

15¢ MAY 4

WILD WEST WEEKLY

MAVERICK BY BRAGG

STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST

15¢

WEEKLY

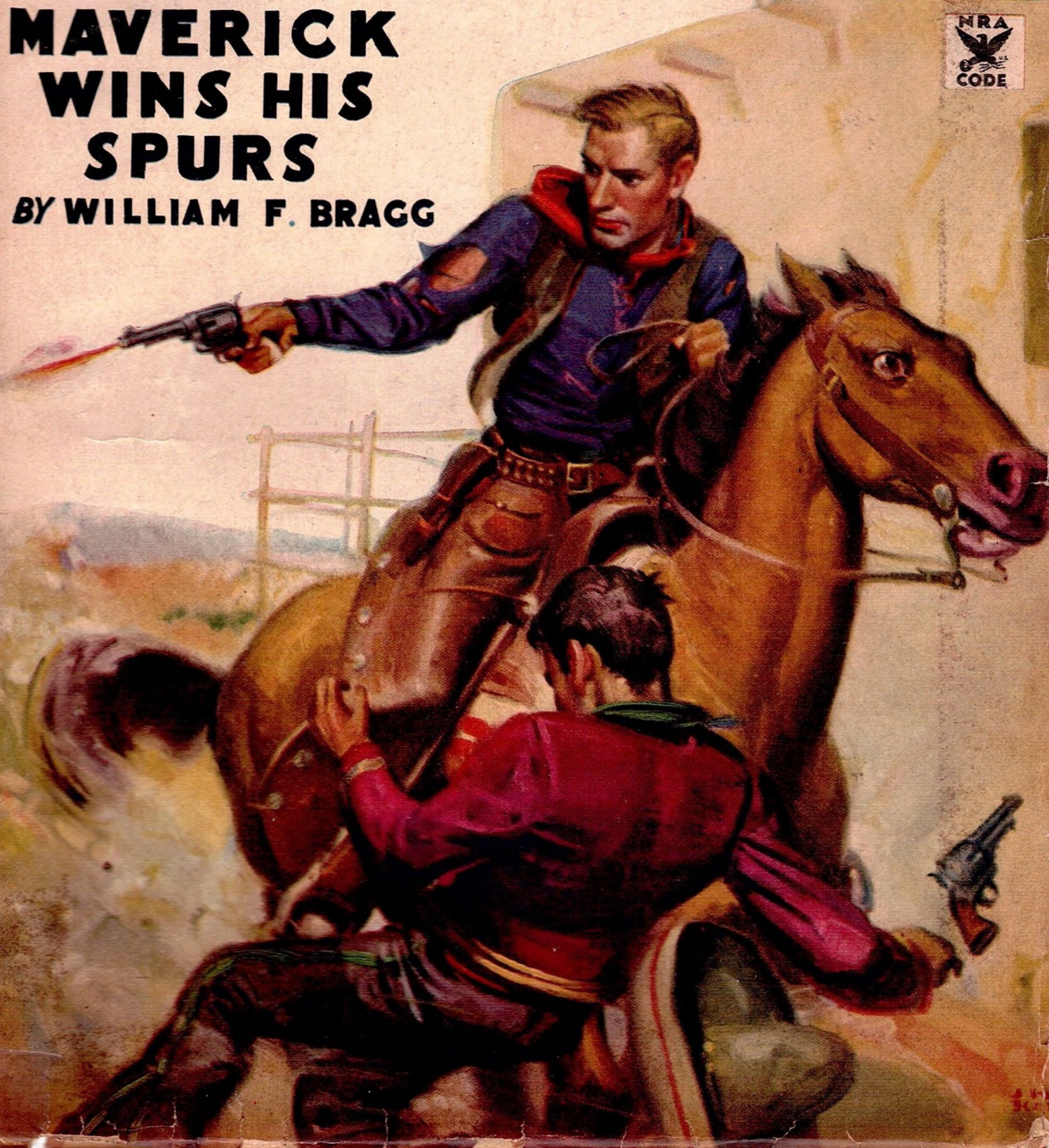
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MAY 4

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

MAVERICK WINS HIS SPURS

BY WILLIAM F. BRAGG



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SALES TAX: Residents of New York City should include the 2% sales tax for unemployment relief.

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED-THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!

MY RAISE DIDN'T COME THROUGH MARY-I MIGHT AS WELL GIVE UP. IT ALL LOOKS SO HOPELESS.



IT ISN'T HOPELESS EITHER BILL. WHY DON'T YOU TRY A NEW FIELD (LIKE RADIO?)

'TOM GREEN WENT INTO RADIO AND HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY, TOO. I'LL SEE HIM RIGHT AWAY.



BILL, JUST MAILING THAT COUPON GAVE ME A QUICK START TO SUCCESS IN RADIO, MAIL THIS ONE TONIGHT



TOM'S RIGHT-AN UNTRAINED MAN HASN'T A CHANCE. I'M GOING TO TRAIN FOR RADIO TOO. IT'S TODAY'S FIELD OF GOOD PAY OPPORTUNITIES



TRAINING FOR RADIO IS EASY AND I'M GETTING ALONG FAST--

SOON I CAN GET A JOB SERVICING SETS--

OR INSTALLING LOUD SPEAKER SYSTEMS

THERE'S NO END TO THE GOOD JOBS FOR THE TRAINED RADIO MAN!



YOU SURE KNOW RADIO-MY SET NEVER SOUNDED BETTER

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N.R.I. TRAINING CERTAINLY PAYS. OUR MONEY WORRIES ARE OVER AND WE'VE A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD IN RADIO.

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I'LL TRAIN YOU AT HOME In Your Spare Time For A GOOD RADIO JOB

Mail the coupon now. Get the facts about Radio—the field with a future. N. R. I. training fits you for jobs in connection with the manufacture, sale and operation of Radio equipment. It fits you to go in business for yourself, service sets, operate on board ships. In broadcasting, television, aviation, police Radio and many other jobs. My FREE book tells how you quickly learn at home in spare time to be a Radio Expert.

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Many Make \$5, \$10, \$15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

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J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 5ED5
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WW-1B

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Vol. 93, No. 2

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Cover Picture—Scene from

"Maverick Wins His Spurs" . . . Painted by J. W. Scott

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Five fightin' pards trail-herd through the desert, 'spite o' thirst an' lead.

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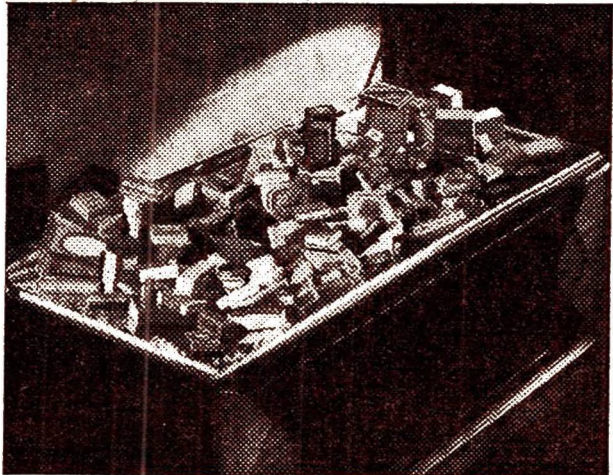
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you shouldn't
try an untried
laxative



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Dr. T. J. Rastelli

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Dr. T. A. Ellis

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28x4	24-25	2.49	.95
28x4	26-27	2.45	.95
28x4	28-29	2.50	.95
28x5	30-31	2.85	1.05
28x5	32-33	2.90	1.05
28x5	34-35	2.90	1.15
28x5	36-37	2.95	1.15
28x5	38-39	2.95	1.15
31x5	20-21	3.25	1.15
31x5	22-23	3.35	1.15
31x5	24-25	3.40	1.15
31x5	26-27	3.40	1.15
31x5	28-29	3.45	1.25
31x5	30-31	3.50	1.25
31x5	32-33	3.50	1.25
31x5	34-35	3.55	1.25
31x5	36-37	3.60	1.25
31x5	38-39	3.65	1.25
31x5	40-41	3.75	1.25

TRUCK BALLOONS

Size	Tires	Tubes
7.00-20	\$5.95	\$2.95
7.00-22	6.25	3.75
6.25-20	6.95	4.95
9.00-20	10.95	5.65

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30x3 1/2	2.38	.88
31x4	2.55	.95
32x4	2.98	.95
33x4	2.95	.95
34x4	3.28	.95
35x4	3.48	1.15
36x4	3.49	1.15
38x4 1/2	3.68	1.15
38x5	3.68	1.15
38x5 1/2	3.75	1.45
38x6	3.95	1.45

Heavy Duty TRUCK

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	\$4.25	\$1.95
32x6	7.98	2.75
34x7	10.95	2.95
36x8	9.95	2.95
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40x8	15.95	4.95

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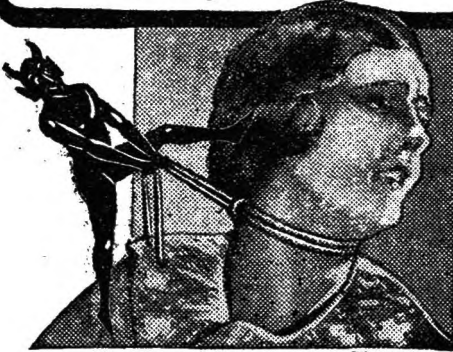
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2⁴⁰
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BALLOON TIRES			
Size Rim	Tires	Size	Tires
20x4.40-21	\$2.15	30x4.50-30	\$3.25
20x4.50-20	2.35	30x4.50-30	3.35
20x4.50-21	2.40	30x4.50-30	3.45
20x4.75-19	2.45	30x4.50-30	3.55
20x4.75-20	2.50	30x4.50-30	3.65
20x4.75-21	2.55	30x4.50-30	3.75
20x5.00-19	2.65	30x4.50-30	3.85
20x5.00-20	2.75	30x4.50-30	3.95
20x5.00-21	2.85	30x4.50-30	4.05
20x5.25-19	2.95	30x4.50-30	4.15
20x5.25-20	3.05	30x4.50-30	4.25
20x5.25-21	3.15	30x4.50-30	4.35
20x5.50-19	3.25	30x4.50-30	4.45
20x5.50-20	3.35	30x4.50-30	4.55
20x5.50-21	3.45	30x4.50-30	4.65
20x6.00-19	3.55	30x4.50-30	4.75
20x6.00-20	3.65	30x4.50-30	4.85
20x6.00-21	3.75	30x4.50-30	4.95
20x6.50-19	3.85	30x4.50-30	5.05
20x6.50-20	3.95	30x4.50-30	5.15
20x6.50-21	4.05	30x4.50-30	5.25
20x7.00-19	4.15	30x4.50-30	5.35
20x7.00-20	4.25	30x4.50-30	5.45
20x7.00-21	4.35	30x4.50-30	5.55
20x7.50-19	4.45	30x4.50-30	5.65
20x7.50-20	4.55	30x4.50-30	5.75
20x7.50-21	4.65	30x4.50-30	5.85
20x8.00-19	4.75	30x4.50-30	5.95
20x8.00-20	4.85	30x4.50-30	6.05
20x8.00-21	4.95	30x4.50-30	6.15
20x8.50-19	5.05	30x4.50-30	6.25
20x8.50-20	5.15	30x4.50-30	6.35
20x8.50-21	5.25	30x4.50-30	6.45
20x9.00-19	5.35	30x4.50-30	6.55
20x9.00-20	5.45	30x4.50-30	6.65
20x9.00-21	5.55	30x4.50-30	6.75
20x9.50-19	5.65	30x4.50-30	6.85
20x9.50-20	5.75	30x4.50-30	6.95
20x9.50-21	5.85	30x4.50-30	7.05
20x10.00-19	5.95	30x4.50-30	7.15
20x10.00-20	6.05	30x4.50-30	7.25
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20x11.50-19	6.85	30x4.50-30	8.05
20x11.50-20	6.95	30x4.50-30	8.15
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20x12.00-20	7.25	30x4.50-30	8.45
20x12.00-21	7.35	30x4.50-30	8.55
20x12.50-19	7.45	30x4.50-30	8.65
20x12.50-20	7.55	30x4.50-30	8.75
20x12.50-21	7.65	30x4.50-30	8.85
20x13.00-19	7.75	30x4.50-30	8.95
20x13.00-20	7.85	30x4.50-30	9.05
20x13.00-21	7.95	30x4.50-30	9.15
20x13.50-19	8.05	30x4.50-30	9.25
20x13.50-20	8.15	30x4.50-30	9.35
20x13.50-21	8.25	30x4.50-30	9.45
20x14.00-19	8.35	30x4.50-30	9.55
20x14.00-20	8.45	30x4.50-30	9.65
20x14.00-21	8.55	30x4.50-30	9.75
20x14.50-19	8.65	30x4.50-30	9.85
20x14.50-20	8.75	30x4.50-30	9.95
20x14.50-21	8.85	30x4.50-30	10.05
20x15.00-19	8.95	30x4.50-30	10.15
20x15.00-20	9.05	30x4.50-30	10.25
20x15.00-21	9.15	30x4.50-30	10.35
20x15.50-19	9.25	30x4.50-30	10.45
20x15.50-20	9.35	30x4.50-30	10.55
20x15.50-21	9.45	30x4.50-30	10.65
20x16.00-19	9.55	30x4.50-30	10.75
20x16.00-20	9.65	30x4.50-30	10.85
20x16.00-21	9.75	30x4.50-30	10.95
20x16.50-19	9.85	30x4.50-30	11.05
20x16.50-20	9.95	30x4.50-30	11.15
20x16.50-21	10.05	30x4.50-30	11.25
20x17.00-19	10.15	30x4.50-30	11.35
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20x17.00-21	10.35	30x4.50-30	11.55
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20x17.50-20	10.55	30x4.50-30	11.75
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20x27.00-21	16.35	30x4.50-30	17.55
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20x29.50-21	17.85	30x4.50-30	19.05
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20x33.50-20	20.15	30x4.50-30	21.35
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20x35.00-20	21.05	30x4.50-30	22.25
20x35.00-21	21.15	30x4.50-30	22.35
20x35.50-19	21.25	30x4.50-30	22.45
20x35.50-20	21.35	30x4.50-30	

Maverick Wins His Spurs

By William F. Bragg

Author of "Chalk Butte Coyotes," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE SPURS OF A MAN.

AS young Tom Terry strode down the porch steps of the 77 ranch house trailing a pair of silver-mounted spurs, he grinned as he saw the cloud of yellow dust that

who was polishing Dutch ovens and cleaning out a chuck box near the water trough.

"Yore fust time up, Maverick," the cook answered. Then he saw Tom's gleaming spurs, and a sour grin came to his double-chinned face. "Hope yuh prove big enough tuh



hung over the big round corral and heard the whoops of a bunch of Texas cowpokes who were roping and riding—and trying to ride—skit-tish ponies.

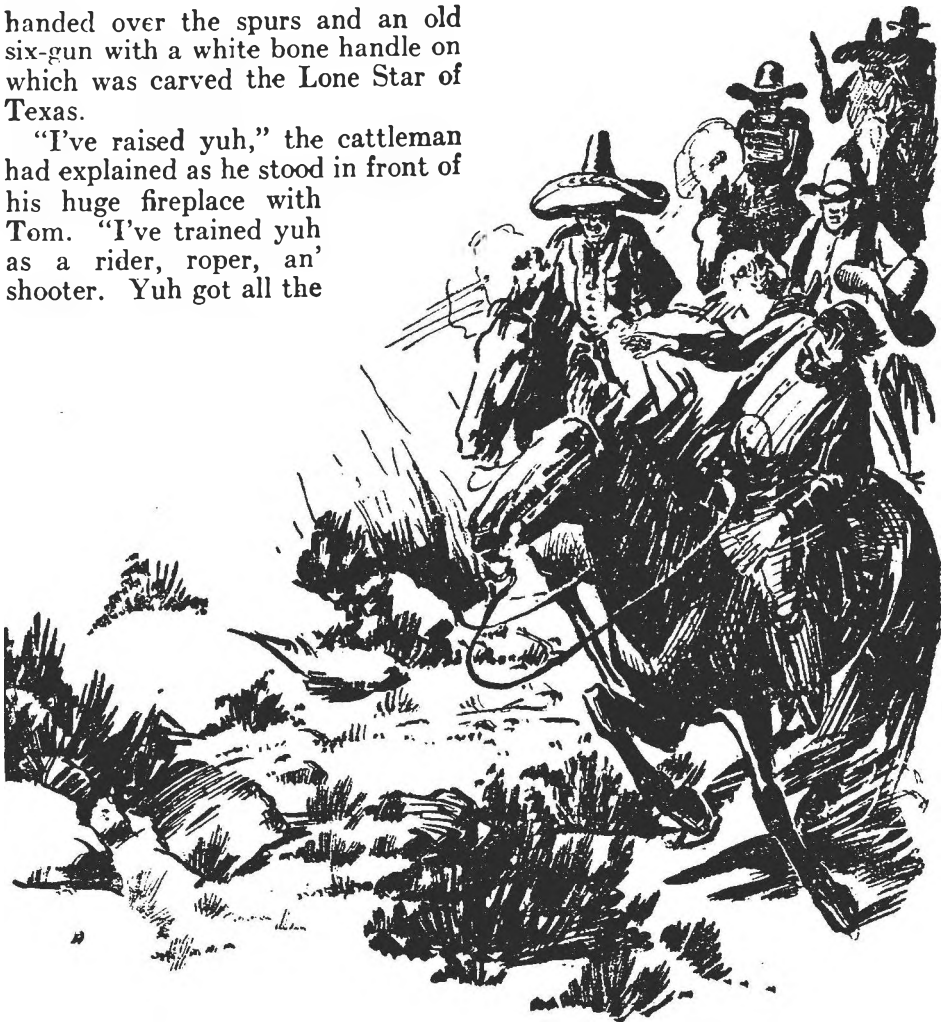
"Gittin' ready to go up the trail," he called to the bald-headed cook

clank them hooks from here tuh Dodge City."

Tom's happy smile vanished. The cook had hit the nail on the head. Colonel Jeff Pointer, owner of the outfit, had expressed the same hope to the young puncher when he had

handed over the spurs and an old six-gun with a white bone handle on which was carved the Lone Star of Texas.

"I've raised yuh," the cattleman had explained as he stood in front of his huge fireplace with Tom. "I've trained yuh as a rider, roper, an' shooter. Yuh got all the



trimmin's of a Texas puncher to take longhorns up the trail. But—how's yore *heart*? That's what I don't know. An' you got to find out."

Tom's blue eyes had flashed as he answered: "Colonel, I'm figurin' to make good on this drive or die tryin'. I know what it means to you."

Then the old man had taken out a polished box of black wood, opened it, and revealed the pair of gleaming spurs and the old gun.

"These," he had explained, "belonged to yore dad, Captain Jim Terry of the Rangers. You was left

motherless as a baby. Yore dad was my friend. He put yuh in my care. After he quit the Rangers, he become my foreman. An' later, I give him a third interest in this outfit. He was a good man. Ten years ago, a border bandit started workin' on our cattle—a thief called 'El Coyote.' Jim hit the trail. He left these Sunday spurs an' this gun behind. Jest took steel hooks an' his reg'lar six-gun. He went into Mexico, an'—he never come back."

That was why some of the older punchers of the 77—veterans like "Baldy" Patch, the cook, and "Sor-

rowful" Smith, the point rider—called Tom by the nickname of "Maverick." When his father had vanished, he had been like an unbranded young longhorn until the old colonel came to the rescue.

So Tom was on his way to the horse corral, proudly wearing his missing father's spurs and six-gun, and aware of the colonel's hope that he would prove worthy.

"I hope I make good," he said again, and balled his rope-calloused hands into hard fists. "Not so much to win these spurs as to help out the colonel who's been dang good to a stray kid."

For young Tom knew that this drive of longhorns up the western trail to fill a government beef contract in Wyoming Territory was the colonel's last hope of saving his ranch down here on the Rio Grande.

Hard times had come to the 77—rustler raids, drought, and Texas fever among the cattle. Then a banker friend in San Antonio had loaned Colonel Pointer the price of a herd of Mexican cattle, and the ranch had been put up as security.

If the herd got through safely to Wyoming, the longhorns would be sold for triple their purchase price. Then the colonel could pay off his debt, reclaim his ranch, and stock it again with good stuff.

"But if the longhorns don't git through," young Tom whispered, "we'll lose the old home ranch."

His eyes roved over the familiar scene—the rambling house half covered with trailing vines, the tall green cottonwoods around the kitchen door, the big round pole corral with posts braced with wrappings of rawhide, the brown bare hills to the south across the Rio Grande.

"We'll make the drive," Tom vowed. "We'll shore win our spurs."

He looked fit for the try. He

stood six feet tall, without his scuffed boots and lacking a dusty white hat on his shock of yellow hair. He was wide through the shoulders, slim through the hips, lanky, and a trifle bowed of leg from long hours in the saddle, not handsome, for his nose was rather large and when he smiled, his grin appeared to stretch from ear to ear.

But, as Sorrowful Smith had said, a man didn't need to be good-looking to make a good trail hand.

What was required, according to the grizzled range expert, was nerve to circle a stampeding herd on a night thunderous with storm and flaring with lightning, heart to live or die for the outfit brand, strength to put in eighteen hours a day in the saddle and sleep on a rock, stomach enough to live and thrive on the chuck turned out by Baldy Patch.

"I reckon, anyway," drawled Maverick, "that at least I can stand Baldy's sour-dough flapjacks an' jerked beef without gittin' the pip."

Two or three punchers roosted on the top rail of the corral. The lankiest specimen, in a greasy buckskin shirt and pair of worn chaps, was Sorrowful Smith, the outfit philosopher, poet, singer, and general handy man.

Through narrowed eyes he was watching a flight in the corral between a blocky-built rider and a red-eyed buckskin horse. The man had just lost a stirrup. As Tom stalked up, the pony tossed his rider into the dust.

"Whoopee!" howled the audience. "When yuh top off Stem-winder, yuh got to ride with everything yuh got!"

Tom's jaw stuck out angrily as he looked through the rails. The buckskin was *his* horse. He had chosen the animal a year ago, broken it to ride, and then turned it out on grass

to fat up for this drive. But the rider in the dust—a new hand hired for the trail—had roped out Stem-winder while Tom was with the colonel.

"That's my hoss," growled the kid. "It's agin' the rules fer another hombre tuh rope from a string that a man's already chosen."

It *was* against the rules. Before starting up the trail, the ten punchers of the outfit drew straws for first choice of horses. Then in turn, each man would rope out his mounts until he had selected ten to twelve head. Once chosen, these horses belonged to him until he quit the drive.

"Maverick," drawled old Sorrowful, blinking his sleepy eyes, and pawing his grizzled handlebar mustache, "what yuh goin' to do about *that*?"

And he pointed a trigger finger toward the man in the dust and the squalling buckskin that was just now attempting to pitch off the saddle.

"That's my hoss," said Tom, "an' I figure tuh ride him."

He unbuckled his gun belt, hung it over a corral post, hitched up his batwing chaps, and swarmed over the top rail. As he strode toward the buckskin, lariat noose trailing behind, the unhorsed puncher stood up, and rolled a pair of hard brown eyes.

"Kid," he rasped, and wiped the corral dust off his black-whiskered chops, "whatever are you doin' with that rope?"

"I'm goin' tuh dab down on that hoss. He's mine. I call him Stem-winder."

