips moving in perfect rhythm to his arms and legs. On his lean hips were strapped a pair of ivory-handled Colt .45s.

Soon a greenhorn lost his roll. Slim then asked if it would be all right for him to get into the game.

"Shore," Bull grinned evilly and winked

to his men. "We'll take your money as well as anybody's."

Buying some chips, Slim sat down and won a few small pots. Then came a larger one. Bull was dealing. Slim bet recklessly, not watching his cards, but kept a careful watch on Bull's hands. After seeing him slip a card from the deck into his hand, Slim drew a .45 noiselessly and leveled it at Bull.

"I ought to blow you to pieces for trying to cheat," Slim said. "But I am going to give you an even break, which is more than you gave my brother." So saying, Slim holstered his gun.

Bull Baker, seeing his chance, started to rise and draw his gun. "All right, you greenhorn, I am going to let you have it!" Bull stated as his gun was leaving leather.

No one watched Slim Donovan's lightning draw, for Bull's henchmen were grinning wolfishly as though it was bootlull for the intruder. Everyone present knew Bull to be the fastest on the draw in those parts.

To the surprise of these gunmen, there was only one report. Bull Baker, with one gasp and with his gun not even leveled, was sinking to the floor with a crimson smear around his heart.

Slim, waving his gun at the rest of the killers, said: "If any of you other skunks want to take up where this one left off"—pointing to Bull's lifeless body—"just make a break."

After receiving no reply from the cowering men who just stared at Bull Baker's remains, Slim holstered his .45 and left the saloon.

Mounting his pinto, he rode down the same moonlit trail with a lighter heart and an old score settled.

"Slim shore did even the score with thet polecat Bull," says Peaceful Perkins. "Much as I admires to keep the peace, I'd 'a' done my durnedest to do jest what he done."

"Looks like now we got a score to settle with Señor Brusius," speaks up Jim-twin Allen. "I moves we does it by sendin' him a check."

"I hopes he sent in his hull street address," says Bud Jones. "Reckon thar's a few folks in Oshkosh thet the postmaster never heerd tell of."

"This yere amachoor done jest

thet," says Dusty Radburn. "Yuh kin put my vote down fer the story, too."

The vote evens up the score shore 'nough. The story's herded into the corral, an' we takes up:

SIX-GUN JUSTICE

By Curtis Billingslea—Age 29
Gilmer, Texas

Red sunset silhouetted the tensed figures of the slim young waddy and the grizzled old sheriff facing each other across the dying brone on the canyon rim.

"But, sheriff," protested Matt Carson, "I didn't hold up the bank and kill Ab Peters. Like I was tellin' yuh, I swapped lead with the masked hombre when I met him foggin' it down the trail. I hit him, but he got my brone. If Bardo Waddell says he recognized me as the bandit, the ornery, tin-horn polerat lied!"

Sheriff Stump Bryce stood like a grim statue on his wooden peg, stiffened fingers almost touching his .45. The old sheriff had given his leg in the cause of law and order years before, in a battle with rustlers.

"Findin' yuh on the trail I'm followin' is evidence enough fer me," he growled. "Ab Peters was my best friend, an' I'm settlin' scores, personal. Pull yore smoke-wagon, waddy!"

Carson's mouth tightened. He didn't want to shoot the rugged old lawman. Still, he couldn't go down without an effort to clear himself.

His hand streaked for his hip. His gun was out, and roaring, hot lead smashing into the sheriff's wooden leg. Bryce spun crazily off balance, his shot going wild, then measured his length on the ground. Carson kicked Bryce's gun over the edge of the canyon. Then he forked the sheriff's brone and spurred on the trail, leaving Bryce

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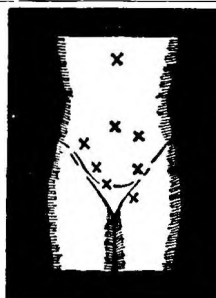
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staring in impotent rage at his shattered peg.

After a few yards he jerked leather and peered with sudden intensity at a tiny flame that had come into being on the dark floor of the canyon. Where he stood the wall dropped precipitately about fifty feet, then sloped to the bottom, but a mile ahead was a break through which a horse-man could descend.

Half an hour later he cautiously approached a small campfire, gun half drawn. Then, as he saw the white face of the hombre lying on the ground, and heard his rasping breathing, he slid the gun back in its holster.

With eyes glazing in death the bandit watched Carson dismount and bend over him.

"I want to go right, pard," he gasped. "I robbed the bank and helped frame another hombre for it. It was Waddell's idea, Bardo Waddell—"

He choked, and his body jerked, then stilled. Carson's mouth felt dry. Without his testimony, the sheriff wouldn't believe he hadn't killed the hombre and planted the bank loot on him.