"That hoss ain't nobody's but his own. That hoss is plumb loco an' a hawg fer punishment. But me"—the blocky man batted his thick chest with a hairy fist—"I can top him. Me—Pecos Joe Badger."

"That Stem-winder," Tom said, "is a hoss of fine spirit. He always bucks when he's fust corralled. That shows he's a dang good pony. But once yuh show him he's got to work, then he's as meek as a lamb, an' mild as mince pie. But I don't figure"—he looked "Pecos Joe" over—"that yo're the man to make Stem-winder git down to business."

Pecos Joe, having recovered his wind, opened his thick lips, and regarded Tom with vast surprise. Then he jerked down his thick black brows in an angry frown.

"A sprout like you," he roared, "to tell Pecos Joe what hoss he can ride! Say, I eat greenhorns like you fer breakfus', an' a half dozen of yuh don't make a meal fer Pecos Joe. You skedaddle back to that fence, let me have yore rope, an' watch me claw all the hair off that mean buckskin."

"This here," drawled Tom, "ain't no time to talk about eatin'. An' I reckon I got no time fer cannibals. So if you'll jest skedaddle *yoreself* fer the fence, I'll try a whirl with Stem-winder."

Joe advanced, heavy jaw thrust out, and fists swinging.

"Want tuh show off them purty spurs," he sneered. "Waal, I ain't been workin' here long. But I heard tell you was the owner's pet, his maverick. An' so he dolls yuh up fer the trail? Waal——"

Before Tom could answer, Joe swung a haymaker that knocked him down. Then Joe raised a whoop and fell on Tom's heaving chest. He landed a second punch that made the boy's head reel. And while Tom was fighting for wits and wind, Joe swung around and reached for the buckle of Tom's right spur.

"I'll jest use these on the hoss!" Joe roared. And now he was laugh-

ing. "They're the sort o' hooks that a man ought ter wear."

On the fence, watching punchers howled and laughed. Only Sorrowful sat silent, gray eyes glittering, shoulders hunched up like a wise old barn owl.

"The maverick," he whispered, "has got to *win* 'em to wear 'em."

This Pecos had a reputation as gun fighter and all-around warrior. He had won half a dozen rough-and-tumbles since joining the outfit. And Tom, being a modest youth, had observed from the sidelines.

"But no dang Pecos waddy," he snarled, "kin ride my hoss or wear my spurs!"

Arching his shoulders, he punched his elbows into the dust, kicked out like a broncho on a rope, flung Pecos aside, and arose in a fighting rage.

Neither man wore a gun. They battled it out, foot to foot, and jaw to jaw. Tom's head jerked back as Pecos got home a glancing blow on his lean right cheek.

Then Tom hit from knee-level. For Pecos had followed in. The punch took the Pecos tough on the point of his bristling chin. And he measured his length in the corral dust. At which sight, Sorrowful Smith raised his whining voice in song:

"On the rocky banks of the Pecos, they
will lay him down to rest,
With a saddle fer his pillow, an' his front
teeth on his chest."

Tom stood, breathing heavily, waiting for Pecos to stand up. The blocky man groaned, opened his eyes, and finally staggered up. He made no attempt to resume the fight.

"If that hoss hadn't sort o' dazed me," he growled, "I'd have took off yore dang spurs. I wasn't in no

shape tuh fight yuh. But we ain't through with——"

"Git out o' the corral," barked Maverick Terry, "an' let me rope my hoss."

Once he had caught and mounted the buckskin, he rather regretted the fight with Pecos. The hard blows had sapped his strength, fogged his brain. And to ride Stem-winder, as Tom well knew, a man needed all he had in the way of brains and muscle.

Stem-winder, true to his name, unwound like an eight-day clock. He spurned the earth, then pounded it with braced legs. High in the air, he "swapped" ends while the corral-pole audience cheered.

Tight in the saddle, Tom rode with quirt, spurs, and reins. Once he was hurled up on the horn, and almost lost a stirrup.

"But I don't dare git throwed," Tom panted. "Not with that Pecos watchin' me. An' Sorrowful Smith to make a song about it."

His legs felt numb below the knees. He heard a constant rattle and knew not whether it was the click of his teeth or the pop of his head snapping back and forth on his spine. He had lost his hat. His shock of yellow hair flared under the sun. His chaps were rattling. His saddle bulged up behind at every wild lunge of the buckskin's wiry body.

Old Sorrowful sang above the tumult:

"If ary puncher wants tuh have a right
good time,
Let him top a cayuse what can turn on
a dime."

Blaw! Angry Stem-winder bucked straight toward the corral fence, then turned in time to save himself a broken neck. For, after all, Stem-winder was a wise cow-horse and this was merely fun. Tom, aware of

his bawling pet's little tricks, got a new grip on the rawhide reins, brought up the pony's bogged head.

And Stem-winder, having had his fun, quit fighting, and stood quietly with heaving flanks and rolling eyes.

"But he's had his leetle sashay," said Sorrowful, "an' now he'll be a real hoss, until the next time they turn him out on grass."

Tom climbed down, slapped the buckskin on sleek and wiry neck. Then he wobbled toward the corral fence. He reached for his gun belt, buckled it around his lean middle.

Pecos Joe, six-gun drawn, stepped through the gate.

"I been waitin' fer you," he announced. "No rattle-headed kid kin show *me* up! Go fer yore gun!"

Unprepared for treacherous attack, shaky because he had first battled a man, and then a horse, Tom would have been cut down by Joe's first bullet.

The men on the fence were also taken by surprise. They sat open-mouthed. None had time to draw iron. None—except one.

Blam! A .45 slug dug up dirt in front of Joe's boots.

The Pecos warrior whirled, looked up into the smoking barrel of Sorrowful's old Colt.

"Pecos," drawled Sorrowful, "you are charged with attempt tuh murder. You are facin' a Texas jury"—he tilted his gun—"that's apt to git discharged at any minute. So——"

Pecos Joe scowled, drew back a pace from Tom, then holstering his six-gun, he shuffled out of the corral.

"Thanks, Sorrowful," said Tom.

"Don't thank me, Maverick," drawled the lanky puncher, "thank that buckskin hoss. Fer the colonel told me if *you* couldn't ride him, I'd have tuh put him in my string. An'

after watchin' said hoss perform, I'd rather tangle with Pecos Joe than mount that buckskin's hurricane deck."

But Tom grinned and winked his right eye. For he knew that Sorrowful feared no man, horse, or anything else on this green footstool. Except critical comments on his style of singing.

CHAPTER II.

TO SAVE AN OUTFIT.

THE sound of the iron triangle that hung just outside the kitchen door, ended the horse breaking. The cook was announcing supper, and the outfit whooped and headed for the bunk house to wash off the dust before trooping in for fried beef and potatoes, and maybe pie, if Baldy happened to be in a good humor.

Sorrowful, too dignified to run for a meal, sauntered along, and Tom wishing to appear as steady, matched the older man's speed. Sorrowful was singing softly, a far-away whine like a mournful coyote behind the ridge.

"Wake up, Jacob's day's a-breakin'—
Beans in the pot an' a hoe-cake bakin'."

Tom laughed. "But it's evenin', Sorrowful."

"Jest the same," said the Texas bard, "thar'll be beans. Mornin', noon, an' night. They are Baldy's long suit."

As they neared the bench outside the bunk house where men were splashing water into tin basins, Tom saw Pecos Joe head for the ranch house. Another man—a lean fellow in tight buckskin breeches that flared over soft boots—sided the whiskered warrior.

"I wasn't lookin' fer trouble with Joe," Tom said. "I ain't huntin'

war with any man. But I couldn't stand fer him ridin' my hoss."

Sorrowful grinned. "Didn't look like he rode him." Then he faced Tom, and now he was entirely serious. "Boy," he went on, "thar's been trouble here since Joe hired on. An' I don't like that slim gent in the Mex pants who's with him. He's a stranger, too. Good with a rope. Allus smooth-spoken as a jewelry salesman. Too *dang* smooth-spoken!"

"That's Pete Santerra," cried Tom. "Come here about the same time as Joe. But never bothered anybody."

"I don't like his looks," drawled Sorrowful, "fer I've noticed the same tiny light, way back in his eyes, that you'll see in those of a hungry wolf. So, boy, while yo're watchin' friend Joe, keep a weather eye out fer Mr. Pete Santerra."

Then Sorrowful removed his hat, poured half a bucket of water over his straggling sand-colored hair and turkey-red neck, and reached for the bar of slippery soap.

But Tom Terry stood watching Joe and Santerra until they had entered the ranch house. And never was his right hand six inches above the white bone handle of his six-gun.

"I'll take no chance on gittin' soap in my eyes," said Tom, "not while them two buzzards are within easy shootin' range."

Sorrowful was now using a comb that lacked half its teeth to put a careful part in his hair. His eyes bulged, and he gripped the end of his tongue with his yellow teeth.

Old Baldy, the cook, stuck his head out the kitchen window, and glared at the heavily breathing puncher.

"You ol' fool," he snorted, "you'll never take no prize fer good looks. Fergit them love-locks an' hustle in

to chuck or this gang will clean me out."

"There will always be some beans left," murmured Sorrowful, and he chanted the words of the army mess call. For Sorrowful had once chased Apaches with Uncle Sam's cavalry:

"Porky, porky, porky without a streak of lean—
Soupy, soupy, soupy without a single bean."

"Come on!" howled Baldy, and he flourished a butcher knife. "Come on, or I'll shore end yore whinin' with eight inches of raw steel."

So Sorrowful went sauntering toward the cook shack. And Tom hid his grin in a washbasin.

"Tuh hear them holler," he mumbled, as he used a towel that had been too popular, "you'd figure 'em as bitter enemies. But Baldy an' Sorrowful would stand together agin' the world."

Last of the crew to hurry toward chuck, Tom hustled past the door of the owner's office. But old Colonel Pointer, limping down the steps, halted him. The colonel had been slightly injured, a few days before, in handling a jumpy horse.

"You know I'm sort o' laid up," said the colonel, "so I need company. Eat with me to-night."

The colonel preferred to dine with his crew. But old Baldy had forced him to stay in the living room until his sprained ankle healed. And take his meals off a tray.

"Danged ol' flapjack-snapper figures I'm a mossback," growled the colonel, and his gray eyes flashed under thick grizzled brows. But Tom saw that he was glad enough to sink down in his armchair and put his sore foot up on a convenient pillow.

"Fly to it," said Colonel Pointer, and motioned toward the steaming

dishes on the table. "Enough thar tuh feed a troop of sojers. Or one hollered-out kid like you."

As Tom downed tender beef and good yellow corn pone, the colonel sat back and watched with a soft gleam in his eyes. The boy was shaping up well. Rumors had reached the owner of the fight in the corral.

"Winnin' his spurs," murmured the old man. "Waal, I've tried to make him a credit to Captain Jim. Wish Jim could see him now."

Tom finished a second piece of dried-apple pie, then groaned and sat back.

"Let yore belt out a notch," advised the colonel.

"No notches left," said Tom. "When a man sees pie like that, he jest naturally unbuckles before he flies to it."

"I hope," Colonel Pointer said slowly, "that you've ate enough to last you until breakfast."

"Aw, I can steal a snack out o' the kitchen if I git ga'nt around midnight."

Colonel Pointer reached for his cane, stood up, limped over, and closed the door. This surprised Tom for it was a typical spring evening in Texas, balmy, and with the merest hint of a cool breeze from the Rio Grande.

"I'll shake up a blaze," said Tom, and stepped toward the fireplace.

But the colonel, after bolting the door, turned around and slowly shook his head.

"Don't touch off that wood an' kindlin'," he half whispered. "Instead, haul out what yuh find piled behind it."

Tom reached into the sooty opening—a huge maw built to hold half a log behind the andirons. He brought forth a cowhide pack sack. Its weight astonished him.

"Hoist it up on the table," ordered the colonel.

Tom obeyed. The cattleman bent forward, opened the carrier, and with both hands lifted out a buckskin pouch.

"You know what's in that?" he asked, and stared into Tom's puzzled face.

"Search me," said the kid.

"Gold," growled the colonel.

"Twenty-dollah gold pieces. Each buckskin poke weighs ten pounds an' holds twenty-five hundred in money. Hard money, son. An' thar's four pokes in this pack sack. How much is that?"

Tom's eyes bulged. "Around ten thousand," he whispered.

"Right," snapped the 77 owner. "An' thar's another pack sack carrying the same weight in gold—forty pounds—back in that fireplace. They come in to-day by special messenger from San Antone. This here's the money I borrowed to buy that herd of Mexican cattle that we figure to send up the trail."

"Gosh," whispered the amazed Tom. "Twenty thousand dollars in two cowhide packs."

"A good load for one lively mule," snapped the colonel, and his pointed gray beard bristled. "Son," he went on. "This money *must* cross the river to-night."

"What for?"

"A half dozen Mexican cattlemen are selling me the longhorns that will shape up my herd. But I got to take delivery in Mexico. They want hard money—gold. They are honest but suspicious gents, an' they won't let me trail them cattle over the Rio Grande until they are paid. My contracts call fer countin', payin', an' crossin' by noon to-morrow."

"I reckon you'll send the money over in the chuck wagon under a strong guard."

The colonel sank back in his chair. He stared at Tom, and slowly he shook his head. Finally he drew a bit of folded paper from his vest pocket. He tossed it over to Tom.

"Read that," he ordered.

Tom's young face became grave as his eyes raced over the scrawled words:

COLONEL: You know me of old. You do not love me. That is too bad. Nor I you. I hear you will drive cattle to Wyoming. That is good, colonel. For you remember in the old days that my share in any deal along the Rio Grande was the royal fourth. So do not forget me, colonel. If you wish to cross without trouble, wait until dark. Then set two lanterns in your window. I will be watching, colonel, for you know that I do not sleep. But if I do not see the signal, then I may be angry, Colonel.

And Tom saw that the signature was "El Coyote." He looked up at his grizzled chief.

"The man," whispered Colonel Pointer, "who once ruled the border. If cattle were sold, he took a fourth of the herd as his tribute. The same if money or horses changed hands. The man——"

Young Tom was standing up, leaning on the table with hands balled into fists. His blue eyes flashed. And a vagrant gleam of light touched up the white handle of his old six-gun.

"The man," he said hoarsely, "who rode a trail into old Mexico that my father followed."

"The man," said the cattleman. He bowed his head. "Yore father never returned. But"—he gestured toward the note—"El Coyote has come back. After ten years. He has come back to claim his royal fourth. I found this note to-day pinned to my door with a Spanish dagger."

And he flung a shining knife with a needlelike point and a jeweled hilt on the table.

"It means," he went on, "that El Coyote or his spies are in camp. I have taken on many new hands. It is hard to find men I can trust. But to buy the cattle, this money *must* cross the river into Mexico."

"How?" asked Tom.

"I will send out the chuck wagon under guard to-night. With Sorrowful to make a show of guardin' big value, an' Baldy to drive, with a Sharps buffalo gun across his knees. But there will be nothing in that wagon except sacks of flour, beans, and corn. The money——"

"Yes!"

"The money will cross the Rio Grande by way of Dead Man's Draw. And you—if you will do it—you will lead the mule that totes two cowhide pack sacks."

"Alone?"

"El Coyote would not suspect me of trustin' twenty thousand dollars to a younker like you. If he makes a raid, he will jump the chuck wagon. But you will ride the river safely."

The room was growing dark. Curtains had been pulled down over the windows. The colonel replaced the buckskin pouch in the cowhide carrier.

"I would not send you," he whispered, "if I believed there was danger. And if I could ride, I would go with you. But I must travel to-night in the chuck wagon. And I hope"—his old face tightened grimly—"that El Coyote *will* try a holdup. For as he writes, I do not love him."

Tom was younger, his ears keener than those of the cattleman. Now he heard a soft sound outside the barred door. As though a spur had struck against a porch pillar.

He drew his six-gun, rushed over, looked out. Dusk had fallen. Shafts of yellow light glittered from the kitchen windows, from the bunk

house down the path. There wasn't a man in sight.

"But I'd have sworn," Tom whispered, as he relocked the door, "that I heard somebody on the porch."

"If thar was a spy," said the colonel, "he couldn't hear what we said. That door is sound-proof. All the windows are closed an' shades drawn. No, let El Coyote send his pack to smell out our plans. We'll put this gold safely across the river an' buy the trail herd that will save the 77 Ranch."

The colonel touched Tom's shoulder, a found touch, and his old eyes glistened.

"My home," he said huskily, "an' yores, son. For I told yuh before that yore father, Captain Jim of the Rangers, had a third interest in it. An' so—if yuh figure to wear his spurs an' gun—fight to save the ol' place, Tom."

When Tom Terry rode away toward the Rio Grande on his buckskin pony, and with a loaded pack mule following, no double lantern lights gleamed from the ranch-house window. The 77 chief had defied El Coyote.

CHAPTER III.

DEAD MAN'S DRAW.

THE 77 Ranch, known as the Lightning brand because its mark on the left ribs of longhorns was made in this fashion,



was located a few miles west of the junction of the Pecos and Rio Grande Rivers. Through a vast sweep of gray sage, dusty mesquite, and cactus, Tom followed a beaten cattle trail down to Dead Man's Draw.

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Across the stream, Rangers in an earlier day had clashed with a band of marauding Apaches. After the fight, whites and reds had been planted where they fell, for the weather was warm. Sixteen mounds were located a few rods up from the southern bank.

All were covered with rocks, for it was the custom for passing punchers to toss a rock on lonely graves in the desert. The custom had started, perhaps, to protect passed comrades from coyotes, and then becoming a range superstition.

"Moon's comin' up," said Tom, and he looked toward the east where a round yellow ball hung above the divide. "It'll be easy to cross."

It wasn't safe to cross the Rio Grande at Dead Man's Draw in darkness. Yellow torrents in the spring carried down vast loads of sand and mud and banked the debris in long and jellylike bars just below the surface. Trapped in such a bog hole, horse, rider, or longhorn had small chance of escape. But with sufficient light, an experienced rider could follow a sheet of gravel that ran from bank to bank and offered safe footing.

Tom knew that the chuck wagon with its supposedly valuable cargo had gone several miles down stream to cross into Mexico at a well-known wagon ford. But here at Dead Man's Draw, Colonel Pointer would count, pay, and cross two thousand longhorns.

"Thar's a bunch of brush up near them graves," Tom decided. "I'll tie up the hoss an' mule, roll out my blanket, an' wait fer daylight."

The moonlit night was conducive to thought, and Tom's mind pictured the events that had made up his life from that dim day, years before, when his father had ridden into old

Mexico on El Coyote's trail and had never come back.

"I can jest remember dad," the boy whispered. "A tall slashin' six-footer with yaller hair an' blue eyes. He wore a long mustache, and it seems to me he always dressed in buckskin an' had high boots that reached to his knees. Gosh"—the boy's eyes became dim—"the colonel has shore been good to me. But nobody can quite take the place of yore dad. I'd shore like tuh see Captain Jim ag'in."

For Tom always called his missing father by the Ranger rank. And now, as he rode along with the mule shuffling under the heavy load of eighty pounds in minted gold, Tom recalled that few men, excepting the colonel, ever mentioned his father or the latter's career. Even old Sorrowful was apt to become strangely silent when Tom asked about the missing captain.

"He must 'a' been a prime fighter," Tom sighed. "But nobody will tell much about him. I wonder why."

Now, as he heard the chuckle of water in the bogs along the river, and the occasional sleepy squawk of a wild duck, Tom checked his buckskin.

"I don't figure to take any chances of gittin' shot up as I cross the river," he said. "I'm dang shore somebody was on the porch this evenin' when the colonel showed me this gold."

But the colonel had insisted that the room was sound-proof, that even if one of El Coyote's men had been lurking around the house, he would have heard nothing.

"Jest the same," Tom whispered, "I'm takin' no chances."

Bending, he pulled out the Winchester carbine that was slung under his right stirrup fender. He made

certain that it carried a full magazine. Then, after returning the weapon to its rawhide scabbard, he took out the old six-gun with the Texas Star carved deeply on its handle, punched out five loads, and replaced them with new cartridges.

"I'll be sartain," said Tom, "that if I do run into trouble, thar'll be no misfires."

Ready now for the crossing into Mexico, he urged Stem-winder down the trail. The buckskin was in a calm mood. But Tom was not deceived. Let any man but Tom hit leather on Stem-winder, and the buckskin would immediately start pitching.

"This hoss," said Tom, "will only carry a man that has proved he can stay with him."

The mule, a rangy, mouse-colored brute, jogged behind at the end of a long lead rope. The animal was a favorite wheeler in Baldy's chuck wagon string and bore two names. The cook proudly called the mule Dynamite. But Sorrowful Smith called it Beans.

"But a dang good mule to cross the river with," Tom said as he emerged from the brush and started across a patch of wet, hard sand.

But now, just when a man desired quiet, the mule hung back, slanted both long ears, pointed its Roman nose at the stars, and emitted a long bray.

"Dang yuh!" Tom raged. "This ain't no time fer singin'. Not when I'm tryin' tuh git this money over to Mexico without bein' jumped. Shut off that bray an' come along!"

But Dynamite—or Beans—refused to come along. Bracing both front legs, the animal balked. Tom swung around to get a firmer grip on the rope. Stem-winder, a horse of cast-iron nerve except during a

bucking exhibition, squirmed and finally whinnied.

"Dang it!" rasped Tom, and his blue eyes glittered. "When both the mule an' the hoss git jumpy, thar's trouble around Dead Man's Draw."

As he spoke, a dim figure emerged from the thick brush that grew for miles along the river except for the occasional clearings where stock could be crossed. Tom tied hard and fast to his saddle horn with the end of the mule's lead rope. He rammed his left arm through his bridle reins, raked out the Ranger six-gun with his right.

"Stand where yuh are," he snapped. "An' then recite yore leetle piece. Who be yuh?"

Under the moonlight, the figure was revealed as that of a stooped old man on a tiny burro. That explained why the mule had brayed, for the mule is the most sociable animal on earth where burros are concerned.

And the scent of the burro's rider had alarmed Stem-winder. For a trained cow horse will always give the alarm at night when a stranger approaches.

"Git off yore canary," Tom rapped out, and his long gun barrel was lined on the old man's breast. "An' after yuh git off, h'ist yore hands 'way up."

The rider obeyed. He wasn't ten paces now from Tom. He wore a tall sombrero of plaited straw, a gayly colored serape around bowed shoulders, baggy white cotton pants, and rope sandals on bare feet.

"Nothin' but a pore peon," growled Tom. "Maybe sneakin' a leetle tequila past the customs tuh sell in the United States."

The man shuffled nearer, carefully refraining from any sudden movement that the young Texan might consider hostile. Peons—poor Mexi-

can peasants—were peaceful men, and seldom took chances under the gunsights of one of these terrible, blue-eyed *Texicanos*.

"Señor," he quavered, "I am a man of peace."

The words were in broken but fair enough English. That didn't cause wonder to Tom. Along the river, Americans and Mexicans had mastered a mixed form of language.

"I also ride in peace," growled Tom.

"You perhaps cross the river? No?"

"What's it to you?"

"Perhaps you ride from the Pointer ranch?"

Tom wasn't giving out any information. But he had lashed a shovel, pick, and gold pan on the mule's load so that if questioned too closely, he could say he was a prospector bound for the Mexican mines. Now, to quiet the old man, he gestured toward the mule.

"Figure out fer yoreself why a man rides south with an ornery mule and a miner's tools."

The old man grinned. His face was thin, swarthy, and a long gray mustache half masked his smiling lips.

"You search for gold," he whispered.

"Gold," Tom nodded.

Then, across the Rio Grande, from some bold headland, a coyote's howl drifted up to the stars. A chill of fear raced the length of Tom's spine for the sound recalled to him the murderous bandit who had vowed to collect his royal fourth or break the 77 outfit.

"The pack runs to-night under the moon," said the old peon. "Señor, it would be well to keep to the shadows, in Mexico, while you search for this"—white teeth glis-

tened under the heavy mustache—"gold."

"Who are you?" Tom asked.

"Only a man of peace," the peon answered quietly. "And one who rides softly when the coyote howls."

He waited, then he asked. "Have I the permission to mount?"

"Fer a peon," growled the suspicious Tom, "you talk dang good English."

"Ah, I was not always a peon. But señor"—the old man spread his arms, and shrugged thin shoulders under his blanket—"I am old now. Once I was the gallant caballero. But that was in my youth. My cattle vanished. My horses. My good name. Now I am only old Manuel—a poor man who cooks for those more fortunate."

He mounted his burro, kicked up the sleepy animal with calloused heels, jogged toward the brush. Tom let him ride away. There were strange figures along the border, rich men, and ruined men.

"Old Manuel," he said. "An' if Colonel Pointer don't make the grade with that herd, he'll be in the same fix as that ol' cook."

Stem-winder entered the river. The mule followed quietly. There was light enough for Tom to follow the gravel bar. The stream here was not over two hundred yards wide. Not deep enough, except in spots, to swim a horse.

These animals were well trained. Tom made the crossing, spurred up the slippery bank toward the low ridge where sixteen graves were located in an uneven circle. He headed toward the clump of brush to make his night camp.

The moonlight now revealed a low divide back from the stream. And as Tom reached the graves, he heard again the howl of a coyote. And looking up, he saw a string of riders

outlined on the ridge against the moon.

"Men in steeple-crowned hats," he whispered. "At least a dozen."

Here in the shadows he believed the riders had not sighted him. He worked feverishly against time for he heard the clatter of hoofs as horses turned and filed down toward Dead Man's Draw. He slid from his saddle, cleared his rifle, laid it across a grave. Then he turned to the mule, unbuckled the pack sacks, worked with flying fingers.

"No time," he muttered, "to git into the brush. Got to make my stand here. That is, if they spot me."

He hoped that the horsemen would swing wide of the graves—for many border men hated to pass this place at night. But the thud of shod hoofs came nearer. Tom heard now the clink of spurs, the rattle of curb chains, the pop of saddle leather. And then a man's voice broke out in furious command.

The mule betrayed Tom. Before he could clamp a hand down on Dynamite's quivering nostrils, the mule emitted a resounding bray. Instantly there came a sharp command on the trail. The approaching riders halted. Then——

Blam! A red streak of fire lighted up the night as a gun roared, and a bullet sang past Tom's head.

The mule lunged away, stampeded wildly toward the brush. Stem-winder, startled, reared back on bridle reins that had been twisted about a bit of brush.

Out of the night, a dozen yelping riders charged the circle of graves. With a pop, the buckskin broke restraining reins, bolted after the mule.

Stretched out behind a mound of rocks that covered a white Ranger or a red Apache, Tom Terry lined his

rifle. There was light enough to see the charge, but it was dim for gun-work.

"But dang 'em," Tom breathed, "they'll shore *smell* burnin' powder."

Wham! His rifle cracked.

The line of horsemen, not fifty yards distant, swept on without an empty saddle.

"Too high," growled Tom, and he blinked his right eye to clear it for more expert shooting. The Winchester barked a second time.

"Battin' my eye worked," rasped Tom.

For a rider pitched from his horse. The pony came madly on, with loose stirrups pelting its ribs, and reins dragging.

A tall horseman, in the lead, howled like a coyote. His high-crowned hat clung to his head by a leather throat band.

Tom ripped out another string of lead. Now gunfire crashed out along the silent river as bullets zipped past him. A slug hit the top of the grave that sheltered the fighting Texan. Gravel was thrown into his eyes.

Blinded, he staggered up with rifle tight against his shoulder. The horsemen loomed like black giants. Above the boom of guns, he heard the high-pitched yelp that aped that of the sneaking coyote.

His gun was hot, empty. He cast it down, raked out his six-gun. The charge passed him. A clubbed carbine struck him down. He rose to his knees.

Riders turned sharply, rushed a second time on the man at bay. The moon was high above the bluff. They saw a tall bare-headed youth whose shock of yellow hair flared like a battle flag. A man blind, and trapped, but undefeated. For though he could not see to fight,

Tom's six-gun was pounding out lead.

A rope snapped toward him. The noose settled around his neck. A man prodded a lunging pony with rowels large as dollars. Tom was jerked off his feet. He clung to his gun but clawed madly with his left hand at the strangling lariat.

Other riders checked their mounts, swarmed down. A half dozen men bore Tom to the ground, slapped him with steel six-gun barrels. But before his senses failed, he fought like a treed wild cat.

CHAPTER IV.

A BANDIT FOILED.

WHEN Tom opened his eyes, he discovered that he lay on a pile of dirty blankets in a dimly lighted room. When he attempted to rise, he found also that he was tied hand and foot, and that a cloth gag had been inserted into his mouth and tied so tightly that he was half strangled.

Red rage filled him. He stormed on his bunk, twisted his lanky legs to loosen the rope laced around his ankles, strained and squirmed to free his arms that were lashed behind his back.

A glare of red light filled the room. Tom saw that the blanket that served as a door had been pushed aside. The ruby gleam came from a large camp fire built outside the entrance. There were men out there who snarled and chattered Mexican.

But the tall man, who had just entered the room, looked at Tom and spoke in English.

"So," he sneered, "you are awake. Well, most men would have died from such a beating. But you—you are a Terry. A hard breed to kill."

Striding to a rough table on which was set a lantern, the newcomer

raised the light and glared down at Tom. Then he bent and ripped the gag from the Texan's mouth.

"I am glad that you *did* live," he rasped. "For I wish you to talk."

"Talk," Tom mumbled, for his lips were stiff and sore. "Talk about what? And with who?"

The tall man answered by kicking Maverick in the ribs. Tom's eyes flashed. He squirmed in his ropes.

"You coyote!" he stormed. "Turn me loose, and I'll——"

The tall man stepped back to the table, placed the lantern on the rough boards, sat down on a stool. Then he laughed.

"You have guessed the name," he told Tom.

"Coyote?"

The man nodded mockingly, tapped his chest with a long trigger finger.

"El Coyote," he drawled softly.

Tom quieted. Here sat the man who had lured his father into Mexico. El Coyote, collector of the royal fourth, enemy of the 77.

A strange and mysterious figure, Tom saw at once. For El Coyote wore a steeple-crowned hat that was decorated with a golden band. The wide brim shaded his face. A fold of black silk masked nose, mouth, and chin.

The bandit was tall and slim. Around his lean waist was buckled a belt that supported two guns. And with a groan, Tom saw that one weapon had a white bone handle on which was stamped the Lone Star of Texas.

"The captain's gun," he whispered. "El Coyote is carryin' it. And on his boots——"

There flashed a pair of silver-mounted spurs. And now the bandit's laughter rang louder. Half rising, he pounded on the table. And

Tom saw that his hand was gloved in yellow buckskin.

"Come in!" El Coyote shouted. "Come in an' laugh with me at this young fool, this maverick, who could not wear the spurs of a man."

Men pushed aside the blanket, crowded into the room. They looked Tom over with fierce eyes. Some laughed to flatter their chief. A few who carried their arms in slings or limped, swore at the gringo who had fought so bitterly down in Dead Man's Draw.

"Let us finish him," one growled.

El Coyote laughed mockingly, waved a gloved right hand. Tom, expecting that a knife would be drawn, or a six-gun, saw that El Coyote's fingers were long and nimble.

"Except fer the little one," the Texan whispered. "That's stiff as a poker."

Somewhere he had seen another tall and swarthy rider who always wore gloves. Where? But recollection failed him as El Coyote's men came nearer.

They were not masked like their chieftain. All were not Mexicans. Several were American outlaws—toughs who had joined this strong band to murder and rob their countrymen.

"Let's blow him apart," snarled one, and he stepped into the light.

Tom Terry opened wide his eyes, barked out a name:

"Pecos Joe!"

"The same," roared the 77 traitor. "An' all set tuh drill yuh."

"That would be yore style," snarled Tom. "To kill me when I'm hog-tied. Fly to it, yuh danged spy!"

So it was Pecos who had hidden on the porch while the colonel revealed his gold to Tom. Pecos Joe

had wormed his way into the outfit to gather information for his chief.

"Kill me," Tom raged. "But I know that somehow, some way, real Texans will run yuh down an' kill yuh fer a human skunk!"

With a furious oath, Pecos Joe slipped out a gun, threw down on Tom Terry.

"No man can call me a skunk," he roared, "an' live!"

El Coyote leaped up, flung out a lean arm to knock down Joe's weapon. But he was late. The bullet would have drilled Tom Terry through his middle shirt button. But from the crowd, a slim figure emerged, an old man in the tattered garments of a peon. He jostled Pecos Joe.

The six-gun roared. But the bullet pitched into the wall just above Tom's body. Pecos whirled on the old man, knocked him down with his left fist. A can of hot stew was emptied over the floor.

"You loud-mouthed fool!" cried El Coyote. "You have knocked down my cook. An' my breakfast is on the floor."

Sinewy fingers bit into Joe's thick right forearm, hurled him away from Tom. The Pecos fighter, stumbling back, sought to line his gun on the raging bandit. But the latter, who had used his left hand to toss Joe away, held a short, needle-pointed dagger in his right. He flicked it—the merest deft toss. The knife penetrated Joe's gun arm. With a howl, he dropped his weapon.

"Get out of here," El Coyote snapped. "All of you! I called you in to laugh. When there is killing to be done, I will do it."

They backed out sullenly, all except the cook who had been knocked down. El Coyote prodded the peon with his right boot.

"Get up!" he rasped. "And out!

To your work, you clumsy fool! Do I hire you to let me starve?"

The cook arose, whimpering. He tottered from the room. And Tom, eyes wide with wonder, saw that it was Manuel who had met him down at the river crossing.

He hated the bandit but now respected him for his shrewd skill in sowing the 77 with traitors and placing disguised watchers at the crossing.

"That old cook," he whispered, "passed on some signal that I was crossin'. What a fool he must have thought me when I told my story about bein' a gold miner."

The bandit resumed his seat on the stool. For a long time, he regarded the Texan. Then he spoke smoothly. "I am clever, my friend. But you—even though you have lost gun, horse, and spurs—you also are clever. That is why you are alive. For I tell you"—his voice rose harshly—"that I would take no Terry alive without good reason."

"How did you know my name was Terry?"

"Bah! Pecos Joe told me who you were after we had knocked you senseless. The 77 maverick—the last Terry alive."

"Then—then when my father followed you——"

El Coyote laughed. "It was a long trail he followed. For years, he was not far behind me. He was a brave man, a fighter. But no match for the Coyote. We met for the last time in Mexico City. The Inn of the Skull near the Thieves' Market. It was there——"

El Coyote reached inside his shirt, brought forth a buckskin pouch similar to those that had held the colonel's gold. From this he drew a folded paper. It crackled as he unwrapped it.

"For this," he drawled, "your

father followed me. He risked his life for it. He failed."

"What is it?" Tom whispered.

"Proof," laughed El Coyote, "that I am a murderer and a thief. Proof that would convict me in any court, American or Mexican. But your father failed to get it."

He slid the buckskin pouch inside his shirt. Then he bent forward. And now his voice was fierce. And the dark eyes, under the flaring hat brim, flashed.

"But we will talk now," he barked, "of a younger Terry who also failed. Clever perhaps—but not clever enough. You tricked me well, you and the colonel. I believed you were packing gold across the river. My spies passed the word."

"How did they find out? The door was sound-proof, the windows closed."

El Coyote laughed harshly. "You forgot the fireplace chimney," he said. "There was a nimble man on the roof. He heard all you said. That the chuck wagon would not carry the gold. Well, we caught you. But——" He glared at Tom: "Where is the gold?"

"Gold?" Tom whispered. "What gold?"

"Do not lie to me. We roped that braying mule. We had no time then to look at the packs. For there was a chance that riders would hear gunfire and come from your ranch. We rode for our hide-out. We opened the packs."

"Waal," said Tom, and now he could grin, "what did you find?"

El Coyote stood up, shouted furiously. "Manuel! Bring in one of those packs."

The old cook came in, panting under the weight of a cowhide pack.

"Open it!" raged El Coyote.

Manuel unbuckled the straps,

dumped a pile of rocks on the dirt floor.

"Rocks?" marveled Tom.

"Rocks!" rasped El Coyote. "We found two sacks filled with rocks. There was no gold. You hid it. Where?"

"Yo're loco," Tom drawled. "Why would I fill my packs with rocks? Or gold? A kid like me. Say, yore man is joshin' you. The one who listened down the chimney. The colonel really intended to send his money by the chuck wagon. He figured you'd have spies out after he read yore little note. So he jest double-crossed a double-crosser."

"These rocks!" gibbered the bandit. "You lie to me. You had gold in the packs. But somewhere along the trail you became alarmed. You hid the gold, filled the sacks with these river rocks."

"River rocks?" drawled Tom, for now he was enjoying himself. "Why, Coyote, don't yuh reco'nize high value? Them's mineral rocks. As I told yore cook, I was out prospectin'. Course a bandit wouldn't reco'nize gold in the rough."

El Coyote loved to mock a prisoner. But he didn't fancy the same sort of treatment. He leaped toward Tom, dragged him from the bunk. On the wall hung a coil of rawhide lariat. El Coyote ripped it off the peg, fashioned a slip knot.

"Water!" he howled.

Old Manuel slipped out the door, returned hurriedly with a jug of water. El Coyote jerked out his knife, cut off several feet of the lariat, threw it into the jug. Then he stepped to the door, shouted angrily for Pecos Joe.

The tough entered, surly but fearful.

"You wished to kill this Texan," snapped the bandit. "But you wanted him to die quick. We fought

about that. But you are a good hombre, Joe. You have served me well. I will reward you. You shall sit here and watch this Texan's nerve break. You will grin as he howls for mercy."

"That'd suit me bang up, chief," said Joe.

"And when he is pleading for life," El Coyote went on, "he will also be seeing for the last time these relics of his father."

Raking out the bone-handled six-gun, he laid it on the table. Then he extended his right foot.

"Unbuckle these spurs," he ordered. And old Manuel, bending humbly, obeyed.

"Put them on, Joe," said the bandit.

Joe grinned, stretched out his boots. Manuel served as his valet.

"I said," the Pecos rider growled, "that these was too dang purty fer a kid. They're built fer a man's boots."

El Coyote turned on Tom Terry.

"You have one chance to live," he rasped. "And only one. Tell this man where you hid the colonel's gold. And he will save you."

Pecos Joe growled: "I figured I'd watch this greenhorn cash in."

"You would rather get yore share of twenty thousand in gold?" asked El Coyote.

"Shore!"

The bandit drew the wet rawhide from the jug, slipped out the noose. Then he laughed and walked from the room. Old Manuel followed on his slapping sandals.

Pecos Joe regarded Tom Terry with a baleful eye.

"I don't know what that hombre has up his sleeve," he growled, "but whatever it is, it's plenty. You'd better start talkin', yuh tow-headed maverick."

"About what?"

"About whar yuh hid that gold coin."

Tom laughed: "I said before that the colonel fooled yuh."

Pecos shrugged. "Have it yore own way," he sneered.

Three men entered the room. They bore a sack. They laid it on the floor. A strand of leather lariat was tied tightly to a wall peg. El Coyote strode in. He paced from the sack to where Tom lay helpless in his ropes.

"Six feet," the bandit said. "The length of a——"

"Grave?" asked Pecos Joe.

El Coyote laughed. "No. But you shall see."

His men wielded glittering knives. The sack was ripped open. With a snarl, a huge animal leaped forth, lunged against the leather thong that was fastened to its neck collar.

"A wolf!" shouted El Coyote. "The elder brother of the coyote. I have used this trick before, my friend, on men who would not talk. This wolf is kept in a cage, seldom fed, always starving. Prodded to fury when we would use him."

The huge gray animal was snapping at the stout leather, circling on padded feet, baring fangs sharp as El Coyote's dagger. Wild green eyes finally fixed on Tom Terry. With a snarl, the wolf lunged toward the Texan.

"You see," El Coyote howled, "that the lariat has been soaked in water. The leather gives under the strain. It stretches—stretches! Each lunge brings the wolf nearer this kid. An' finally——"

He stepped back, glared down at Terry.

"If you would escape the fangs," he snarled, "tell us where you hid the gold."

Then he motioned to his men. They passed out of the room. Only

three living creatures remained. Pecos Joe, leaning back against the table with narrowed eyes on the picture before him. Tom Terry, hog-tied and helpless on the floor. A snapping, snarling buffalo wolf that lunged and fought against a stretching lariat to sink its fangs into its hated human enemy.

"Now," drawled Pecos Joe, and he raised his right boot, "yuh see what happened when yuh tried to wear a man's set of spurs."

CHAPTER V.

THE TRAPPED WOLF.

A WOLF, when free, will run from a man. But at bay, no other animal will attack with such ferocity. This lobo, lunging against the raw-hide rope, biting and snapping to cut the leash, had been starved and tortured to the point of madness.

Tom Terry, who could bravely face the wild charge of a dozen bandits, felt that his iron nerve was slowly breaking as he lay there helpless, not six feet away from this green-eyed, bare-fanged killer.

"Got to hold out," he muttered grimly, and sought to roll back toward the wall.

But they had hauled him away from the low bunk where he had first rested. It barred his efforts. And Pecos Joe, noting his vain struggles, roared with laughter.

"Got yuh squirming, hey?" he shouted. "Nerve bustin' up. Waal, all yuh got to do is to say whar yuh hid that gold."

He waited. Tom eyed the wolf. A vicious lunge, the snap of fangs closing like a steel trap, the sight almost made him give in. Then he heard Joe's bellowing laughter. And he set his teeth, calling on all his will power to resist the instinct of self-

preservation which, after all, is the first law of nature.

The wolf, half starved, wearied of its efforts. It crouched with blunt muzzle resting on its paws, and red-rimmed eyes on Tom.

Pecos jumped up, launched a brutal kick against the animal's body. Up reared the wolf on hind legs, a picture of snarling fury. Then it dropped again to the floor.

"Crippled, yuh varmint!" shouted Joe.

And he kicked the beast a second time. It couldn't stand up to fight. Tom understood. For he had seen, as the wolf leaped up, that its left hind leg hung helplessly. A trap had broken the bone.

And much as he hated wolves that preyed on cattle and colts, Tom vowed that if he escaped, one wolf at least would be freed. For stretched on the floor, he understood the cruel, baffling torture of being chained up.

Now entered the author of this brutal test, El Coyote, trapper of wolves and men. He stared from the wolf to Tom, grinned at sight of the boy's face, white under its tan.

"You like my pet?" the chieftain inquired, and his dark eyes glittered above his black velvet mask. "Or would you prefer to be less stubborn and escape those fangs?"

"I told yuh before," Tom panted, "that yo're wrong on that gold."

El Coyote rubbed his chin. Then he looked at Joe.

"We will take no chances," he said. "It is almost daylight. I will take half the men. We will stop that wagon and make sure. You—you are in charge of camp."

"Want me tuh stay in here," growled Joe, "an' watch this here proposition?"

"If you like. But don't get careless. There is wine in camp. Don't

touch it. We are after a big stake in gold and when we get it, then we will drink to our success."

"I'm tectotally dry," growled Joe.

El Coyote flipped out his tiny dagger. And Tom saw that the bandit's right hand was ungloved and that he lacked the little finger. That explained the stiff finger in the buckskin glove. El Coyote had stuffed it to prevent interference with knife or gun work.

"That's an identification mark," breathed Tom. "If I ever git free an' run into El Coyote ag'in, I'll know him."

But apparently there was small chance of escaping. El Coyote grinned and drew the blade of his dagger across his lean throat as he stared at Pecos Joe. And understanding the threat, Joe snarled and vowed he would not become careless.

"The wolf has come nearer," the bandit said to Tom. "Your time grows short unless you will talk. So—adios!"

He strode from the dim room in all his glory of tight buckskin breeches that flared above soft boots, short jacket above the gleaming belts around his waist, steeple-crowned hat adorned with bullion band. And not long after, Tom heard the thud of hoofs as riders galloped away.

Then entered old Manuel, apologetic as usual. Pecos greeted him sullenly.

"The big dude pulled out?" he asked.

"With six men," said Manuel.

"That leaves about six here counting you an' me."

"You are right, señor."

Across from Tom in the side wall was a small fireplace. The peon carried a few lengths of mesquite. He

knelt and began to split these with a short-handled hatchet.

"What yuh doin'?" Joe asked suspiciously.

"It is near dawn. I built a small fire to keep you warm."

"Aw, I feel purty hot. This man an' wolf fight keeps my nerves tinglin'."

"Then you do not wish the fire?"

"Naw, git out."

Manuel bowed, edged toward the door. For an instant, he stood between Tom and Pecos Joe.

And deftly he dropped the hatchet on Tom's body so that it would not clatter on the floor. Pecos Joe jumped up. For a breathless instant, as Tom writhed to roll over on the hatchet, he believed that Pecos had seen the old man's action. But Pecos arose merely to speed the cook on his way with a hearty kick. Then he sat down.

But now Tom Terry had braced the hatchet between his back and the edge of the bunk. The blade had been ground to a razor edge, for mesquite is a tough wood. And facing the wolf, that lunged against an ever-lengthening rawhide, Tom began to saw the ropes, that held his wrists, against the steel.

He couldn't understand why Manuel had offered him this chance for life. But he decided it was because of the brutal treatment accorded the old man by both El Coyote and Pecos.

A rawhide strand snapped softly. Pecos glanced sharply toward Tom.

"What's up?" he asked. "Yo're wrigglin' sort o' strange."

With one wrapping of rawhide cut, Tom pulled gently on the remaining strands. They gave. His wrists were free. But aroused and suspicious as a grizzly bear on the prod, Pecos strode over. He leaned over the Texan.

"What's goin' on?" he growled.

There was one chance—and only one—remaining. Tom flung out his arms, gripped Pecos around the ankles. The man fell with a crash. He half rose, howling for aid. But Tom, with a mighty shove, hurled Pecos toward the wolf.

The beast leaped. Pecos, forced to fight a deadlier enemy than man, flung up protecting arms.

Tom Terry moved with speed. He sat up, seized the hatchet, slashed between the wrappings of rawhide around his ankles.

As excited men crowded into the room, he leaped toward the table, gripped the bone-handled gun.

Blam! The bullet was hasty, but a man howled as the slug cut through his rising gun arm.

A bullet whined past Tom, drilled adobe mud from the rear wall. He swerved away from the door, firing as he ran. They retreated from his hail of lead.

But there, where the wolf was tied, a fearful battle was in progress. Pecos had not been able to get away from the animal's fangs. The wolf had taken a strangle hold on the big man's right leg.

Tom Terry was a fighter, but it was not in his heart to watch a wolf maul a man to death. He rushed back to where he had dropped the hatchet, seized it, cut through the lariat that had held the lobo.

The snarling animal lunged forward. But, bending, Tom hit it alongside the head with the flat of the hatchet. And as the weakened animal staggered back, losing its grip on Joe, Tom hurled the groaning, swearing gunman toward the table and shouted for him to crawl on top.