A noise from behind caused him to whirl. Sheriff Bryce hopped on one leg into the circle of firelight.

"Clumb down the canyon," he said, "usin' the rope yuh left on yore saddle. I heard the hombre's confession. Reckon now I need me a fast-shootin' deputy to round up Waddell. If yuh hanker fer the job, son, it's yours."

"I shore do," the young waddy said earnestly. "An' sheriff, I'm plumb sorry I had to bust yore peg."

"Waal," Bryce said, "it ain't the fast time I've give a leg fer the cause of justice!"

"How yuh votin' on thet story, Peaceful?" asks Dusty Radburn.

"I don't want to start no argy-mint," Peaceful Perkins answers, "but twixt us two, I'm fer it."

"I'd tell yuh yuh'd better go back to Purgatory if yuh wa'n't," busts out Jim-twin Allen. "Sheriff Bryce was one o' them old-timers thet didn't let a little thing like a missin' laig keep him from performin' his duty."

"Yeah," says Bud Jones, "an' any way yuh look at it, she's a plumb good story. I'm fer it strong."

The same goes for the rest of us, an' the corral gate swings open fer

another prime steer. We decides to
end up with a good pome about the
Texas Rangers who allus gits thar
man.

SILENT JOE

By Nora White—Age 32
Huntingdon, Tennessee

Silent Joe of the Texas Rangers
Was trailing an outlaw band.
He rode through mesquite and cactus,
Over dunes of shimmering sand.

From the rocks the outlaws jumped him.
The Ranger's horse fell dead.
And his master's six-guns thundered
In a hail of whistling lead.

When the desperate fight had ended,
The bandit gang was stilled—
Save their chief, Black Pete, a prisoner
Of the Ranger, whose pal he'd killed.

Silent Joe was badly wounded.
The horses all had fled.
He handcuffed the sullen outlaw,
And left the key with the dead.

Onward for hours he staggered,
Thirst crazed, as his life blood ran.
But at last from the death-strewn desert,
Silent Joe brought in his man.

"Them amachours shore done
good tonight," says Peaceful Per-
kins when we starts driftin' to the
bunkhouse. "None o' their stories
missed the brandin' iron 'cause they
wa'n't sent with a clean bill o' sale."

"Yuh might remind all the ama-
choors not to depend on their ad-
dresses bein' on their envelopes,"
chips in Bud Jones. "They're apt
to be smeared out by some plumb
dirty thumbs thet jest finished a
ropin' or brandin' job."

To all thet we adds thet yore ad-
dress on what yuh sends in is the
safest way to git yore check if yuh
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By WILLIAM F. BRAGG

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This department is for the purpose of preserving the old cowboy songs and Western range ballads, and their history. Readers can help in this work by sending in any such songs that they know, especially those handed down by word of mouth by parents, grandparents, and other old-time Westerners. The story of the song, how it came to be written, and the facts on which it is based should accompany the words whenever possible.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

AS I'm gettin' the songs together for this week's Corral the wind an' rain are sweepin' across the prairies and the sagebrush. They look like the sea, gray-green, the grass scurryin' with the east wind behind it.

We're always singin' about cowboys or cow hosses, or ranches, an' such; but did yuh ever stop to think how important the grass itself is to the West? S. Omar Barker has a poem on the subject.

GRASS *

By S. Omar Barker

The cattle drifted seeking it 'cross plains
and desert sand,
Or bawled in driven trail herds when the
drouth

* Taken by kind permission of the author from his book entitled "Buckaroo Ballads," published by the Santa Fe New Mexican Publishing Company.

Had shriveled every blade and made the
range a barren land,
With thirst and hunger parching every
mouth.

Grass, or unlucky lack of it, ruled cattle,
men and life;

Bold, independent cowboys were its slave,
And though it often drove them into hatred,
death and strife,

Unquestioning allegiance still they gave.

Cut fences, raided sheep camps, and the
wars of ranch and range,

Grim six-gun battles when they came to
pass,

The old West's feuds and fellowships—both
sometimes weird and strange—

Were marked with brand of waterhole
and grass.

Two score brave men by balls of lead sent
swift to meet their God,

In Lincoln County's cattle war alone,
Lie like the Kid, in lonely graves beneath
Southwestern sod—

Do grass roots still entwine each crum-
bling bone?

Not tragedy alone has been its vast heroic
spawn,

For grass has fathered daring and ro-
mance;

And made a West of horseback men, lean
knights of leather brawn,

Whose trails are paths for progress' far
advance.