When El Coyote's outside guard, reënforced now with rifles and sawed-off shotguns, made their sec-

ond rush through the door, they saw two men kneeling on the table. And a wolf leaping toward the door with bared fangs.

Sighting light, as the door was opened, the wolf's sole desire was to escape. These bandits would face knives and bullets. But not fangs. With wild yells, they retreated.

Tom Terry paused but briefly. He rammed his six-gun against Pecos Joe's ribs.

"The spurs!" he snapped.

Outside sounded shouting, and suddenly the crack of guns. Ripping away the spur straps, Tom worked furiously to fit them to his boots. Pecos Joe, dizzy and terrorized, tried feebly to hold the wiry Texan.

"Lay down," rasped Tom.

And with the flat of his hand, he knocked Pecos off the table and halfway across the room.

Now he heard the drum of hoofs. Horses were rushing past the shack at a mad gallop.

"A stampede!" fumed Tom. "Or El Coyote comin' back."

He must go out, fight his way to safety with the old Ranger gun, or die. Grimly, he shoved aside the blanket, stepped out under a red dawn that was just breaking above the brown hills of Mexico.

He saw that he stood at the upper end of a narrow canyon that reached down toward the river. A trail twisted up to the rim. And up this pathway, he saw a small bunch of horses running at full gallop.

Not ten feet distant, an old man in tall straw hat and gayly colored serape, crouched behind a spitting rifle. Stretched out on the bare ground were two men. Others, hidden behind rocks, were firing on Manuel.

"Around the cabin!" the old man

shouted as Tom emerged. "Hurry, señor."

"Not alone," shouted young Terry. "You'll come with me."

A bullet spattered against the front of the adobe hut. Tom lined the six-gun, fired on a rifleman whose tall hat appeared just above a sagebrush. Dust flew from the hat as the owner dropped from sight.

Under cover of Tom's fire, old Manuel raced around the hut. Tom cracked out another slug and followed at a stiff gallop, for his legs were numb from the tight ropes that had so lately bound them.

In a little gully below the house was a brush corral. In it stood two animals, a buckskin horse and a mouse-colored mule. They were fighting for freedom, but they had been tied with stout ropes.

"I ran down when you made the stand-off," Manuel gasped out. "Stampeded the rest of the horses after I had tied up yore pony an' that mule."

"Why did you help me?"

"Because—when I heard that you were young Terry—I remembered that years ago your father was good to me. Captain Jim. I could do no less."

"You did plenty. But we got to ride!"

They hit leather, for Manuel had thrown a light Mexican saddle on Dynamite. The gate was open. They galloped out. Tom's silver spurs were gleaming under the early light.

They followed the hot trail left by the stampeding ponies. It circled around the shack. Here was danger. For as the two men rode past with Tom in the lead, Pecos Joe staggered from the house.

And two of his bandit friends rushed from hiding to shoot Tom and Manuel off their mounts.

"Look out!" the old man yelled.

A bullet tore leather from Tom's saddle. But he flashed past the shack. Pecos Joe, lashed to fury and fearful of punishment from El Coyote for allowing the prisoner to escape, took an extra chance.

He leaped out boldly to turn Tom's horse. Stem-winder, ears laid back and teeth bared, lunged ahead. A front shoulder struck Pecos, flung him to the ground. He lay there in a crumpled heap as Tom and Manuel turned up the trail that led to the canyon rim.

Guns roared but the bullets were wild and high. The two riders topped the ridge. Toward them rushed horsemen. And they saw El Coyote in the lead. The gold band on his hat gleamed under the rising sun.

"Cut off!" Tom groaned.

But Manuel shouted: "The bandits are running. Men are following them."

It was true. El Coyote and his riders circled across the mesa, not daring to take chances on being caught between two fires.

Tom heard the bull-like roar of a buffalo gun, saw one of the bandits fling up his arms and pitch from the saddle.

Then El Coyote had dropped from sight over a rise of land. And Texas punchers, led by Sorrowful Smith, surrounded Tom and Manuel. The trail veteran bore the .50 caliber Sharps.

"Boy!" he snapped, no thought now of song or poetry in his mind, "whar you been all night? An' who's yore Mex friend?"

"Entertainin' El Coyote!" said Tom.

"Entertainin' him? Shucks, he's been down payin' a call on us. Jumped our chuck wagon just be-

fore daylight. We beat him off. Follered him."

"How's the colonel?"

"Half weepin' an' blamin' himself fer sending you out with that gold. Wishin' he'd took it in the chuck wagon in the fust place. Fer, after all, his men proved true-blue. All except two."

"I can name 'em. Pecos an' Pete Santerra."

"Yeah. An' say, whar is that dang gold? Them cattle are about due. If we don't git it quick, the Lightnin' brand herd won't go up the trail."

CHAPTER VI.

ACROSS THE RIO GRANDE.

ON the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, where Dead Man's Draw runs down to the stream, the 77 camp was located. In several bunches, cattle began to string down toward the crossing. They were piloted and driven by vaqueros from several of the near-by ranches.

Colonel Pointer, wavering between rage and grief, was talking to a respectful hombre in high hat and tight buckskin breeches, a veteran foreman who had been appointed to count over the cattle for the various owners, receive the payment, and aid in crossing the herd.

"Dang it," the colonel sputtered, "I wisht I had never made this deal. I'd rather see that boy come ridin' back than own half the cattle in Chihuahua."

"The cattle are here, señor. We are ready for the counting. Where is the money?"

"Don't yuh understand that I played the old goat an' sent a good kid alone across the Rio Grande with yore money? Can't yuh savvy that I tried tuh outsmart El Coyote, an' he beat me at my own game? Never

ag'in will I bluff. Hereafter, I'll trust my men to the limit."

"We are sorry indeed, señor, that one of your men is missing. We know that El Coyote is indeed a bad man. But"—the Mexican pointed toward the herd that had been thrown together and held by a circle of horse-men, "this is business. Show us the money, or we must turn out our cattle."

The game was lost. The colonel shrugged helplessly, shook his head.

"Good-by, Tom," he murmured. "An' good-by, 77!"

He turned and stumbled toward the chuck wagon where old Baldy was cleaning up after the night battle with El Coyote. Just now the cook was pouring horse liniment on a Texas puncher's bullet-creased pate, and cussing the victim into silence.

"We're whipped," groaned Colonel Pointer. "Boy gone—money gone. But if I could see Tom Terry ag'in, I'd not give a dang about the gold."

Baldy glanced up, saw something on the hills above the camp. And one of his infrequent grins came to his fat face.

"If you had good eyes," he shouted, "you'd turn an' see a sight tuh make yuh beller."

The colonel swung around, forgetful of his sprained ankle. Then he whooped and did a war dance. Down the hogback came a knot of riders.

Three men led. One was a lean Texas puncher with a buffalo gun across his saddle fork. On his right flank galloped an old Mexican in flapping white cotton pants. And on the left there rode a tall youth whose yellow hair gleamed under the sun.

"Tom!" bawled the old colonel. "Tom!"

The vaqueros, holding the cattle, drew their guns at the approach of

the wild riders. They were honest men, but they feared these gun-fighting, laughing Texans. The foreman, caught near the chuck wagon, raked forth a Colt and swore in Spanish that here was treachery.

But old Manuel shouted that El Coyote was defeated, that the herd would be bought. Guns were holstered. Vaquero faces broke out in pleased grins. The foreman turned mild as milk, took off his hat to talk to Colonel Pointer.

While Tom and his boss were shaking hands, the herd was strung out. These were the typical long-horns of old Mexico, of every variety in color and size, but all running to branching horns with a spread of six feet from tip to tip.

These cattle were wild and almost swift as deer. Here on the Rio Grande they were gaunt and undersized. But after three months on the bunch grass of the Chisholm Trail, they would gain weight and sell for triple their present price to Northwestern buyers.

"String 'em out," said Tom Terry, "an' make the count. Two thousand head at ten dollars a round."

"But the money, Tom?" the colonel protested.

"Don't worry about that. Loan me a strong man an' a shovel. I'll perdooce the money."

He did. From four of the old graves, he dug out the buckskin pouches where he had hidden them under the rocks before the charge of El Coyote.

Two thousand cattle were counted, the money turned over. There were stacks of coins on a blanket that had been spread on the ground. The foreman called men to carry off the payment, others to guard it.

"That El Coyote," he said, "may return."

"You can bet he'll return,"

growled Sorrowful Smith. "If it hadn't been fer gittin' back to the outfit, me an' Tom would have run him cl'ar to Chihuahua City. But we had to git back. So watch yore mazuma, señor."

Now began the delicate job of crossing two thousand nervous long-horns across two hundred yards of river. A long brush fence had been built below the crossing at right angles to the stream. This served as a wing to prevent cattle from breaking to the side as whooping punchers ran small bunches down to the Rio Grande.

"Excited cattle," Tom explained to Manuel, "will generally foller a hoss. That's whar me an' Stem-winder come in."

Manuel smiled. "Señor," he said softly, "I have crossed many long-horns across wider streams than this."

"Where?" Tom asked, startled, for he had taken this old man for nothing but a peon cook.

"It is not time yet to tell you that," whispered Manuel. He laid a clawlike hand on the boy's shoulder, and somehow he seemed to stand straight as a ramrod in his tattered garments. "Some day, let us hope, I will tell you where I rode the cattle ranges."

He turned away, shuffled toward the brush along the river. Tom watched a moment. Then he heard shouts as a half dozen riders cut out two hundred head of longhorns, bunched them, and shot the wild-eyed animals along the wing fence toward the crossing.

Stem-winder stood waiting. Tom hit leather. He raced into the river. The cattle followed the horse.

Where the stream made Stem-winder swim, Tom drew up his legs, took a firm grip on the cayuse's black mane. He looked back. The

Rio Grande was filled with long strings of swimming cattle. Their blunt noses, branching horns, just broke the surface.

Occasionally one emitted a choked bawl and attempted to turn and drift with the current. But other punchers were slipping into the stream on both flanks. They splashed water in the eyes of the fugitives, swung them back into the main herd.

The work proceeded swiftly for it was a good day for crossing. There was no sun on the water to blind the longhorns. The river was low and safe.

"That is," Tom said, as Stem-winder emerged, wet as a beaver, on the American bank, "unless they drift down stream to whar they'll bog in sand."

That now was the sole danger. That the herd would become panicky, turn in mid-stream, and be carried by the current down to sand bars. If such happened, Texas punchers, endeavoring to break the mill, would be swept from their saddles, lost with the herd.

Rapidly the crossing went on for the Mexican foreman and his vaqueros were aiding the 77. A thousand longhorns had reached the United States and been herded closely by several punchers. Half the herd must cross. An hour had elapsed since Tom had first spurred Stem-winder into the Rio Grande.

An extra horse had been brought across to the Mexican side for his use when Stem-winder grew weary. There came a halt in the crossing as a half dozen steers proved contrary. Vaqueros were lashing them into line with bullwhips. Texas punchers waited to flank the swimmers. Tom, wiping down Stem-winder just outside the wing fence, heard a sudden sharp yell:

"Señor!"

He swung on his high heels, saw Manuel emerge from the brush at a headlong gallop.

"They come!" the peon cried. "El Coyote has returned!"

Around a muddy bend in the river broke a line of horsmen. They galloped straight toward the filing cattle. Several quirted their horses into the water. Guns began barking.

But the bullets were not pitched toward the Texans and the vaqueros. They were flung across the surface of the stream to splash alongside and ahead of swimming longhorns.

Frightened animals, bawling, swung out of line and were caught by the current. Several drifted past the end of the wing fence toward the slimy yellow sand bars down stream where red-necked turkey buzzards roosted.

"Come on!" Tom yelled.

He had swung his gun belt from a near-by fence post before taking to the river. He seized it, buckled it around his wet waist. As he grabbed for a swinging stirrup, old Sorrowful Smith came up with a rush. His hard eyes were centered on the whooping line of attack.

"I'm with yuh!" he barked.

The unexpected attack threw the entire job of crossing the herd into wildest confusion. Some vaqueros, panic-stricken, fled with despairing yells of "El Coyote."

But many brave riders rallied under the stout-hearted foreman who was there to deliver longhorns and return with twenty thousand gold dollars.

Three men led the rush against El Coyote and his band. Sorrowful galloped on the left flank with the wind whipping his long yellow mustache back past his outstanding hairy ears.

Old Manuel, sprightly as a youth despite his age, galloped on the right astride a flea-bitten gray Indian cayuse.

Tom Terry held the center on red-eyed Stem-winder.

The two lines met with a crash. Gunfire rolled back from the hills of Mexico. Other Texans charged into the dusty mêlée. One, who came swiftly on a mouse-colored mule, was a bald-headed cook swinging a meat cleaver.

Another who topped a panting pony was Colonel Pointer, afire for battle despite the pain of his sprained ankle.

They fought, Texans and bandits, not for money or life, but to make or break a longhorn herd.

In the dusty swirl of fighting horsemen, it was difficult to recognize face or form. Men spurred their horses, ran out lead until hot guns were empty, swore, and lived or died as their luck ran.

And up the stream, daring the swing of cattle that would catch and drown them in a fatal mill, other Texans held the line from the wing fence to the shores of the United States. Cattle were crossing. That was the first duty of the cow-punchers—to see that this work was not broken up.

"Whar's this coyote?" howled old Sorrowful, and he swung his old Sharps like a war club at the head of a galloping bandit.

"I also would see him!" panted Manuel. "For years, I have tried to pull that mask off his face!"

Out of the haze loomed a huge man. His teeth gleamed in his ugly black-whiskered face. He charged Manuel, deciding that it would be easier to attack this old man than a grizzled warrior of Sorrowful's stripe.

Their horses met with a shock. Stirrups locked. Manuel rose like

a rattlesnake striking, battered down Pecos Joe's guard with a plunging gun barrel, shot the bully off his horse.

"For kicking me," he snarled, as he galloped away.

Tom Terry's rush on Stem-winder had carried him straight through the battle. Ahead he saw a lone horseman. The sun gleamed on a golden hat band. Tom set his left spur. Stem-winder turned on the space of a dime.

The two riders met there on a bank, ten feet above the Rio Grande. Tom caught a brief glimpse of a black velvet mask under a tall hat.

Then the smoke of roaring guns obscured the bandit's face and figure.

The bandit's horse, lunging backward as the rider whirled to meet Tom's charge, plunged off the high bank into the yellow Rio Grande.

The fact that he rode a wise cow pony saved Tom from like disaster. For Stem-winder, trained to turn and dodge, swerved away from the crumbling bank. Tom checked. He rode slowly back to the edge.

Just below him a quivering sand bar extended out into the river. The bandit had been hurled into it when his horse plunged off the wall. There was nothing in sight now except a tall hat with a gold band and one arm extending into the air with fingers curled and clawing.

Even as Tom ripped his lariat off his saddle to make a cast—for he would have saved even El Coyote from such a death—the mud closed over the arm.

"Gone!" gasped Tom.

Then he looked farther down the bar and saw a longhorn sinking to its death.

"Mebbe he got what was due him," the young Texan whispered.

"Died the same way as the cattle he stampeded."

A rider came up, glanced at Tom.

"I knew that man," he said.

"Who was it?"

"El Coyote! He had something with him that I have tried to get for years. A buckskin sack containing evidence of a murder and robbery committed ten years ago."

"It's gone now," said Tom. "No power on earth could resurrect El Coyote from that quicksand."

The battle was over. Several dead bandits were sprawled in the mesquite. Two 77 punchers and three vaqueros had also paid with their lives to save this herd. But men rushed back to finish the work. That was the code of the Texas Trail. To stay with the herd despite death or disaster.

Colonel Pointer and Sorrowful met Tom and Manuel.

"All over," said the 77 owner. "Nothin' to do now, but take two thousand longhorns up about two thousand miles of trail that's brimmin' over with outlaws, Injuns, tough towns, and hard-eyed nesters. An' with a few stampedes and so forth thrown in fer good measure."

"But at least," Manuel said, "we will not worry about El Coyote."

They sat silent, nodding their heads. And then—from a low ridge behind them—a howl floated up toward the sky.

"But coyotes," whispered Colonel Pointer, "real coyotes seldom howl in the daylight. Do you reckon he could——"

Tom Terry was staring hard at his boss and picturing again the sight of the hand disappearing under the sand bar. He hadn't thought about it until now.

"That right hand," he said, "had all its fingers. But El Coyote——"

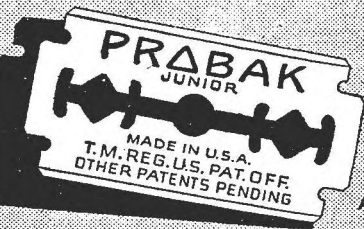
"He lacks a right little finger," said Manuel.

"I reckon that man in the sand must have been Santerra," said Tom. "Pete Santerra."

Colonel Pointer grunted. "If it wa'n't El Coyote, we will soon enough know that he's alive. For he hates the 77, and he'll not quit until he has broken us or himself."

Even if that wa'n't El Coyote who dropped inter the quicksand, there's still plenty o' trouble ahead fer Maverick Terry an' his pards. The Texas Trail is a plumb tough drive fer any cow outfit. An' the 77 has a long ways ter go. Foller 'em. There'll be another story about their doin's in an early issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.

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Dead Guns for the Silver Kid

By T. W. Ford

Author of "The Sign of the Silver Kid," etc.

SOME sixth sense had warned him, and the "Silver Kid" was bolt upright on the cot in the back room of the Crossroads House. His face came up to the level of the dingy, cracked windowpane, and he stared out upon striking death.

A bunch of men had come into the yard behind the place, pony hoofs muffled in the mud from last night's downpour.

There was a limp, sodden figure two gents had been holding in the saddle. They let him slip to the ground.

Then "Solo" Strant, the Silver Kid, saw that the limp one had been playing possum; saw, too, the glint

of the lawman's badge on his vest.

When he hit the mud, he rolled over in a flash, digging at the .45 on his hip. He just reached the cedar butt. Then one of the bunch—a squat gent—spurred his cayuse over him. And another man whipped his hand up from a shoulder holster.

Crang-g—crang-g! The two shots ripped out almost as one.

And the lawman slumped back dead, sombrero crushed down in the mud by his head.

The Kid choked a moment, sickened by the cowardly murder. Then his own hand snaked around to his silver-butted Colt beneath his straw

pillow. He knew it was there. Habit always made him wake repeatedly during a night to make sure it was close.

His hand clamped on it as the door was booted rudely open. The Kid flung up his gun, thumb cocking the hammer. It wouldn't come back. And his sleep-heavy eyes widened as he gaze at a rust-locked old weapon, broken and useless. The half-breed proprietor of the Crossroads House had double-crossed him.

Crang-g! There was a splintering crack.

A slug buried itself in the wood over the Kid's head. And a seedy, red-rimmed-eyed gent barged through the door.

"Steady, yuh fool!" he snarled.

The Kid sat motionless. The five from the yard pushed in after the first, the breed proprietor with them. The Kid's eyes slid to his double cartridge belts over the chair. They were a couple of yards away.

But he saw that his second holster had been emptied, too. His fingers inched toward his shirt.

Then he thought better of that. Five or six weapons covered him now. It wasn't time for the last-ditch play. A false move and a half dozen slugs would drill him point-blank.

Slowly he rose from the cot, bootless, a tiny waddy beside those six wolfish gents. Yet that slight body could deal death in a lightning-fast flip of gun steel from holster leather. His smile widened.

"Yuh gents'll have tuh pahdon me fer not bein' ready tuh receive yuh like yuh——"

"Shet up!" snapped the leader.

He took the Silver Kid's silver-stocked weapons, which the breed passed him. The leader was a stringy, wall-eyed hombre, a toothpick between his brownish teeth,

spider-legged on run-down boot heels.

His wall-eyes went from the deputy badge pinned on the inside of the Kid's coat, over the chair, to the window, then out to the dead man in the mud.

"Yuh seen too much," he said thoughtfully. "Mebbe we better close yer eyes—like his."

The Kid's eyes went to the body out there, half covered in the rank growth of weeds. He stiffened his spine against the chilly finger that played along it. And silently he berated himself for his carelessness.

He'd known he was on the edge of the Red Rim country—outlaw territory. But he'd been pushing ahead for almost a day and a night steadily. The rain had made a morass of the trail, chilled him to the marrow. And his tough little paint horse—Sorghum—had been exhausted and glassy-eyed. So he had reined in at the Crossroads House and bedded down.

But the breed proprietor had double-crossed him. The Kid knew that now. Going through his clothes during the night, the breed had come across that deputy's badge.

It was the night before, as he sat resting the paint at a fork in the trail, that the Kid had got that badge. A sunken-eyed figure had stumbled from the mesquite, then slung up a gun with a hoarse cry and opened fire.

In a flash, Solo had dropped from the saddle, yanking at his own holster. One shot from his deadly gun sufficed. He creased the stranger across the head, dropping him.

Solo had eeled through the mesquite to him, rolled the flat figure over on its back. For a long moment, he'd stared at the deputy's badge on the other's vest, at the groove where a slug had been de-

flected from it, at the crimson splotch on the deputy's chest.

The latter had opened his eyes briefly and croaked his story. Riding the Red Rim country with a fellow deputy, he'd become separated from his pard, then gunned by one of the Rim bunch. He'd taken Solo for one of them. Then his dying breath strangled in his throat as he tried to name the hombre who'd shot him.

Solo had scraped him a grave. About to ride on, he'd seen the deputy's shield in the trail. And something had made the Kid pin it on as he started the man hunt for the deputy's killer.

Now it looked as if that deputy's badge was to be Solo's death warrant. Solo knew he was cornered. But his nerve didn't waver.

"Mistuh," Solo said, bluffing hard, "there's more'n one way o' gittin' a deputy's badge."

"Climb intuh yer boots!" the wall-eyed hombre ordered. "Haney, git his hoss saddled up."

"O. K., Shag." Haney—squat, bow-legged, and almost neckless—waddled out, spurs dragging. Solo noticed that he was the one who'd ridden down the deputy.

Calmly humming his strange Mexican tune, Solo hauled on cold, stiff boots. He drew on the coat of the plain black suit, pulled on a weather-beaten sombrero.

"Shag" whistled softly at sight of the tiny silver skull that held the straps of the hat together beneath the Kid's chin. That was the sign of the Silver Kid—that and the silver-conchaed hatband and the silver spurs on his boot heels and the silver-stocked guns. That was why he'd been dubbed the "Silver Kid."

And gents who crossed the sleepy-eyed, soft-spoken ranny in gun play could have told of another sign.

And that was the scar that remained for life across the back of a man's gun hand after the Kid had shot his weapon from his grasp.

"Thet hat might look right handsome on me," the gent called "Shag" muttered.

Solo the Kid shrugged. "Then, again, she might earn yuh a rope necktie."

Shag guffawed, wall-eyes rolling. "Yuh John Laws allus bray loud just 'fore yuh cash yer chips. Let's git movin'."

They went out, past the snaky-eyed breed behind his bar, to the ponies in back.

Shag gave more orders. The dead man was loaded into the saddle. Well covered with drawn guns, the Kid climbed aboard his paint pony, Sorghum. Then they filed out and along the greasewood-lined trail that led up toward the pass on the edge of the Red Rim country.

Hangman's Pass, it was called. The Kid had heard about it. When a gent was led out of the Red Rim country through that pass, he usually met his fate at the hands of a necktie jury.

Solo himself had ridden through it the night before in the rain. And the Shag hombre was going to show the Kid a new way of naming that pass.

They reined up in the mouth of it, its high sides shutting out the scorching sun. A gnarled, long-leafless tree reared up on the left.

Shag nodded and grunted something. One of the men snagged his rope over its lone limb without removing the cigarette stub pinched in his thin lips. He snaked a second across.

Twin nooses dangled down. Solo realized he was to be hanged in the place of the deputy he'd met on the trail.

The Shag gent laughed dryly. "‘Hangman’s Pass,’ they call it, huh? I’ll show ‘em who’s the hangman! Git ‘em set!"

The dead man’s pony was sidled beneath one of the loops.

"Reckon we won’t have tuh tie *his* dewclaws," Haney jeered as he propped up the head so they could slip the noose over it.

The other end of that rope was lashed around the trunk. And then the dead man’s pony was quirted out from under him and his crooked legs swayed in the air.

The Silver Kid fought the sickness that crowded in his throat, tried to close his ears to Haney’s cackle. Some day, he’d like to get that waddy alone.

"All right. The next one!" Shag commanded.

Solo’s paint was led forward. It nickered fearfully as if it sensed what was coming.

"Easy, Sorghum fella," Solo murmured calmly. "Our partnership ain’t dissolved yet."

Shag spat and rolled his toothpick across his face. He balanced one of the Kid’s silver-stocked Colts admiringly as they lashed his hands behind him.

Haney yanked off the Kid’s hat, and the noose went over his head. Still the Kid sat with that quiet smile.

"How ‘bout lettin’ the condemned man have a last smoke, mistuh?"

Shag nodded. "All right. A few puffs, anyway. Thet is," he added, "pervidin’ yuh got the makin’s."

"Right here in my shirt pocket," Solo said.

Haney sidled up lazily on his pony, fished in the Kid’s pocket, then began to build him a quirky, sneering.

Shag was talking. And Solo was thinking fast, trying to see out the

back of his head, blindly gauging the movement of his lashed hands. Haney had got just a mite careless, just an inch or two too close, as the Kid had figured. The leering bully was the type.

"Thet un an’ yuh, yer agoin’ tuh be a lesson tuh yer breed," Shag was boasting. "I want ‘em tuh know what’ll happen tuh folks what come noseyin’ in here. Buzzard bait! Thet’s what!"

Haney was holding the match after jabbing the smoke into the Kid’s mouth. And the Kid’s light fingers had gun steel. He thanked his stars that Haney was a cross-arm-draw gent, toting his gun butt forward.

"Take yer last puff!" Shag warned. "I got one ornery, two-gun lawman yesterday. Thet’s ‘nother danglin’ ‘side yuh. An’ yer goin’ tuh keep him company! Now——"

"Yer makin’ a heap of a mistake, mistuh," Solo said.

Shag guffawed, spat. "Let his pony have the quirt there!"

"Not so fast!" the Silver Kid purred.

The hombre known as Haney sat frozen, burnt match in his suddenly paralyzed fingers. There was a gun, upside down but none the less effective, crowding his ribs. And the coldness of the Kid’s drawling voice was matched by the glitter in his narrowed eyes.

"Wait—Sh-Shag!" yelled Haney plaintively. "W-wait!"

II.

Even as Haney begged, Shag flung up the silver-stocked gun of the Kid’s with which he’d been toying. It looked like a stand-off with the Kid due to stop lead. But the Kid remained sleepy-eyed.

He was thinking fast. Shag’s

boasting words about getting another lawman told the Kid who Shag was: The killer of that deputy on the trail!

"Sh-Shag," Haney begged, "he's got a gun on me an'——"

"Tuh blazes with you!" Shag returned coldly. "I kin git me plenty o' two-bit gun fighters, Haney. An' I'm agoin' tuh git me a dead polecat right now."

"Thet deputy said the same thing," Solo announced flatly.

Shag hesitated, edging his pony forward. "What depity?"

"The one whose badge I'm wearin' now."

"Yuh killed him?"

"Mistuh, I don't know nothin' 'bout yuh. How do I know yuh ain't a lawman or a bounty-huntin' gent? An' yuh, Haney fella, don't git nervous with yer dewclaws. You'll stay healthy longer!"

Shag laughed harshly and shortly. "Me a lawman? Haw-haw! Yuh met thet deputy?"

"Uh-huh."

"An'—what?"

"Nothin'," Solo said evenly, poker-faced. "Only I never aimed tuh stretch a John Law's rope or be a two-bit sheriff's target."

"An' yuh swapped lead with——"

"I said once I'm not sayin'! His grave's back there on the trail. Yuh kin fork back an' see fer yerself pronto. Yuh don't figure he gave up this badge o' his easy, do yuh?" The Kid was making a stiff bluff. "Now do I ventilate this waddy o' yores or——"

Shag's wall-eyes widened. It was his turn to say: "Not so fast! I 'member thet badge, 'cause I gunned thet depity myself, yesterday. When I left him a-layin' fer dead, I saw where my slug had grooved his badge. But he got away after thet an'——"

The Silver Kid played his boldest card then. "Why in tarnation didn't yuh say yuh wasn't lawmen in the fust place!"

With the words, he dropped the gun he held on Haney. It slid to the rocky trail between the horses.

"Me a John Law?" Shag spat his contempt. "When we was 'bout tuh string yuh up, yuh heard what I said 'bout——"

"Talk's cheap," the Kid cut in. "Wind-bellied gents come down the trail fast. How'd I know there wasn't a reward out an' yuh gents aimed tuh collect it an'——"

Shag grinned slyly. "Yo're one o' them gents they want dead or alive, huh?"

The Kid only shrugged.

Shag sat thinking. He looked down at that gun the Kid had voluntarily released, the only thing that had given him any kind of a drop on them.

"Well, mister, what'd yuh say the handle was?"

"I didn't. Strant's as good as any, ain't it? Folks call me Solo, 'cause I ride alone."

"All right, Mr. Solo Strant. Yo're agoin' tuh ride down the trail tuh thet grave o' the depity with us. An' if everything's like yuh say—all right."

"Suits me," Solo said.

"Cut him loose, boys. Give him a rest from the hemp necktie, too."

And Solo Strant, the Silver Kid, played his ace then. They freed his hands. He swung them a moment, then slid one up to his shirt as if to get the makings. Instead, the fingers suddenly flashed inside it, whipped the two-shot derringer from his tiny hide-out holster. And he had it under Shag's nose in a split second.

Shag sat frozen, wall-eyes glassy.

"Pahdon me if I borrow my own

smoke-pole, mistuh," the Kid said softly. He snapped it from Shag's limp fingers.

While he holstered the derringer, he kept the Colt on the second button of Shag's dirty shirt. Then he drew a silver dollar from his pocket, placed it on the wrist that held the gun.

Like forked lightning, his gun hand slashed down across his body to his holster, sheathed the gun. The dollar fell spinning from his wrist. And the Silver Kid's hand whipped up with that gun on the draw.

Brang-ol! And the dollar was plugged before it hit the dust.

Through the swirl of gun smoke, he handed the Colt back to Shag, butt foremost. It was a long-shot gamble. But Solo meant to convince them he was far from a lawman, was a lobo like themselves, a hot-striking killer. He wanted to ride with them, to be accepted as one of them. Returning the gun clinched the play.

Still stunned, Shag took it. His men sat astounded, two of them just drawing. Shag stared unbelievably at the gun that had left his hand only to be returned so swiftly.

"I *could* 'a' drilled yuh, if I'd wanted tuh," Solo told him quietly. It wasn't time to make his play, he knew.

Shag nodded, still bewildered. "Mr. Strant, thet was dang fast gun play! Awful dang fast! If thet deputy's in his grave like yuh say, mebbe yuh might crave tuh ride with my bunch, huh?"

"Mebbe," the Silver Kid said. He had won the first trick.

They rode out of Hangman's Pass, down from the huge mesa that was the Rim country. Solo looked back once at the dangling figure of

the deputy who'd been gunned so viciously. High over him, a buzzard drifted.

The Kid's sleepy-looking eyes swung back to Shag's men, riding along the edge of a mesquite jungle. Two of them rode behind the Kid, their leathery hands never straying far from their tied-down holsters.

"Sorghum, pard," Solo addressed the wiry little paint, "'fore I resign from this here outfit, there's goin' tuh be work fer a heap o' buzzards—or a heap of ropes. An'——"

The rider ahead turned. "Say somethin', fella?"

"Jus' a-parleyin' tuh myself," Solo answered. "They tell me gents learn thet trick up in the Big House."

"They *tell* yuh, huh?" the man ahead guffawed. "Bet yuh ain't been there, huh? Haw-haw! Strant, yuh should 'a' been an actor!"

Solo's eyes got even more sleepy-looking. "Yuh ain't seen me *really* act yet, fella."

He kept watching Haney as they rode, studying his face every time the trail twisted and he could get a glimpse of it. Haney looked like a hurt child or maybe a bogged-down dogie that had been deserted in a mud hole.

Haney couldn't understand it. Shag had been all primed to sacrifice his life, when Solo held the gun on him before. Shag had been going to let him get shot down like a worthless cur.

Haney was scared. He'd been close to death, and he didn't want to die. He'd just about been double-crossed, it seemed. Again and again, his fat hand strayed to the bowie knife stuck in his waistband. Solo knew what the pudgy hombre was thinking. And Solo was counting on it.

The sun was plumb in the cen-

ter of the sky like a hole in the blue when they halted at the spot where the deputy was buried. Shag and two of his men went over and scuffed away the rocks, then the dirt.

The Kid built himself a smoke as if it meant nothing to him. Shag peered down at the face, then came over and dropped a hand on the Kid's shoulder. Inside, Solo was quivering with fury, thinking of how that deputy had died.

"Reckon yo're on the square, Strant."

Solo's eyes slid around. "Anybody says I ain't——"

Shag stiffened. "Easy, mister. No sense in scrappin' 'mong ourselves. Yuh an' me drawin' 'gainst each other—well, she might be suicide, either way."

But the outlaw leader's mouth was ugly around the toothpick. He couldn't forget that Solo had shown him up with that sudden derringer play back in the pass. Still, he couldn't turn down the chance of getting such an ace-high gun slinger in his bunch.

"How 'bout throwin' in with us, hombre?"

Shag wasn't taking any chances, though. A gent had to prove himself to ride in his lawless outfit. And especially this young ranny who'd appeared to be a John Law. Shag had a test.

Unhurriedly Solo licked the edge of his cigarette paper, stuck the quirly between his lips, applied a match to it. Almost without looking, he knew his every move was watched, that he'd have no chance for gun tricks for a while.

He meant to settle with Shag in a show-down gun play. But the Kid was no fool; there wouldn't be much sense or satisfaction in burning down Shag if his men ventilated him, the Kid, immediately after.

"O. K., Mistuh Shag!" He grinned disarmingly. "Only I don't crave tuh git danged near hung every sunrise."

Shag guffawed. "We all make mistakes, pardner. An' yuh don't need worry 'bout to-morra mornin'. 'Cause I aim tuh hold up the Painted Plains bank. 'Fore I'm finished, they'll be callin' me 'Poison Shag,' all right."

The Silver Kid's heart sank. He'd hoped they would fork back to the Rim country. Instead, he was going to be forced to raid a town.

III.

About sundown, they made a dry camp in a coulee in the foothills north of Painted Plains. The Silver Kid got no chance to make a play. Shag kept his silver-stocked Colts. And the rest of the bunch took turns standing guard in the brush by the picket line throughout the night.

Shortly after the sun had been up a couple of hours, they rode out and pushed toward the Plains.

Once, on the crest of a rise in the rolling range, the Kid caught a glimpse of it—a straggling huddle of frame buildings with here and there the gleam of a dobe standing out. There was a white town hall with a tumble-down turret, gilt signs that glittered brilliantly under the sun.

He thought again of that dying deputy, of how Shag's men had snuffed out the life of the second one in the yard of the Crossroads House. And he felt white-hot rage inside him.

But now it looked as if the famed Silver Kid himself was trapped.

"Sorghum, hoss," he murmured as the paint pricked its ears, "they got the piggin' strings on yuh an' me right proper! Got us earmarked an'

iron-marked for the lobo brand. But until the last card's dealt——"

The hombre with the red-rimmed eyes sidled his pony toward Solo as if he'd read his thoughts.

"Yo're a purty gun slinger, amigo! But I seen some o' the best earn 'emselves six foot o' Boot Hill—fer a double cross!"

The Kid looked out of those sleepy eyes and smiled. "Do I look, fella, as if I was goin' loco?"

The red-eyed waddy dropped back, rattling the loose cartridges in his ragged jeans. He was wondering if maybe this young-looking hair-pin was just a trick gun slinger, and if he'd be so tough in a real gun fight.

Shag led the way south, crossing the main trail that had developed into a wheel-rutted track, to swing down to the cottonwood-lined creek.

Shielded by the cottonwoods, they closed in on the cow town that was now without a sheriff. The creek curved about a hundred yards south of it.

Shag check-reined his pony back on its haunches. Then he stood studying the town for a long time from under frowning, sun-bleached brows.

His wall-eyes swung to his bunch.

"Six gunmen—naw, five o' yuh—ought tuh be able tuh keep 'em all covered! Yuh, Strant—yuh'll go in an' git the dinero! Sabe?"

Solo nodded slowly, steeling his nerves. The play was all against him.

"Haney, yuh hold the door," Shag concluded. "An' give 'em plenty o' lead if they ask fer it!" He and the red-eyed gent whispered together a moment.

And that gave Solo his chance. He'd halted beside Haney purposely. Tugging off his black sombrero with the silver-conchaed band, he pre-

tended to fan himself as he talked low to him.

"Seven ways is a heap tuh split this dinero."

Haney's eyes ran around, and his thick neck sank guardedly into shoulders. He counted heads, eyes resting balefully a long moment on Shag's own back. He hadn't forgotten how quickly Shag had been willing to let him get killed, the day before.

"Five 'gainst two is too many," he croaked back.

"Is six 'gainst one?" Solo asked in reply.

"Meanin'?"

"Meanin', does Shag figure tuh split it seven ways," the Kid whispered in a long-shot chance.

It clicked. He could tell by Haney's eyes. The man was thinking of the day before. Thinking, too, of how he'd be on foot to hold the door of the bank, how easy it'd be to drop him as they fogged it out after the job was done.

Shag swung around and guided his pony over to Solo. The stringy, spider-legged bandit leader pulled Solo's twin Colts from his waist-band and held them out. The red-eyed gent was right behind the Kid then, with his hogleg in his paw.

"They're loaded, Strant! Look fer yerself!" Then he whirled his horse and barked for them to follow him.

The Silver Kid just had time to shoot a quick glance at the cartridge chambers as he thumbed the barrel around, and to see that the shells were in. He spurred Sorghum out of the cottonwoods, the red-eyed hombre tailing him all the way.

They thundered upon the quiet cow town. A white-haired man peered short-sightedly at them from his chair tilted against the front of the livery stable. Then Shag's gun blasted the alkali at his feet, and

he popped out of sight like a panicked jack rabbit. They swung into the wide, rutted main street.

Two men scurried back through the batwing doors of a barroom. Doors slammed and shutters slapped as Painted Plains cowered under the scourge of the Red Rim country.

One bald hombre leaped out of the feed store, steadied a rifle. But before it could crash out a shot, a volley toppled him with a broken leg.

A wild-eyed Mex pushed a six-gun out of a second-story window.

Crang-g! Orange-red flame jetted from Shag's murderous weapon.

The Mex tumbled back inside. And the horsemen, with the Silver Kid for once riding with outlaws, streaked down the road. They swept it with their gunfire. Shag's arm flung up as his cayuse slid to a stop across from the bank.

Haney and the Kid slid from the saddle and headed for it on a dead run. The Kid was thinking fast. Haney, ahead, brought his gun barrel down savagely on the skull of a fat man who came running out.

"Fast, fella!" he bawled at Solo.

Solo Strant whipped his lithe body inside, shot a glance around, then turned and leveled on Shag from the shadow. It wasn't the way the Solo hombre liked to fight. But, trapped by circumstance, he had no choice.

He steadied himself a moment. He didn't want to kill Shag. When the Kid did that, he wanted it to be in a stand-up, fair-and-square fight.

Crash-h! The silver-butted weapon blurted lead from his steady hand.

And the Silver Kid stood staring. It seemed impossible. For he had missed. Shag, unhurt, was aiming at somebody down the road.

Crack-k! Something bit grind-

ingly into the wood near the Kid's shoulder.

Whirling, he saw a pasty-faced teller gripping a six-gun in both trembling hands.

Crang-g! A second time the deadly Silver Kid shot.

He didn't want to hit that teller. But he had to stop his shooting. He aimed for within a couple of inches of the man's head, for the wooden framework of his cage. But nothing happened. The teller was clumsily cocking the hammer a second time. And then Solo realized.

They had given him back his guns all right. But during the night, one of the bunch had cut the lead slug from the bullets. He was shooting blanks, nothing but a blast of powder that roared in answer to the hammer. He saw then why he'd missed Shag, a moment ago.

The Kid was tricked. He had to play out the outlaw rôle.

"Soon, Mistuh Shag, yuh an' me's due fer a reckonin'," he muttered as he rushed forward.

IV.

Solo jabbed his useless weapon through the bars of the teller's window.

"Drop thet smoke-pole!" he commanded.

The panicky man's thumb slid down from the hammer. Slowly he let the gun go. It fell to the counter. The Kid snatched it up, gestured with it to the single, old-fashioned vault open behind him.

"Come across with the dinero!"

On stumbling legs, the pasty-faced teller tottered to the safe and hauled out a couple of canvas sacks of currency. He pushed them under the bars of his cage, teeth rattling.

Solo grabbed them in one hand and waited for no more. He didn't

know what his next move was going to be.

But as he stepped out, the scared, treacherous Haney made for him. He swung his Colt toward Solo and relieved him of the bags. He, too, had known, evidently, that the Kid's weapons were as good as dead.

The shooting had stopped as Haney lunged for his pony. Solo hurried after him to the Sorghum horse; he saw how the red-eyed hombre kept him covered. Then they were fogging it back down the road, around the corner of the livery stable. There was a wild burst of fire at them there. Two-three gents, too, already urging out ponies.

Toward the creek and the cottonwoods they tore, Haney with the dinero in the lead, Shag hard after him, three of the others off on the right flank. Behind Shag came Solo with the red-eyed gent following.

Spang-g! A rifle spoke from the rear, and one of the three on the right toppled from his saddle.

They kept on riding, the remaining six, hitting the bank of the creek. Forelegs splashed through the water. And the canny Silver Kid played his final card.

"Look out, Haney!" he bellowed.

And with the bank teller's gun he sent a slug whistling close past his head. Haney twisted around. It was the double cross he feared. Ready to turn on Shag since the incident under the rope yesterday, he suspected treachery only too readily.

Crang-g! Crang-g! He thumbed the hammer wildly at Shag, but missed.

And Shag rode at him. Desperately, the squat Haney flung his cayuse broadside in the stream. He and Shag crashed, both falling from the saddle. The two horses went down, neighing with fear, as Solo

swung the light-stepping Sorghum from the path.

He urged the paint up the opposite bank and whirled as the red-eyed gent, following, threw down on him. Solo Strant's borrowed gun spoke. "Red-eye" crashed from the saddle. Solo twisted around toward the creek.

One of Shag's bunch was spurring madly down it, already vanishing around a bend. Haney and Shag and the last one were thrashing about in the water.

Haney was an insane man. His gun knocked from his hand, he had the bowie out, was working toward that last man, thinking it was Shag.

A final gun blurted. Haney slumped down in the shallow water. Shag himself straightened, fighting the sucking mud.

The Silver Kid spoke his piece. "Gents, I' hate tuh see any more killin's, but——"

He left the rest of it unsaid, hinting at it with the slow-wheeling weapon. Shag swore savagely as he pawed mud from his face.

"Yuh mangy snake, yuh said yuh was no lawman."

"An' I'm not," Solo told him. "But I'm a square man, an' I crave tuh see square play when it comes tuh guns!"

Shag spat, then went yellow, as he turned to see the hastily assembled posse from the town drawing near. The last gent of his bunch went over and flopped down on the bank.

"Yuh said yuh ride alone, huh? Why, yuh double-crossin'——"

"Soft, mistuh!" Solo warned. "Talk soft! I was ridin' alone—only yuh didn't know it!"

The posse swung up, a jabbering, excited handful of townsmen. In a few words, Solo told the story of the dying deputy he'd met on the trail.

A little bow-legged hombre from the plains shook his head ruefully and asked some questions. Solo told him all he knew.

A sly glitter lighted Shag's wall-eyes. He was on the bank, trying to shake the water out of his boots. And he'd remembered something forgotten in the fight in the creek. Remembered about the Kid's guns. That Solo hombre was fast as lightning. But with empty guns——

Shag stuck a finger in his ear and worked it around as if he was having trouble with water there. Then his other hand whipped to the hide-out weapon in a shoulder holster. That part of him had remained dry enough. He slung it out, laughing harshly.

"All right, yuh polecats! Who's the joke on now, huh?" He had the jump on them. The posse had already holstered their weapons.

"I'm awfully sorry, mistuh——" the Silver Kid began.

Then his hand with the bank teller's Colt slapped up.

Crang-g! Crang-g! Crashing lead spanned the few yards between them.

Shag's bullet drove into the ground. And he reeled backward, clutching his gun hand, staring at

the red, bullet-grooved sear across the back of it.

Shag stared and stared, unable to take his wall-eyes from the gash that would leave a lifelong scar to testify to the gun wizardry of the Silver Kid.

The Kid stood rubbing that tiny silver skull on his chin strap.

"I got a heap of a big hunch, Shag, thet a necktie jury'll do to yuh what yuh did to thet dead deputy up in Hangman's Pass."

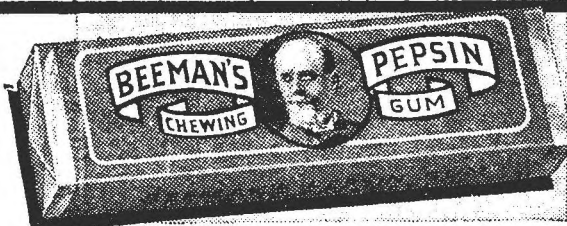
Shag paled, then put on an air of bravado. "Let 'em string me up—an' every gent in the Rim country'll be crowdin' in here with spittin' guns!"

"We'll chance thet," the leader of the posse said.

Solo Strant, the Silver Kid, smiled thinly as he holstered the Colt. "Wouldn't make a heap o' difference if yuh did git away, Shag! Foggin' it wouldn't do yuh no good, no matter how far yuh stretched hossflesh. 'Cause, no matter where yuh went, what trail yuh hit, men'd know yuh fer what yuh are."

He began to build himself a quirkly. "Shag, yuh got the gun mark—the sign o' the Silver Kid—there on yer hand till the day yuh die! An' mebbeso thet day ain't far off."

Flavor? Lots of it



Enjoy Beeman's Gum

... A I D S D I G E S T I O N



Calamity Borrows A Badge

By Lee Bond

Author of "The Oklahoma Kid Votes Early," etc.

THE two riders rounded a hair-pin curve in the steep mountain trail just as a rifle exploded. The riders reined in, staring in surprise.

Not thirty yards ahead of them, a man squatted in the trail, levering a fresh shell into a Winchester. The gun steadied, boomed again. The two riders saw the direction the gun was pointing, and swung their glances.

They were both snarling instantly. For two hundred yards away, a band of wild horses raced frantically along a mountainside. Behind the band

lay two of the wildies, kicking in death as their sleek bodies skidded down toward the valley where they had been grazing.