Oh, blades of grass are little things by
every windlet swirled,

By cricket song and kiss of rain caressed,
Yet they have ruled, since early time, the
frontiers of the world!

Hail, Grass! The silent monarch of the
West!

Hyar's a song yuh had a long while
back and might like tuh have ag'in:

THE COWBOY'S LAST RIDE

By Wesley Beggs

A young cowboy rose early one morning
And saddled his brone for a ride,
He hit the high hills and the valleys
With Jimmy, his pard, by his side.

It was out on the Little Missouri,
Where they went to look after a stray,
And where the old mountains of Killdeer
Loomed up a short distance away.

They had left their camp early that morn-
ing,
With their hearts very buoyant and gay;
They left like two bright, happy children,
Who were brimful and over with play.

They rode the high hills and the valleys
But never a stray could they find;-
They searched the deep coulees and wash-
outs,
Where many a cow trail did wind.

At noon they struck an old cow camp
And stopped to fill up on some chop,
For the cowmen are always big-hearted
And will give you the best in the shop.

And when they had eaten their dinner,
They started again on the range,
But a cloud rolling up from cloudland
Said the weather was going to change.

So they took from behind their old saddles
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But it happened as it sometimes does,
That the wind blew the rain all away,
And the boys still rode the prairie
A-trying to look up the stray.

But just as the sun was a-setting
A saloon and store cabin they struck.
"If we can't find the strays," said Jimmy,
"We've found a rich streak of luck."

So up they rode to the store cabin,
And unsaddled their brones for the night,
And a great big smoking hot supper
Filled the boys with happy delight.

After supper they went to card playing
And shuffled away until late,
And for wild, reckless, careless cowpunchers
Could play at a pretty good rate.

They had at the cabin strong whiskey,
And it got all the boys in a row,
For Jimmy and Bill were no cowards
But would fight like an old Texas cow.

The fracas, it started in earnest,
And they pulled out their old .45s,
And Billy was shot through the body
And never would go back alive.

A sad, sad day when cowpunchers
Took Billy away to his rest;
They stuck up a board for a headstone,
And planted a rose on his breast.

Quite often we talked of young Billy
Who was shot in a low drunken fight,
Who early left camp in the morning,
But never went back there that night.

We planted young Billy next morning
While the tears quite tenderly fell,
And we left him to sleep in the bosom
Of the West that he loved so well.

The raindrop kissed the lily
By the morning glory vine,
And the lily kissed the ivy
And the ivy kissed the pine.

All was sweet and lovely
Like a cloudless summer day,
For the golden sun was setting
And her jewels were at play.

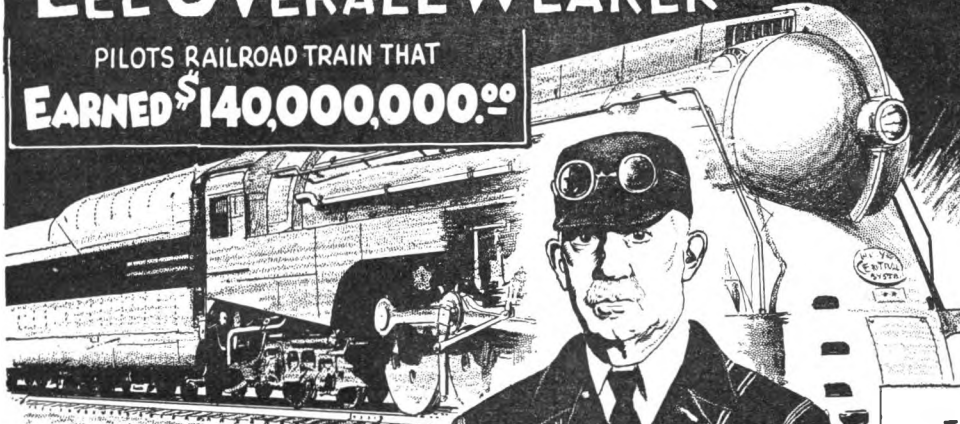
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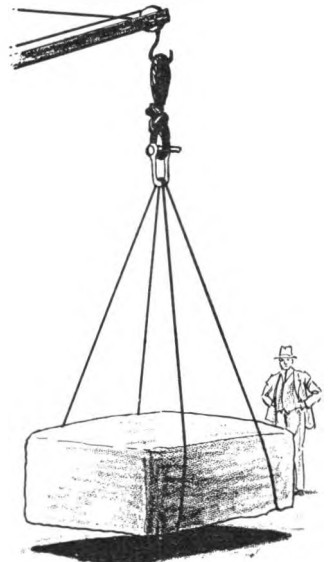


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