"That dirty skunk!" one of the riders snarled. "Calamity, that jasper needs a lesson."

The one who spoke was "Shorty" Stevens, a bantam-sized waddy with sandy hair, snapping gray eyes, and a hair-trigger temper. As Shorty spoke, he swung his eyes to "Calamity" Boggs, his trail pard.

Calamity was a large, powerfully built waddy, with curly black hair and black eyes that were as keen as

an eagle's. Calamity's big smooth-shaven face was the picture of gloom itself.

"This ain't none of our business, Shorty," Calamity's deep voice came suddenly. "O' course, I'll ask the gent why he's killin' them harmless broomtails. But he'll likely drill me, pard, 'cause my awful luck has overtook me at last. This'll be my finish, Shorty."

If Calamity Boggs ever had a cheerful thought in his life, he kept it strictly to himself. But Shorty Stevens had traveled with his big gloomy pard long enough to know that Calamity's gloomy talk was simply a habit.

Shorty saw something now that pleased him very much, and that something was a smoldering gleam in Calamity's black eyes. The big sour-faced waddy might look and act like a dummy, but Shorty Stevens knew that Calamity Boggs was a whirlwind with those huge fists, and an expert with either rifle or six-gun. And when Calamity's eyes gleamed as they gleamed now, some jasper was due for trouble.

The rifle crashed again, and the man down the trail swore angrily because his slug missed a lagging colt in the band of wildies. The jasper heard the approaching riders then, glanced at them, and turned his attention back to the wild horses. His rifle came up, and he was searching through the sights for a target when Calamity Boggs called loudly to him.

The gun roared, but the sudden boom of Calamity's voice caused the rifleman to twitch. The hombre missed the lagging colt again, and leaped to his feet with a savage oath as Calamity and Shorty reined in, facing him.

"What do yuh mean, bellerin' out like that?" the fellow demanded

harshly. "Yuh made me miss that danged colt, that's what. Fer two cents——"

"What's the use in shootin' them wildies?" Calamity Boggs cut in. "O' course, it's none o' my business. Them hosses has likely ate up all the range yuh own, or somethin'. This is yore land, ain't it?"

The rifleman was staring up at the saddle pards out of puckered yellow eyes. He was a gangly, hook-nosed specimen, with two low-slung guns on his thighs, besides the rifle he held.

"Strangers, eh?" the horse killer sneered suddenly. "If yuh wasn't strangers, yuh'd know better than monkey with me."

"Who's monkeyin' with you?" Shorty Stevens snapped. "Calamity, here, asked yuh was this yore land."

"Say, runt, watch how yuh talk ter me," the hook-nosed man in the trail snarled. "It's none o' yore business, but this hyar is gov'ment land."

"Oh, so yuh was jist killin' them hosses fer fun, then?" Calamity Boggs muttered.

"Shore I was, yuh gloomy-lookin' fool!" the rifleman snarled. "They makes danged good target practice. I allus piies off my bronc an' drills a few o' the cussed wildies whenever—— Hey, what the——"

Calamity Boggs leaned out and down so suddenly that the hook-nosed hombre had no chance to dodge aside. Calamity's two big hands fastened over the gangly jasper's shoulders, and a moment later, the horse killer was lying face down across the bow of Calamity's saddle.

"Let go o' me, feller!" "Hook-nose" wailed. "Yuh can't handle me like this. Shore as my name is Butch Olan, I'll—— Hey, wait!"

Calamity had reached down, grabbed the rifle barrel, and ripped

it from Butch Olan's hands. Calamity also removed the six-guns from the holsters at Olan's thighs, then calmly tossed the lanky jasper to the ground.

Calamity slid to the trail, tossed the captured six-guns well aside, and stood looking a moment at the rifle he still held. "Butch" Olan was scrambling to his feet, swearing wildly, murder in his tawny eyes. Calamity Boggs took the rifle by barrel and stock, gave it a sudden twist, and stood looking at the broken weapon.

He tossed the barrel and mechanism away, flipped the polished stock into the air, and caught it by the tapering shank where the metal of the gun had joined it.

Why, yuh blasted coyote, I'll fix yuh fer this!" Butch Olan bawled. "I'll knock yore blasted head off, thet's what!"

Butch Olan charged then, fists swinging. Calamity watched him calmly, and it seemed that one of those whizzing fists would surely find the big waddy's face. But at the last moment, Calamity moved, and with such speed that Butch Olan rushed on past.

Calamity reached out, caught Olan by the nape, and shook him sharply. Then Calamity sat down very calmly, pulled Butch Olan down across his knees, and grinned ever so slightly.

"This is going to hurt yuh worse than it does me, Mr. Olan," Calamity said dolefully. "O' course, I'll likely beat yuh plumb to death, an' git hung fer doin' it. But while this hyar rifle stock holds out, I aim to warm yore pants a mite."

The rifle stock rose, came down sharply, then rose again. Butch Olan yelled shrilly, for Calamity Boggs was plying his crude paddle with no gentle force.

"Yow-ee!" Shorty Stevens whooped. "Pour it on him, pard! The skunk needs worse than that fer killin' hosses jist fer fun. Let that paddle slip an' crack him acrost the head with it!"

The paddle kept up its sharp *whap-whap-whap* until Butch Olan lay trembling and groaning with pain and rage. Calamity tossed him aside then, threw the gun stock far down the mountainside, and stood up.

"Yuh won't feel like settin' a saddle fer a spell, hombre," Calamity growled. "So we'll take yore blue roan that I see down the trail yonder on into town. Besides, a long walk might teach yuh some respect fer a hoss."

"Yuh dang——" Olan began.

"O' course," Calamity added hastily, "yuh'll trail me down an' drill me fer this. An' I'll bet yuh cripple me up instead o' killin' me outright, so's I'll die slow an' awful. The signs have allus been agin' me."

"Yo're danged whistlin' I'll trail yuh down!" Butch Olan croaked hoarsely.

He stood there in the trail, gaunt face white with rage. But Olan had sense enough to let well enough alone. He was far from a weakling, yet Calamity had held and spanked him as easily as if he was a mere child. Butch Olan realized that that big sour-faced waddy who had twisted a sturdy rifle apart and used the stock for a paddle was no hombre to fool with.

He watched out of tawny eyes that were pools of murderous light while the two strangers rode on down the trail. Butch Olan saw them stop, gather in the reins of his big blue cow horse, then ride on down the crooked mountain trail toward the valley.

Olan started limping down the

trail then, swearing sizzling oaths at every step. It was ten long miles to Bender, and he was afoot.

"Them two will pay fer this!" he snarled as he staggered down the trail. "I'll round up the boss soon as I git ter town an' tell him what's took place. Them two strangers will shore wish they had never been borned afore me an' the Bar C gits through with 'em!"

II.

Calamity Boggs and his runty pard stopped just outside of Bender, looped up the blue horse's reins, and sent it galloping on ahead of them down the trail. They waited until the blue horse turned into Bender's one crooked street, then followed at an easy pace.

"This'll be my finish, I tell yuh, pard," Calamity Boggs moaned. "Whuppin' thet gent an' stealin' his hoss——"

"Fer gosh sakes, yuh big moose, stop gloomin'," Shorty cut in peevishly. "All yuh've done is groan. We didn't steal that hoss. The critter is free to go back to wherever it belongs, ain't it?"

"Thet's right," Calamity sniffed. "Bawl me out jist when somethin' turrible is due to happen. I—— Good gosh, jist look!"

Shorty was looking, gray eyes widening. The pards had just turned into the town's street. Ahead of them a few rods stood the blue horse they had taken away from Butch Olan. The horse stood in the center of the street, surrounded by a crowd of hombres who were plainly excited.

As Shorty and Calamity drew closer, they noticed that those hombres were plenty ornery-looking, and heard them shouting Butch Olan's name. Calamity grunted heavily,

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swung his big line-backed dun into a sagging hitch rack, and dismounted. Shorty reined his roan horse sharply, pulled in beside Calamity's dun, and bounced down to the dusty street.

"We'd better sort of edge up to that crowd careful, Calamity," Shorty growled. "Looks like that hoss-killin' Olan snake is right well knowed around here. Some of his pards might not like it if they knowed what we done."

"O' course his pards won't like it," Calamity growled gloomily. "An' they'll find out right off that I kilt that pore feller an'——"

"Yuh—say, are yuh plumb loco?" Shorty growled. "That danged Olan snake ain't kilt, an' yuh know it. Blisterin' his breeches an' lettin' him walk to town won't kill him none."

"He'll likely starve ter death on the way in," Calamity mumbled. "Or mebbe the pore feller will git snake-bit an' die chawin' his tongue with fits."

"Yuh make me sick!" Shorty snapped. "All yuh do——"

But the peppery little waddy got no farther. A heavy tread sounded on the sidewalk just behind them, and the pards whirled from their horses to find themselves facing a squat, thick-set hombre with a flat, scarred face that was twisted into a suspicious scowl.

The squat jasper licked at bloated lips, letting his hard steel-gray eyes rake the two cowboys up and down coldly.

Shorty and Calamity blinked, for on the hombre's open vest was the badge of a town marshal. The marshal took another half step forward, halting on wide-planted boots, thick, powerful fingers brushing the butts of twin six-guns that were thonged to his thighs.

Shorty Stevens and Calamity Boggs had all the respect in the world for law and the men who enforced it. But somehow neither of the waddies could keep from feeling that here was a professional killer rather than the usual peace-officer type of man.

"Who are yuh two?" the marshal snarled in a thick, coarse voice. "Quit starin' at me like locoed sheep an' start talkin'! Who are yuh? Where yuh from? What business yuh got hyar in Bender?"

"Easy, there!" Shorty Stevens growled, eyes kindling hotly. "Not so fast on the jaw, feller. That tin badge——"

"Yuh'll likely hang me, marshal, fer some crime I've did," Calamity Boggs cut in mournfully. "But yuh'll have to do it awful quick, 'cause I'm likely dyin' on my feet right now. There's a misery in my head, my stummick is out o' whack, my liver is plumb bad, an' I'm mebbe goin' blind. Besides, I'm hongry."

"Huh?" the squat officer gulped hoarsely. "What—— Say, yuh tryin' ter kid somebody? Who are yuh?"

"Calamity Boggs is my handle." The big waddy shrugged as if very tired. "This feller hyar is Shorty Stevens, my pard. Shorty wants ter make arrangements fer my funeral, Mr. Marshal. The signs is so agin' me that if yuh don't hang me fer somethin' or other, I'll die afore night, anyhow."

The marshal was about to reply when several men left the crowd that had gathered about Butch Olan's blue horse and came running up. In the lead was a big rawboned hombre whose heavy-featured face was flushed and scowling. The big hombre turned ugly green eyes

on the town marshal and swore raspingly.

"What yuh foolin' around these two saddle bums fer, Blue Cookson?" the hombre growled. "Somethin' has happened ter my ramrod, Butch Olan. We'd better——"

"We'd better ask these two a few questions, Guy," the marshal cut in, jerking his head toward Shorty and Calamity. "I heard 'em mentionin' Butch's name when I came over this way ter see who they was. This sawed-off feller hyar was sayin' somethin' about Butch gittin' his breeches blistered an' havin' ter walk ter town."

The big rawboned hombre with the ugly green eyes stiffened. Hoarse oaths came from the salty-looking jaspers behind him, and Calamity and Shorty found themselves instantly hemmed in by a scowling pack of hombres who looked as if they were ready to do some gun-slinging.

"Guy Casper, hyar," the marshal snarled suddenly, jerking a hand at the big rawboned man, "owns the Bar C, west o' town. Yuh two saddle bums better tell what yuh know. If yuh've kilt Guy's ramrod——"

"We never kilt the yaller-eyed snake!" Shorty Stevens flared hotly. "We ketched him shootin' down wild hosses jist to see 'em kick. Calamity wore a gun stock sort o' thin on the seat of his pants, an' we left him about ten miles out the north trail on foot."

The snarling pack would have charged the two pards then but for Guy Casper. The Bar C man yelled profane orders until his hirelings backed up, then turned on Calamity and Shorty, green eyes glinting wrathfully.

"So yuh set Butch Olan afoot, eh?" he snarled. "Yuh must 'a'

snuk up an' jumped Butch when he wasn't lookin', fer that ranny is plenty fast with his guns. Marshal, lock these two up until we find out whether Butch is hurt or not."

"Say, yuh ain't going to let 'em git by with this, are yuh?" the marshal gasped hoarsely. "Guy, we'd better drill——"

"Shut yore fool mouth an' do what I said," Guy Casper snarled. "Besides, Blue, I've got a hunch that these two gents robbed that stage yesterday an' kilt the shotgun guard an' driver."

The squat marshal started, then began grinning broadly. He yanked his twin guns with a swift motion and trained them on Shorty and Calamity.

"Say boss—er—I mean Guy," the marshal laughed, "yuh shore have got a head on yuh. Mebbe we'll find some plumb sound evidence that these two done that stage job if we search the bed rolls on their saddles, eh?"

"We likely will." Guy Casper grinned crookedly. "An' I'll bet they try ter escape an' git kilt sometime ter-night, huh? Especially if Butch comes ter town an' gits put on guard duty at the jail."

A hoarse, unpleasant ripple of laughter ran around the mean-eyed crowd. Calamity Boggs and Shorty Stevens needed no one to tell them that they were in a mighty tough spot.

III.

The Bender jail proved to be a tiny, one-room adobe building with heavy oak door and two small windows that were barred and cross-barred. The little building sat on a knoll, overlooking the rather mangy-appearing town.

Shorty Stevens paced to and fro

in the tiny jail now, sputtering like a sore-headed bobcat.

Calamity Boggs sat on the edge of a grimy bunk, somber eyes staring moodily into space.

Shorty and Calamity had offered no resistance, for to have done so would have meant sudden, violent death. They had been marched up here by the evil-eyed marshal, kicked into the jail, and left to themselves.

"It's a gosh-danged frame-up, Calamity!" Shorty Stevens ranted now. "Did yuh hear what them snakes said about that stage business? They aim to plant evidence on us, then let that yaller-eyed gent yuh whupped with the gun stock drill us."

"I allus knowed I'd come to a turrible end," Calamity gloomed. "Bein' framed fer robbery an' murder, then shot down cold is shore awful, pard. Too bad my awful luck got yuh into this hyar mess."

"Aw, shut up, onless yuh kin think o' somethin' besides that danged gloom," Shorty gulped uneasily. "Calamity, don't yuh savvy that this here is plumb serious?"

"Shore I do," Calamity grunted. "But what can a gent with my awful luck expect? I——"

Calamity broke off, for there came a sudden clattering sound at one of the barred windows. The pards hurried to it, and saw a wizened little old hombre grinning at them through the steel bars.

"Howdy, boys!" the old fellow called. "Me, I'm Ben Nelson. I run the general store down the street yonder. Git up closer, where I kin see yuh good."

The two punchers came closer to the bars. Shorty was frowning, but Calamity managed a slow grin.

"Humph!" the merchant snorted, after a minute. "I thought so.

Yuh two ain't no stage robbers. What'd Guy Casper sick that phony marshal onto yuh fer?"

"Phony?" Shorty Stevens cried. "Nelson, do yuh mean that Blue Cookson ain't really the town marshal?"

"He's no more a marshal than yuh are!" the old merchant snapped. "Guy Casper pinned that badge on the skunk an' told him ter be marshal, that's all. Blue Cookson is a killer that Casper imported along with some others, about six months ago."

"If I'd 'a' known this," Shorty Stevens snarled, "them snakes never would 'a' got my guns as easy as they did."

"Jist as well yuh didn't make a fool play," the little old merchant clipped bluntly. "Who are yuh boys?"

Shorty introduced himself and Calamity, then explained briefly what had happened, starting with their finding Butch Olan killing horses for the fun of it.

"So here we are," Shorty finished grimly. "An' I reckon we'll wind up in Boot Hill."

"So Guy Casper an' Cookson aim to frame that stage job onto yuh, hey?" the merchant growled. "Boys, me an' some others knowed them snakes was behind the stage job yis-tiddy, jist like they've been behind all the rustlin' an' robbin' that's took place around here for the last six months."

"Where's the law—I mean the real law?" Shorty Stevens asked. "Ain't there nobody in these parts to put a stop to such stuff?"

"The sheriff comes down from Tucson now an' then, shore," the merchant snorted. "But Guy Casper is the richest man in these parts, an' keeps the sheriff out at his place, entertainin' him plumb royal, every

time the Johnny Law comes down. Nobody but Casper's friends kin git a word in edgewise to the sheriff, boys."

"What's the matter with writin' the sheriff a letter?" Shorty demanded.

"Jake Freeborn, who used to be my partner, tried that," the merchant snarled. "Jake was found next mornin' hangin' to one o' them pepper trees down yonder in the plaza. Mebbe that happened because Tolly Evans, the postmaster is Guy Casper's cousin."

"With the postmaster watchin' to see that no mail gits to the sheriff, I reckon this Guy Casper can jist about run things around here," Shorty growled. "But danged if I'll— Say, Calamity, we've got to git out of here!"

Calamity had said nothing. He stood there, looking grimly at the old merchant, black eyes puckered a little. Calamity shrugged his big shoulders now, and the expression on his face became gloomier.

"I'm too nigh gone over the Big Divide to make any struggle, pard." Calamity almost groaned his words. "Me, I'll likely not live to git shot by them turrible fellers, anyhow. O' course, Shorty, if Mr. Nelson, hyar, was to slip us a saw or an ax through these bars——"

"Nothin' doin'!" the merchant yelled shrilly. "If I was to help yuh fellers, I'd—I'd git kilt, shore. Me, I'd better go tend ter my customers."

Before either Shorty or Calamity could say a word, the little merchant was running back down the hill toward the mangy scattering of adobe buildings that flanked the ugly street.

"Well, I'll be danged!" Shorty Stevens cried hotly. "I thought

that feller was going to help us, Calamity. I——”

Clank! Shorty and Calamity both whirled as a metallic clattering sound crashed behind them.

They looked first toward the small window which was located in the wall opposite the window through which they had just talked to the merchant. Then their eyes dropped to the floor, and they were leaping forward instantly. For there on the floor lay a keyhole saw and a brace and bit!

IV.

It was the work of a few minutes to bore a hole through the heavy oak door with the brace and bit, then start sawing a half-moon cut about the massive lock that held the door.

Calamity Boggs certainly did not act as if he was ready to go over the Big Divide now, for he was doing the sawing, while Shorty Stevens stayed at the window to watch down the hill toward town. Calamity handled the thin-bladed saw with utmost care, for that plank was thick and tough, and too much pressure on the thin saw blade would snap it.

“Gosh, Calamity, ain’t yuh got that lock cut out yet?” Shorty called in a strained voice. “Seems like yuh’ve been sawin’ away fer hours. If Casper an’ his gang gits back afore——”

“Thar!” Calamity called. “The trick is done, Shorty. We kin waltz out o’ hyar now, pard. But I’ll never live ter see the sun go down. With my awful luck, I’ll git drilled afore we can find us some guns.”

Shorty whirled away from the window, and saw that the job was indeed completed. The massive oak door swung outward, leaving a

half circle of wood that held the massive lock which was still held by the tongue to the facing groove.

“Who do yuh reckon dumped these tools in here, huh?” Shorty asked excitedly, as he and Calamity stood peering cautiously out of the door.

“One of ol’ Ben Nelson’s friends likely done it,” Calamity grunted. “I reckon Nelson was afraid to come right out an’ admit that he was helpin’ us, fer fear we might git talkative later an’ git him into trouble. But we’ll never be able to do any talkin’. Leastwise, I won’t. With this awful luck——”

“Come on, yuh gloomy ox!” Shorty cut in peevishly. “Casper an’ his outfit will be back here any time. We’d better git us some guns, feller, an’ git set to smoke them coyotes some.”

Shorty stepped boldly through the door and started down the path which led to the town. Calamity slogged along behind him, mumbling dire predictions of coming trouble, but raking the ugly street below him with eyes that missed little.

The pards were almost down the hill when a band of horsemen swarmed into the far end of the street. Shorty yipped excitedly, half turned—and felt himself lifted clear of the ground. Shorty yelled in alarm, for Calamity was carrying him tucked under one arm like a sack of oats.

“Put me down, yuh crazy galoot!” Shorty fumed. “What in blazes do yuh think yo’re doin’?”

Calamity had quit the trail and was bounding mightily toward a rickety building which sat at the foot of the hill. The big waddy gained the old building, lowered his runty pard, and made a swift sign for silence.

After a moment, Calamity grinned

sourly and started toward the back of the building.

"They didn't see us," he chuckled. "If they had, they'd be makin' a big holler right now. Come on, Shorty!"

"Dang! I reckon I would 'a' spilled the beans, at that." Shorty grinned at his big pard. "Yuh must be right, Calamity, about them gents not seein' us. I shore don't hear any fuss."

Calamity seemed not to have heard. He gained the back of the building, peered around, then stepped into a littered alleyway. Calamity strode along behind several buildings, glancing keenly into back doors. He turned suddenly and entered the back of a building before Shorty could overtake him.

When Shorty leaped through that back door, a moment later, he found Calamity standing in the middle of the room, grinning as he looked across a scarred counter at old Ben Nelson.

"So yuh boys made it, eh?" the old merchant was saying. "But yuh'd better git under cover mighty quick. Casper an' his outfit jist come back to town. They're in the Buckhorn Saloon, next door hyar, gittin' primed fer action."

"Thanks, amigo, fer havin' it rain a saw an' brace and bit through thet winder," Calamity grunted. "O' course, gettin' out will not do me any good. But if yuh had a extry six-gun or two around hyar——"

"I've got plenty o' six-guns to fill yore holsters," the merchant clipped. "I'll loan yuh all the guns yuh want, boys. But fer gosh sakes git down in my basement an' keep hid. Somebody will discover that yo're out afore long, an' things will begin poppin'."

The merchant moved swiftly to a showcase, opened it, and took out

four brand-new Colt .45s. He snatched a box of shells from a shelf behind the counter, then hurried back to where Calamity and Shorty waited.

Shorty had two empty holsters thonged to his saddle-warped legs. He snatched a pair of the big single-action six-guns, opened their shell gates, and grinned happily as he loaded the thick cylinders with shells from his belt loops.

Calamity took one gun, for he had one belt and holster. He loaded the weapon swiftly, hefted it, and shook his head slowly.

"Off balance. The barrel is bent an' the cylinder don't revolve jist right," he moaned. "This gun'll git me kilt the minute I step into thet Buckhorn place."

"The minute yuh—— Say, are yuh loco as yuh sound?" the old merchant cried hoarsely. "If yuh go into that Buckhorn, Boggs, yuh'll die in yore boots!"

"I know it," Calamity croaked. "But the signs is agin' me, nohow, amigo. Besides, them snakes aimed to frame Shorty an' me fer a robbery an' killin' they done their own selves."

"Don't pay any attention to that big jasper's groanin', Mr. Nelson." Shorty Stevens grinned as Calamity moved toward the front door. "An' if yuh want to see him introduce a little six-gun law to Guy Casper an' them others, jist foller me."

"You mean——" the merchant gasped, but got no farther.

With a sudden grin, he came around the counter and started toward the front door, through which Shorty and Calamity had both vanished. A slender Mexican clerk who had stayed at the front of the store grinned at the old merchant and fell in beside him.

"Mebbe we didn't do the right

thing by lettin' them two out o' jail, Juan," the merchant growled uneasily as he and his clerk passed out through the door. "They'll likely git their fool selves kilt, that's what."

"Those beeg hombre with the so sad voice have the hands which move very fast, Señor Nelson." Juan grinned broadly. "Me, I theenk we see some fon eef we watch through the Buckhorn windows."

V.

Guy Casper leaned his big frame against the Buckhorn bar and downed his sixth drink. Beside him stood Butch Olan, tawny eyes glittering dangerously as he mouthed oaths and fondled a whisky glass.

Beyond Olan stood the phony marshal, Blue Cookson. And on down the bar were half a dozen others of the same type—hard-eyed, tight-lipped hombres who looked just what they were, professional killers.

"Too bad we've got ter plant some o' that stage money in the blanket rolls them two strangers carry behind their saddles," Blue Cookson grumbled. "Guy, I think we ought ter——"

"I'll do the thinkin' fer this outfit, Blue," Guy Casper cut in. "Havin' ter kill that fool guard an' driver yesterday was bad business. The sheriff will be down hyar to-day or to-morrow some time, an' we'll need a plumb sound alibi, boys. Jist leave all the plans ter me an'—— W-what the——"

The front doors slapped open, and into the room stalked Calamity and Shorty, apparently very much at ease. Guy Casper and his hirelings stared in open-mouthed amazement as the two punchers stalked to the bar, leaned against it calmly, and

looked the room over as any two cowpokes just getting in town might do.

Blue Cookson swore suddenly, lurched away from the bar, and stamped toward Shorty and Calamity, evil face livid with rage.

"What are yuh two doin' out o' jail?" he boomed. "Dang yore mangy hides! I—— Hey, wait!"

Calamity's left hand flicked out, and Blue Cookson's vest tore as the marshal's badge was ripped away. Calamity looked at the badge a moment, unfastened the pin, and then refastened it to his own shirt front.

"Now I'm marshal," Calamity said sourly. "O' course, I ain't got the sand ter arrest anybody. If I did have, I'd arrest yuh fellers fer robbin' thet stage yistiddy an' killin' them two men."

"They—they've got guns, Guy!" Blue Cookson cried hoarsely. "Somebody has left these fellers out, an' give 'em——"

"Take yore star back, yuh blubber-headed fool!" Guy Casper yelled. "Us boys will back yore play, marshal, if yuh need us to."

That seemed to reassure Blue Cookson. He twisted his scarred features into a bestial scowl, flung a name at Calamity Boggs, and reached for his twin guns.

But Blue Cookson never drew. Something like the kick of a mule picked him up, flung him halfway across the room. He landed on one unwashed ear, shivered once, then lay still, out cold.

Calamity Boggs blew on the knuckles of his right fist, turned slowly, and started to speak. But Butch Olan squalled an oath, leaped away from the bar, and snapped his hands down in a lightning draw.

Shorty Stevens grinned—and went for his own guns. Calamity Boggs stepped clear of the bar, just as four

six-guns crashed loudly. Calamity saw Shorty stagger, saw the livid welt appear across the little waddy's cheek where a slug had grazed him. But Butch Olan was caving in, swearing weakly as he clawed at his bullet-shattered middle.

Calamity had no time to see anything else just then. For with a wild oath, Guy Casper went for his guns, and went fast.

Calamity's lips settled into a hard grin. Guy Casper's guns were already out and tilting up when Calamity's huge right hand made a shadowy motion, and the double thunder of a single Colt fired twice roared out.

Guy Casper reeled back, screaming wildly from pain and terror. His arms flopped limply at his sides, and the unfired guns spilled from his nerveless fingers.

Calamity leaped past him, smoking Colt thundering again and again. Those six slit-eyed hirelings had gone into action, and Calamity staggered a little as a slug plowed along his ribs, breaking the skin.

But Shorty Stevens was there beside Calamity, and the six Bar C men found themselves thrown into a panic as hot lead crashed at them. Two of the cutthroats were knocked kicking, and the other four lifted their arms with yells of surrender.

"Fight, blast yuh!" Guy Casper screamed. "Don't give up now, or we'll all hang. Yuh fools grab them guns an' start fightin'!"

But those four men who were still on their feet had no stomach for a fight. They cowered back against the bar, eyes rolling uneasily, as Shorty Stevens stepped beyond them and lined his guns. Calamity Boggs half turned—and went sprawling headlong to the floor as a gun boomed.

"Got the snake!" Blue Cookson

roared, leaping up. "An' now I'll git——"

Wham! A Colt roared, and Blue Cookson sat down with jarring force.

Crimson spurted from one of his ears, and there were murderous lights in his ugly eyes as he spun to face Calamity Boggs. Calamity's gun roared again, however, and Blue Cookson dropped his weapons to claw frantically at his scalp.

Calamity Boggs got up slowly, reeled across the room, and calmly helped himself to Blue Cookson's gun. Calamity tossed his own weapon aside with a sour grin.

"Good thing yuh didn't call my bluff, Cookson," Calamity rumbled. "My gun was empty. O' course, yore slug got me deep in the stummick, an' I kin feel muhself dyin' slow an' awful right now."

"Pipe down, yuh big moose, an' give me a hand," Shorty Stevens yelled harshly. "Gosh, Calamity! I shore thought—— Hey, watch the door!"

The swinging doors had slapped open, and grim-eyed men poured into the room. In the lead was a lanky red-headed hombre with a big five-pointed star gleaming on the front of his flapping vest.

"S-Sheriff Jim T-Tinker!" Blue Cookson choked.

The lanky sheriff and the men with him were dusty, grim-eyed, weary-looking. They marched down the room, guns out, glances shooting right and left.

"Hey, sheriff!" Shorty Stevens called. "Guy Casper an' these other snakes robbed that stage yesterday an' kilt the guard an' driver. They tried to frame Calamity an' me, but we turned the tables."

"Got any proof of that fellers?" the sheriff asked grimly.

Shorty stiffened, eyes growing

wide. He saw Calamity blink, grow crimson.

"I knowed it!" Calamity moaned hoarsely. "This is my finish, shore as shootin'. I shot all these hombres jist fer cussedness. Leastwise, that's what the sheriff will say. An' I—— Good gosh! He's got me fer impersonatin' a officer, too. Jim Tinker an' me grewed up together. He knows what an awful skunk I am. But he'll not hang me. These awful wounds is festerin' right now, an' I'll——"

"Same cheerful cuss yuh used to be, ain't yuh, Calamity?" The gangly sheriff grinned suddenly. "Quit groanin', yuh big cuss! Yore pard an' yuh are in for a nice reward, Calamity."

"A grave will be my reward," Calamity groaned as he shook hands with the sheriff. "But we rounded up them stage robbers like Shorty said, Jim."

"It's a lie, sheriff!" Guy Casper cried thinly. "These fellers jumped us without cause, that's what. If yuh'll look in their saddle rolls, yuh'll find——"

"I'd find money that yuh an' this phony marshal, Blue Cookson, planted there," the sheriff snapped. "Casper, I've been suspicious o' yuh for a long time. When I heard about this stage robbery yesterday, I gathered these boys, an' we come lickety larrup."

"Then arrest them two danged bandits!" Blue Cookson snarled. "Yuh ain't got no call ter accuse Guy an' us o' bein' crooks."

"No?" the sheriff hummed. "These boys an' me follered sign

from the scene o' the robbery to Casper's Bar C. We worked on the cook a mite, an' he told us where to dig. Here's the loot."

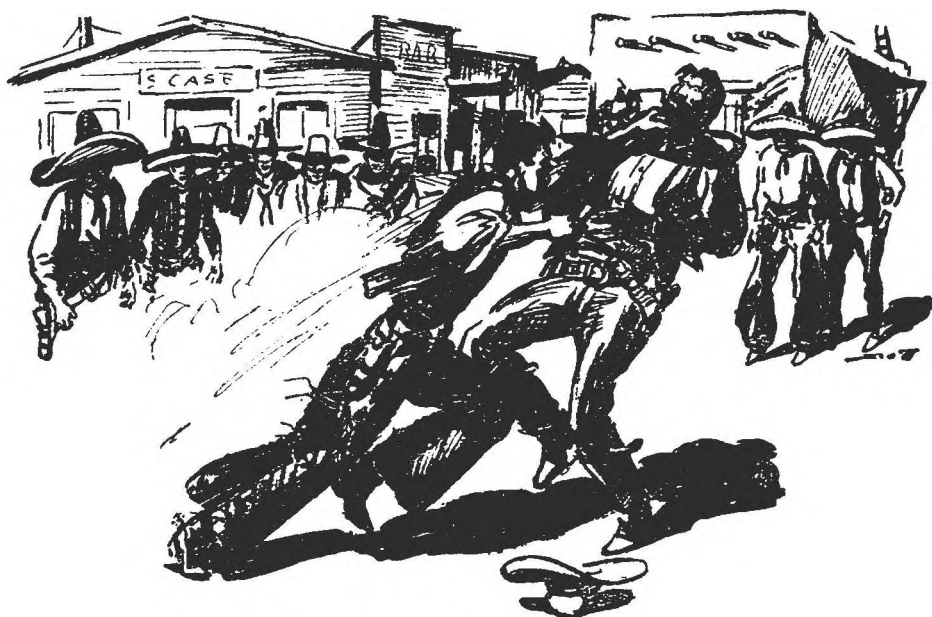
As the sheriff finished speaking, he reached inside his shirt and drew out a stout canvas bag that looked like a stuffed toad. He waved the bag briefly, and from Guy Casper's throat came a scream of rage and fear.

Blue Cookson leaped to his feet, bawled something, and made a grab for a gun that had been dropped by his boss. But Calamity Boggs leaned over, caught Cookson by the seat of the pants, and slammed him into the arms of two burly posse men.

"Thanks, Calamity." The sheriff grinned, holstering a gun he had drawn swiftly. "Yuh an' yore pard, yonder, saved me an' my boys a gun job. We come here to round up these snakes, but yuh've already done it. Looks like yuh done right noble with that borrowed badge."

"Done noble!" Calamity moaned. "Jim, yuh know danged well I'll die inside o' ten minutes. These wounds is festered, my eyes has gone out, an' I'm shot through the stummick. It's awful, havin' to die like this. But the signs has allus been agin' me."

"So I notice," the sheriff chuckled. "Don't die yet a while, Calamity. My boys an' me are going to eat this town out o' grub soon as we finish handcuffin' these snakes. An' thanks for savin' Guy Casper for the noose. Them busted arms o' his will heal, but a busted neck, which the law will shore give him, won't heal."



The Guns Of El Rojo

A "Circle J" Novelette

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "Montana Deputies," etc.

CHAPTER I.

TERROR IN GRUBSTAKE.

DEATH held the little desert town of Grubstake in its grip.

A dead man sprawled across the doorsill of the express office, a gaping buckshot wound in his head. Another dead man lay huddled on the wooden sidewalk in front of the Cholla Saloon.

And these were only two of the murders committed that day in Grubstake by the outlaws who had raided the town and ridden on, leaving terror and destruction behind.

A solitary cow-puncher rode into

Grubstake at sundown. He drew rein at the end of the single street, and his gray eyes narrowed in an expression of horror at what he saw.

A pair of booted feet stuck out, stiff and rigid, from under the edge of the sidewalk, showing where a wounded man had crawled away to die.

The lone rider dismounted and looked in at the express-office door. The safe had been broken open. An express agent lay in a crimson pool in the center of the floor.

The visitor turned and walked down the street, his big chestnut cayuse following him.

He paused in front of the Cholla Saloon and peered inside. There were men hiding behind the bar. And there were other dead men on the floor.

The visitor to Grubstake stepped over the body sprawled on the sidewalk in front of the saloon and continued his journey.

He came to the jail—a little adobe building at the end of the street, with a heavy wooden door and iron-barred windows. And here the greatest horror of all awaited him.

A man was leaning in a strange position against the door of the jail. His head was slumped forward on his chest; his legs sprawled clumsily, like those of a drunken man. His arms hung limp at his sides.

The cow-puncher crossed the street, his horse still dogging his heels. And then he saw what had happened.

The man's clothing was nailed to the door by long, sharp spikes, and his body had been riddled with bullets before the raiders had left him.

The visiting waddy touched one limp hand, feeling for some sign of a pulse beat, but there was none.

He raised the dead hombre's head. To his surprise, he found that there was a black mask over the face. This had been hidden by the big, black Mex-style sombrero that the man wore. This headpiece also concealed a thatch of flaming red hair.

The cow-puncher shook his head. A puzzled expression rested on his bronzed face. He stood back and looked at the corpse, studying it closely.

Then he stepped forward again and slipped his hand inside the dead hombre's shirt. A moment later, he brought the hand out, holding a

small badge that had been pinned inside the shirt.

He studied the lettering on the badge. It read:

STATE OF ARIZONA
TOM SHELTON
SPECIAL RANGER

And it had the official seal of the State on it.

The waddy slipped the badge into his pocket and reached out his hand to lift the mask from the face of the murdered Ranger.

There was a sudden whinny from his horse. A footstep sounded behind him.

"Stick 'em up, cowboy!" snarled a harsh voice.

Half turning his head, the cowboy could see out of the corner of one eye that a pair of six-guns were pointing straight at his back. He bit his lip in annoyance at the thought that he had let himself become so interested in the dead Ranger that some one had got the drop on him from behind. There was only one thing to do just now—and the waddy did it.

Turning slowly, he lifted his hands above his head and faced the man who had ordered him to "stick 'em up!"

This man proved to be a small, wrinkled hombre with a head of white hair and a large white mustache that hid much of the lower part of his face. He had steel-blue eyes, and the hands that held the twin Colts pointed at the cow-puncher were steady and firm.

"Are yuh one of his murderers?" barked the old fellow.

"Do I look like a murderer?" the waddy retorted.

The answer took the white-haired gunman by surprise. He was silent as he stood, looking the young cow-puncher over.

What he saw seemed to shake his first belief that he had caught one of the slayers of the masked Ranger red-handed. For the waddy had a bronzed, frank face, with strong, rugged features, and honest gray eyes that met the eyes of the older man squarely and without fear or shame.

Another thing in the cowboy's favor was that he had the look of a working range hand, although his clothing was a bit better than average. It was well worn and had seen plenty of service. But it was made to stand that.

"Ter tell the truth, fella," the white-haired hombre said slowly, "yuh don't look like a killer. But yuh shore got some explainin' ter do afore I let yuh put them hands down."

The waddy shrugged his square shoulders. A twinkle showed in his gray eyes.

"What explainin' d'yuh want?" he asked.

"What are yuh doin' here?"

"I just drifted inter town a few minutes ago. And I found—this!"

"Yo're a stranger hereabouts, huh?"

The cowboy nodded. "From Montana," he added.

"That yore hoss?" asked the white-haired gunman, with a quick side glance at the big chestnut.

"Yes."

"Circle J!" The older man read the brand on the horse's shoulder. "Is that yore spread up in Montanner?"

"Right again!"

"Yuh got anything ter prove it?"

"Look in my pocket—the one inside the vest. Yuh'll find my C. A. membership card and some other papers."

Before the waddy could finish speaking, the white-mustache hom-

bre took a swift step forward, sliding his left-hand gun into its holster. He kept the right-hand Colt pointed straight at the cowboy's heart. It would have been just plain suicide for the waddy from Montana to bring down his hands and make an effort to grapple with his captor.

The latter now slid his left hand into the inner pocket of the vest and pulled out a thin wallet.

Stepping back out of reach, he flipped it open and glanced quickly at the papers it contained. But never for an instant did he relax his watchfulness.

"Hmph! Yore name's West, huh? Billy West? Is that what they call yuh?"

"That's my name."

"All right, West! Take down yore hands—an' shake if yuh will! I reckon I got yuh wrong!"

The cow-puncher known as Billy West shook the extended hand.

"I'll take that wallet back, if yuh don't mind," he said.

The white-mustached man handed back the wallet with the other's papers.

"Thanks," Billy West said, and slipped the wallet back into the pocket of his vest.

"Will yuh do me a favor, West?"

"What is it?"

"Help me git this body away before the people come." The old fellow nodded toward the grim corpse nailed against the jail door.

"Who did all these killin's?" Billy West asked.

"It's the work of a low-down half-breed known as Manuel and his gang of cutthroats."

"And who is this Manuel?"

"He's the orneriest murderer and thief that ever dodged the gallows!"

"But why did he do this whole-sale killin' here in Grubstake?"

"Just out of meanness and greed," the white-haired man explained. "Manuel and that gang of his'll shoot down a man for a dollar. They're just killers. They don't think nothin' of a man's life a-tall!"

Billy started to pull out the spikes that pinned the masked Ranger's clothing to the jail door.

But he paused in his task, for his eyes had caught sight of something that was partly hidden under the dead man's feet.

A closer look revealed a pair of long-barreled Colt .45s with carved ivory butts—ivory that was turning yellow with age.

Billy stooped to pick the guns up. But the white-haired hombre was quicker. With the speed of a darting lizard, he pounced on the guns and thrust them into his belt.

"Was this hombre a pard of yores?" Billy asked, nodding toward the dead man.

"Did yuh ever hear of El Rojo?" countered the other.

"El Rojo!" Billy repeated. "That means the 'Red One' in Spanish, doesn't it?"

"That's right. Ever hear of him?"

"Seems ter me a sheriff a little farther north told me thar was an outlaw callin' himself 'El Rojo' ridin' the owl-hoot trails down along the border, but——"

Billy stopped as he felt the white-haired hombre's hand clutch his wrist. The other's steel-blue eyes were glaring into his. The old fellow's whole body was quivering with a sudden outburst of rage.

"That sheriff lied!" he shouted. "He lied, I tell yuh. This is El Rojo—murdered by Manuel's killers! But El Rojo's one of the bravest peace officers that ever rode the border. His right name's Tom Shelton, and he had a special commission from the governor to run

down Manuel and break up his gang."

This agreed with what Billy West had seen on the badge which he had taken from El Rojo's shirt and slipped into his own pocket.

A sudden thought came to the waddy from Montana as he looked at the troubled face of the older man.

"This El Rojo was on a secret mission," Billy said slowly. "Probably he let that sheriff spread the report on purpose that El Rojo was an outlaw. But how does it happen that *you* know so much about him?"

The old man's face suddenly glowed with pride. His steel-blue eyes sparkled. He drew himself up to his full height.

"El Rojo—Tom Shelton—was my son! I'm Dan Shelton." He laid a pleading hand on Billy West's arm. "Now do yuh understand, West? I want yuh to help me git my son away from here before anybody finds out what happened to him!"

CHAPTER II.

A SHORT CUT.

JOE SCOTT'S cayuse was blowing hard as it climbed the steep slope. When it got to the top, Joe let it rest to get its wind back, while he slid out of the saddle and turned to look at his companion, "Buck" Foster.

There was a pretty sour expression on Joe's freckled young face as he watched Buck's cow pony toiling up the ascent.

As a rule, Joe Scott's blue eyes were full of twinkling laughter, and there was an impish grin playing around his big mouth. But now there was no mirth at all in his face. He was as solemn as an owl.

At last, Buck brought his ex-

hausted cayuse to the top and let it rest. Buck was a tough, veteran cow-puncher, well past forty, while Joe Scott was barely of voting age.

Both rannies worked on Billy West's Circle J Ranch, and he liked to take them on his saddle-tramping excursions during the winter months when he left the ranch in charge of his foreman.

Their climb had brought them to the rim of an almost circular basin, filled with sandstone boulders and wild, tangled masses of chaparral that no man or horse could hope to get through.

Buck came up beside Joe and looked down at the wilderness before him. Buck was mopping his forehead with a big blue bandanna. Sweat was pouring down his leathery face in rivulets and dripping off the long ends of his grizzled cowhorn mustache.

Joe scratched his thatch of red hair as he gazed at Buck with an expression of scorn. "So this is yore idea of a short cut, huh?"

Buck's lean jaws snapped shut suddenly. His chin was thrust out, and his bulging brown eyes snapped fire from under their overhanging gray brows.

As a matter of fact, Buck *had* persuaded Joe to take this route through the mountains.

Buck claimed he knew this desert mountain country from years before, and that he could show Joe a short cut which would bring them out on the desert within a few miles of Grubstake in much less time than if they took the more roundabout route through Pedro Pass.

But it looked as if something was wrong with Buck Foster's short cut, for the two waddies had been wandering through a maze of wild mountain trails since early morning. And

now they were lost. But Buck wasn't ready to admit the fact.

"I was takin' yuh over a short cut all right," he said stubbornly. "But I must 'a' been listenin' to yore fool talk and took a wrong turn somewheres."

"We could 'a' been in Grubstake with Billy by now, if we'd took the regular trail through Pedro Pass," Joe pointed out.

"That takes us twenty miles out of our way," Buck argued. "This short cut's the best——"

"Aw, stop your bluffin', yuh ol' mosshorn!" the red-headed waddy interrupted. "We're stuck here in the mountains fer the night, all on account of you bein' so thick-headed!"

Buck Foster's voice rose to an angry roar: "It's plumb impossible ter argue with a carrot-topped young jackanapes like you, Joe Scott. Yuh ain't got no reasonin' powers a-tall!"

But Joe wasn't paying any attention to Buck just then. He was studying the lay of the country before him. He shook his head slowly as he looked over the masses of huge boulders and the thick growth of tangled chaparral that filled the valley below him.

Then his keen blue eyes searched the rim-rock trail around the basin. He turned to Buck again.

"Yuh shore picked a swell short cut, ol'-timer," Joe told the veteran. "We've got ter ride around the rim o' this valley. We kin never git through it."

Buck Foster, too, was studying the wilderness below him.

"By ganny!" he muttered. "If I didn't have you along, carrot-top, I'd make it through that mesa——"

"I ain't stoppin' yuh from tryin'," Joe retorted. "Yuh ain't——"

Whi-ii-ing! Spat! The redhead's words were cut short by the spite-

ful whine of a bullet that came from some hiding place in the wall of cliffs that rose up on every side.

The bullet missed Joe's head by a fraction of an inch. But it caught his battered old gray Stetson, lifted it up, and carried it, so that it went hurtling off into space and finally landed some distance away in the tangled brush of the basin.

And now other leaden slugs came winging their way through the air with the drone of angry hornets. In the gathering dusk, it was hard to see to aim straight. And it was hard for Buck and Joe to pick out the exact spot from which they were being attacked.

But, just the same, Buck Foster turned, drew his smooth-handled old six-gun, and emptied it in the general direction from which the bullets seemed to come.

The hail of flying lead increased. It kicked up little clouds of dust around their horses' hoofs. One slug gashed Buck's leathery cheek, another drew a crimson spurt from one of Joe Scott's big ears.

"Come on! Let's git out of here!" the redhead urged. "It's no use stayin' ter git ourselves filled full o' lead!"

"I'm stayin'——" Buck began.

But Joe Scott cut the argument short by seizing his lanky companion bodily and throwing him into the saddle of his cayuse.

Then the red head slapped the animal sharply across the rump with his hand and sent it racing away over the rim-rock trail and out of danger.

A moment later, Joe himself was forking his own cow pony and burning leather close on the heels of Buck's mount.

They drew rein ten minutes later and listened. The shooting had ceased. They had escaped the trap

into which they had ridden. But Buck Foster wasn't satisfied.

"Say, yuh interferin' young loon," he grumbled at Joe, "if yuh'd only stayed with me an' shot it out with them dry-gulchin' polecats, we'd 'a' killed every one of 'em!"

"If yuh'd stayed where yuh was fer another half minute," Joe retorted, "yuh'd 'a' looked a durned sight more like a cinder sifter than a cowpoke!"

"Aw, yo're yaller, carrot-top!" Buck snarled. "Yuh was afraid ter stay an' fight."

"We kin go back an' clean out that nest of hornets in daylight," Joe reminded the veteran, "when we'll have a chance to scout them first."

"Yo're yaller!" Buck repeated.

"Yo're loco!"

"Yo're a red-headed young 'fraid cat!"

"Yo're a thick-headed ol' moss-horn!"

"Yo're scared of yore own shadow!"

"Yuh just act stoopid!"

They went on arguing and calling names while they made camp for the night and ate a scanty supper of dry sandwiches from their saddlebags and tepid water from their canteens.

During the night, they muttered and snarled in their sleep.

But in the morning they were saddle pards again. All the ill humor of the previous day was forgotten. As a matter of fact, they hadn't meant any of the hard names they called each other.

The trails on the far side of the basin were easier. It took them less than an hour to get out of the bad lands and onto the desert flats.

Ahead of them they caught sight of a small cluster of buildings.

"Thet thar," Buck said, pointing a gnarled finger, "must be Grub-

stake, where Billy's goin' ter meet us."

But Joe Scott didn't agree. "That ain't Grubstake. Yuh forget that yore short cut took us miles out of our way."

"That am so Grubstake!" Buck insisted. "I tell yuh I know this desert hereabouts like a book, an' I——"

"Yeah, but yuh couldn't read a book if yuh had one," Joe interrupted—a statement which was perfectly true, for Buck Foster was an hombre who was plenty long on cow savvy and roping and cutting out and branding cattle and riding tough brones, but not so good at book learning.

"Aw, I ain't goin' ter waste no more breath arguin' with you!" Buck declared, his voice trembling with rage.

CHAPTER III.

THE NEW SOMBRERO.

THEY reached the little town at last. It was a typical border settlement—a cluster of adobe shacks on either side of a single street. A population of dark-skinned Mexicans and half-breeds, children with lithe brown bodies playing in the street; dogs, dogs—and more dogs, all mongrels. A few shops, a saloon or *cantina*, *bodegas* or wine shops, and one building, the largest of all, which housed the *fonda* or inn.

"This hyar," Buck declared, "is Grubstake."

"It ain't," Joe denied. "Thar's a lot of Americans in Grubstake. This town's all Mex!"

Buck Foster's ugly, leathery face flushed with anger. "Does a young halfwit like you mean ter tell me I don't know where I am?" he demanded, with an effort at sarcasm.

"I'm tellin' yuh yuh ain't in

Grubstake," Joe stated firmly. "And seein' yuh owe me a new hat, yuh kin buy me one if I ain't right, and I'll pay yuh the price of the hat if I'm wrong!"

"Yuh mean yuh'll bet me the price of a new hat that we ain't in Grubstake?" Buck asked.

"I'm talkin' plain English," Joe said.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad, if I don't take yuh up!" Buck's face now wore a wide smile. "The bet's on. Shake!"

They shook hands on the wager. Then Buck beckoned to a Mexican boy who had been watching the coming of the two Montana cow-punchers with wide-open brown eyes and gaping mouth.

"What's the name o' this town, son?" the veteran asked.

"Thees town ees call' Cristobal, señor," he answered.

"What's that?" Buck shouted, making a move to grab the boy by the shoulder of his shirt.

But the boy was frightened and ran away.

"The lyin' young centipede!" Buck exclaimed. "He must be a friend of yores ter lie like that, Joe Scott!"

"He's tellin' the truth," the red-head insisted. "Here, ask some one else."

They questioned half a dozen men and boys who knew enough English to understand what was being asked. And every one answered that the name of the town was Cristobal, not Grubstake.

Joe Scott was full of glee over his victory. His freckled face wore a wide grin, and his bat ears wiggled with excitement.

"Yuh owe me a new hat, moss-horn!" he reminded Buck.

Buck glared at the redhead savagely. "I owe yuh a new hat, do I, carrot-top?"

Joe nodded and burst into a roar of laughter. "Sure, yuh owes me a new hat. It was yore fault I lost mine, anyway."

Buck spat on the ground and turned away.

"All right, yuh young sage hound," he called back over his shoulder, "yuh gits yore hat. Buck Foster always pays his bets!"

Buck pushed his way through the crowd that had gathered on the sidewalk and went down the street a little way to where a small general store was situated.

He disappeared inside and remained there for some time. Joe was beginning to get anxious about his pard, fearing he might have met with foul play.

But just as Joe was about to decide to follow Buck into the store, the veteran waddy came out. He was holding something hidden behind his back. And he kept it there until he came right to where Joe was standing.

Then he brought it out in front of him and handed it to the redhead.

"There yuh are, spotty-face! There's yore new headpiece!" said Buck, and he thrust a steeple-crowned Mexican sombrero, with a lot of tassels and gilt trimming, into Joe's hands.

Joe took the sombrero and examined it. Then he put it on his head and looked at Buck with an impish expression on his freckled face.

"Seein' it's the first time I've ever knowed yuh ter pay a bet without a lot of arguin', Mr. Foster," he said pleasantly, "I'll shore wear this sombrero in honor of the occasion!"

A group of men and boys had gathered around the two waddies. A murmur went from one to another as they saw Joe in his new sombrero. Listening to their chatter, both Buck and Joe caught the words "El Rojo"

repeated several times in tones of excitement.

"What in tarnation is this El Rojo they're talkin' about, brick-top?" Buck asked Joe.

Joe shrugged his shoulders. His knowledge of border Spanish was very scanty. "I don't savvy this lingo," he told Buck.

"They're pointin' at you," Buck said. "I reckon El Rojo must be Spanish fer Big-nose. They must be talkin' about that beak of yores." Buck went off into a gale of loud laughter. "Haw-haw-haw-haw!" he roared. "El Rojo Scott! Big-nose Joe! Haw-haw-haw! Thet's a good one. I'll be a horned toad if——"

"Buck!"

A sharp voice behind him caused Buck Foster to stop short and whirl about.

Billy West, his boss, stood behind him. Billy's bronzed young features were set in stern lines. His gray eyes were deadly serious as they searched the faces of Buck and Joe.

"Wh-what is it, Billy?" Buck stammered, and he began to tug nervously at the ends of his mustache.

"What d'yuh know about this El Rojo?" Billy asked.

"Not a thing!" the veteran Circle J waddy declared.

"How about you, Joe?"

"I only heard the name a moment ago," the redhead explained. "I don't even know what it means."

"I told yuh what it means!" Buck Foster horned in to remark. "Big-nose Joe! Big-nose Joe!" And the veteran guffawed again.

But his boss cut him short. "This ain't a laughin' matter," Billy said. "Fork yore hosses and fog it out o' this town!"

"What d'yuh——" Buck began to ask a question, but he never finished it.

For a crowd of evil-looking half-breeds had just come out of a near-by *cantina*, and now they were crowding around the three Circle J waddies.

"It is El Rojo!" one of the men in the group said.

"But El Rojo was keeled!" another stated.

An American came out of the *cantina*—a big, square-shouldered brutish fellow, with thick, curly black hair and black eyes that flashed as he spoke.

"El Rojo's dead!" he declared. "Yuh know what happened in Grub-stake. He's dead as a pizened coyote!"

But the Mexicans and half-breeds were pointing Joe Scott out to him and jabbering in their native tongue.

The big American shouted at them first in Spanish, then in English, when his supply of Spanish words failed him.

"This hombre's just tryin' to scare yuh!" he finished. "Take it from Curly Jake!"

But the crowd was fired with strong liquor and looking for fight.

"Better kill him, too!" one hombre suggested to the fellow who called himself "Curly Jake."

There was a swift movement of the crowd. They tried to surround the three cow-punchers. Their hands started for the big six-guns which each man wore. Some were two-gun desperadoes, others carried only one.

But those three waddies from Montana weren't letting themselves be shot down by a bunch of tinhorn border outlaws that way. So they went for their own shooting irons. And the way they got those sixes out of the leather was something that made the gang of half-breed desperadoes popeyed with surprise.

Leaping backward to the center

of the road, Billy West and his two saddle pards had their guns out and spitting lead before the outlaws knew the fight had started.

Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang!
The cow-punchers had got the jump on their enemies by the swiftness of their draw. They were slinging lead like three fighting fools!

Two of the half-breeds, hit by flying slugs, went staggering backward, upsetting several of their companions.

A few of the outlaws had their guns out and were blazing away, but it was wild, desperate shooting.

The Montana waddies fired another round into the crowd—aiming low so as not to inflict deadly wounds. They only wanted to beat off the attack of these border ruffians—not to kill them. For Billy West had other plans for Buck and Joe and himself.

In less than a minute, the fight was over.

With half a dozen of their number wounded, the half-breed gunmen started a mad stampede inside the *cantina* from which they had come.

In the center of the dusty street, Billy and Buck and Joe were grinning at each other like three hungry coyotes that have just raided a chicken coop. They sure had enjoyed that little gun ruckus.

Buck started for the *cantina*, to follow the retreating outlaws. But Billy caught him by the loose back of his bearskin vest and held on.

"Let me go inter that nest of var-mints and smoke 'em all out!" Buck demanded. "Let go my vest!"

"No!" Billy refused. "I got a better job than that for yuh, Buck! I waited all day yesterday in Grub-stake for yuh before I come here lookin' for yuh."

"What is the job?" Buck wanted to know.

"Fork yore hoss and let's git out o' this town!" Billy ordered.

"But the fun ain't half begun, Billy!" the veteran protested.

"Fork yore hoss!" Billy repeated. "Remember, Buck! Orders!"

Buck Foster moved toward his cayuse, muttering under his breath. He knew that when Billy spoke that way, there was no use in arguing or talking back. Orders meant *orders*—and that was that!

Much as he would have liked to stay in Cristobal and finish his little argument with the hombre known as Curly Jake, and the gang of half-breed desperadoes with him, Buck had to ride out of town with his two saddle pards.

But he did it very unwillingly and with a whole lot of grumbling to himself.

CHAPTER IV.

WAS IT EL ROJO?

A LONE horseman was riding his fagged cayuse over the rough trails leading to the headquarters of Manuel, the outlaw. Deep in the heart of a range of desert mountains lying north and east of Grubstake, Manuel had a hide-out where he went when he had completed one of his daring raids. For Manuel was the most cruel and pitiless ruffian that border country had ever known. And he generally waited until the public excitement over one raid had died down before he made his appearance again.

All the time he was in hiding, he would receive reports from messengers, such as this one who was now riding to find him.

The trails to Manuel's hide-out were dim and hard to follow. Only a man who knew the country well could find it. But this hombre on

the tired little desert pony knew the way, and he urged his jaded mount with quirt and spur and voice to its best efforts.

He was a small, wiry *mestizo*—a mixed breed, chiefly Spanish and Indian—with sly little eyes like a rat's, and a mouth as cruel as a jackal's.

He came to a fork of the trail, turned to the right, threaded his way through a twisting canyon, then came out in an almost circular basin, walled in on all sides by frowning limestone cliffs.

Here stood a long, one-story adobe building which served as Manuel's headquarters when he was hiding from the law.

The messenger rode straight for the house, flung himself out of the saddle, and hammered on the door with his fist.

"Who's there?" asked a voice from inside, in Spanish.

"Open up! It is I—Carlos!"

The door was opened. In the opening stood a big fat peon, scowling at the visitor. This was Pancho, the cook and personal servant of Manuel, who always stayed at this hiding place.

"Quick!" said the little messenger. "Take me to Manuel! I must see him at once!"

"He is asleep! I cannot disturb him!" answered Pancho, without moving his bulgy form out of the doorway.

"But it is important—very important," Carlos insisted, trying to push his way past the burly cook.

Several members of the gang were scattered around the big living room. Some were playing cards, others were stretched out on bunks, sleeping. There were bottles and glasses, containing wine and spirits, for Manuel was a wise leader, and knew that one way to keep his men

in good humor was to supply them with plenty to drink.

But no one went near the door at one end of the room, for this was the door leading into Manuel's private quarters.

And now a struggle was in progress between the fat cook and the little messenger, Carlos. The latter was trying to wriggle his small body inside the house, while Pancho was doing his best to prevent him from entering.

"Let me in! Let me in! I've an important message for Manuel!" Carlos screamed, his little fists pounding against Pancho's fat-covered ribs.

"You must not disturb Manuel, I tell you," Pancho insisted. "He is asleep! He will not——"

"Let him come in, Pancho!" interrupted a deep voice behind the bulky cook.

Pancho whirled, an expression of surprise on his heavy-jowled, swarthy face.

Manuel was standing at the door of his private quarters. He beckoned to Carlos. The little messenger approached him on legs that trembled. His heart was pounding against his ribs, for he feared Manuel. The outlaw's reputation for swift punishment of his own followers was almost as bad as for his cruelty to the victims of his raids.

"Come in, Carlos!" Manuel said in a soft voice.

Carlos entered the outlaw chief's room. Manuel closed the door, shutting himself in with Carlos.

"Well, Carlos, what is your message?" he asked.

Carlos paled. He was shaking from head to foot. Manuel's cruel eyes were on his face.

"Speak, Carlos!" the outlaw chief prompted.

He was very tall, this outlaw

Manuel—over six feet. There was an air of command and authority about him. His hair was jet-black. His eyes were very dark and flashed when he was excited or angry. His mouth was a straight gash, with a queer downward twist at the right corner. His skin had a sallow, unhealthy tinge, and his face was heavily lined. Yet he was not an old man—not over thirty.

"Do not be afraid, Carlos," he told the messenger. "Give me your message!"

Carlos gathered himself together, mustered up his courage, and found his voice.

"It—it's El Rojo! He is alive! He was seen to-day in Cristobal!"

The words had a magic effect on Manuel. A haunted look came into his eyes. His face went pale.

"El Rojo? Impossible!" he exclaimed.

"But, señor, yes! I see him myself!"

There was a terrible expression in Manuel's face as he leaned over the small form of Carlos, crouching in a chair.

"Listen, Carlos, if you're lying to me——" he began.

"No! No! No!" Carlos protested, his face going pale with fear. "I would not lie to you, señor! It is the truth I tell!"

"Where did you see El Rojo?"

"In Cristobal, señor! I see him with my own eyes!"

Manuel turned away from the cowering messenger, went to the door, and flung it open. His eyes swept the large room. The men in it were still engaged in their drinking and card-playing. A few were asleep.

"Pancho!" Manuel called out.

The fat cook came waddling forward.

"Where are Pedro and Juan and Curly Jake? I do not see them here."

Pancho looked around the room. He went over and kicked at a bundle in one corner—a bundle that stirred and grunted.

"Come! Wake up, Pedro!" Pancho said in a quiet voice. "Manuel wants you!"

The man who had been asleep sat up, rubbed his eyes, yawned, and got to his feet lazily. He was short and squat, with broad shoulders and long arms that hung down almost to his knees. He was built more like an ape than a man. Great bunches of muscle on his arms and shoulders told of his enormous strength.

"What does Manuel want?" he asked in a sleepy voice.

"Come here, Pedro," barked Manuel. "And you, Pancho"—he turned to the fat cook—"find Juan and Curly Jake! Bring them to me!"

Pancho hurried outside to find the men Manuel wanted.

Pedro's brutish face wore a look of fear as he walked toward his chief. He had a sloping forehead, overhanging small, piggish eyes. His lower jaw jutted out. His flat nose and thick lips completed his resemblance to an ape.

He slunk toward Manuel, like a dog going to its master for a whipping. Like all of this border outlaw's followers, Pedro was afraid of his chief, for he knew the terrible punishments Manuel visited on the men who displeased him.

"Tell me, Pedro!" Manuel gazed into Pedro's brutish face searchingly. "Are you sure that you killed El Rojo the other day in Grubstake?"

Pedro nodded his big head. "I never saw a man deader. We spiked him to the jail-house door and riddled him with bullets. He could not be alive."

Pancho came in at the door, followed by two other men. One of these was the big hulking outlaw, Curly Jake, who had been with the crowd that tried to shoot up the Circle J waddies in Cristobal, that morning.

The other was a small, handsome little hombre, with carefully waxed mustache, straight features, and nervous, delicate hands, dressed like a Mexican dandy, with short jacket, sash, and bell-bottomed trousers. On his head rested a fine high-crowned sombrero. A rice-paper cigarette hung between his lips, and he puffed on it lazily.

This was the gunman, Juan, the deadliest and most expert of the gang at handling a Colt, next to Manuel himself.

Juan alone faced Manuel with no fear in his eyes, but rather with a slightly insolent smile.

"I hear that El Rojo still lives," Manuel said to him.

But Juan shook his head. The smile left his face. His eyes were serious. He took a long puff on his cigarette and blew out a cloud of smoke.

"No, Señor Manuel," he answered politely. "That cannot be. El Rojo is dead. We—Pedro, Curly Jake, and myself—killed him. Those whom we kill do not live to tell about it." And a grim smile played about the little gunman's lips.

"But El Rojo was seen in Cristobal only this morning," Manuel said.

Now Curly Jake came forward. "That is not true!" he declared. "I was in Cristobal myself and saw the hombre. He is a red-headed young cow-puncher, who wears a Mex sombrero. But he isn't El Rojo!"

Manuel was silent; his deeply lined face was thoughtful.

"Next time you see that red-headed cow-puncher," he said, at

last, "capture him and bring him to me. He must be taught that it is dangerous to take the part of El Rojo!"

"But we have killed El Rojo himself," Juan pointed out. "We have nothing to fear from this——"

Crash! Bang! Juan's words were cut short by the spat of a bullet that shattered the glass of the window, whizzed over the head of Juan, and buried itself in the adobe wall.

There was a mad rush for the door. The active little gunman Juan got to it first, flung it wide open.

As he did so, a fresh volley of bullets hummed viciously over his head. At his heels, Manuel, the apeline Pedro, and the huge Curly Jake, crowded for a glimpse of the one who was doing the shooting.

About fifty feet from the house, a rider on a big black horse was cramming a new load of shells into the ivory-handled gun he had just emptied.

As the outlaws appeared in the door of the adobe, he hurled a defiant challenge at them.

"Next time, yuh varmints," he shouted, "I'll put my lead through yore heads, instead of shootin' high! This is just to let yuh know I'm back!"

With the words, he finished reloading and sent two bullets right at the feet of the gunman Juan as he stood in the doorway.

Two spurts of dust flew up where the bullets had struck.

And now the voice of Manuel broke out, harsh with anger.

"Get him! Shoot him down! It is El Rojo! It is El Rojo himself come back from the dead! He must have escaped somehow!"

But not one of the three murderers of El Rojo moved. They

stood like men of stone, staring wide-eyed at the horseman before them.

For the strange rider wore the same fancy sombrero that El Rojo always wore, and they could glimpse the thatch of red hair that showed under the big hat. The horse, too, was El Rojo's. They knew the black cayuse only too well. There was no mistaking the big ivory handled Colts, either. And to make the costume complete, the horseman was wearing a black mask that covered the upper part of his face.

"El Rojo!" the big brutish killer, Curly Jake, barked hoarsely.

The dapper little gunman, Juan, had turned the color of old parchment. He was trembling from head to foot.

"It is El Rojo!" he murmured over and over again.

And the apeline half-breed, Pedro, the other slayer of the Ranger who had called himself El Rojo, just stood and stared stupidly. His dull, brutish mind could not quite grasp what his eyes told him.

Suddenly the spell that held the three killers in its grip was broken by the commanding voice of their leader, and the roar of his gun close to their ears.

"You will die this time, El Rojo!" Manuel shouted and fired straight at the grim figure of the black-masked horseman.

But the latter saw the move in time, touched his mount lightly with the spurs, whirled it about, and sent it racing away and out of sight of the astounded outlaws.

"Adios, Manuel!" shouted the masked rider over his shoulder. "I'm comin' back for yuh! El Rojo's goin' to hang every one of yuh!"

"Listen, you!" Manuel's savage gaze shifted from Pedro to Juan, and then to Curly Jake.

None of them answered.

"I want you to catch that cursed Ranger," Manuel went on, "and bring him to me—alive! I will see to it that he does not escape again!"

"But, Manuel," Juan protested, "he could not have escaped. It must be another——"

"You heard what I said," the outlaw leader interrupted sharply. "Bring him to me alive if you expect me to believe your story!"

CHAPTER V.

RANNIES ON THE RAMPAGE.

THE door of the little general store in Grubstake flew open. The body of a man came flying out; it hit the sidewalk, then bounced out into the middle of the dusty street.

There the man sat up, shaking his head dazedly and staring about him. And now another figure appeared in the doorway of the store. It was the burly outlaw known as Curly Jake.

He shook his big fist at the storekeeper, who was a dried-up little hombre, with a wrinkled face like a monkey, and a wispy gray mustache.

"I'll learn yuh to insult me, yuh little pint o' peanuts!" roared Jake.

"I didn't insult yuh," answered the storekeeper.

Curly Jake spat out an oath, took three steps out to the man sitting in the road, and seized him by the collar of his shirt. He yanked the little fellow to his feet and shook his big fist under his nose.

"Yuh wouldn't trust me fer a pound o' tobacco till next week!" the big ruffian roared. "That's an insult——"

"But yuh didn't pay fer the last terbaccer yuh got," whined the storekeeper. "I can't afford ter——"

Spat! Curly Jake's fist swept upward, smashing the wizened little

merchant across the mouth and putting an end to his protests.

The argument probably would have ended in the storekeeper letting Curly Jake have all the tobacco he wanted on unlimited credit—except for one thing.

That one thing was a lanky, homely-faced cow-puncher who had been watching the scene from across the street, and who chose this moment to horn in on the affair. His boots kicked up clouds of dust as he charged forward, his brown eyes ablaze, his grizzled mustache ends fluttering out on either side of his leathery jaws.

He tore into Curly Jake like a wild cat. His lean, sinewy arms worked like pistons, as he hammered with his knotty fists at the big bandit's face and body.

Curly Jake flung aside the little storekeeper with an oath and turned to meet his new enemy—Buck Foster!

The grizzled Montana waddy had worked himself up into a fine rage over the wrongs of the little storekeeper, who was an entire stranger to him.

"Yuh big, bullyin' hunk of beef! Lay off that sawed-off hombre and fight a gent yore size!" Buck roared.

As a matter of fact, Curly Jake was a good bit bigger and heavier than Buck Foster—a fact which gave the outlaw courage.

He ward off Buck's savage two-fisted attack with a sweeping backhand and grinned.

"Fight a gent *my* size, huh?" he grunted. "It'll shore give me pleasure ter knock the everlastin' day-lights out of yuh, if that's what yuh mean!"

And so saying, he lashed out with his huge fists.

Crash! Crash! The blows landed squarely.

One caught Buck in his lean midriff, doubling him up. The other landed on his chin with sickening force.

Buck went down, rolled over, and lay in the dust.

With an ugly grin spreading over his beefy face, Curly Jake began to dust off his hands. He spat in the road. This fighting sure made a gent thirsty. His mouth was full of cotton.

He half turned toward the nearest saloon. He felt that he ought to buy himself a drink to celebrate his swift and easy victory.

But as he turned away, he felt an iron clutch on his arm. He was whirled around—to face the tough old buckaroo he thought he had just knocked cold.

But Buck Foster wasn't cold. He was hot—red-hot and r'arin' to go.

"Come on an' fight, yuh huckleberry!" he shouted. "Yores truly, Buck Foster, ain't done with yuh yet! Come on an' take yore lickin'—skunk!"

Buck spat out the last word with savage venom and charged in, head lowered, fists flailing.

Curly Jake stepped back, measured his distance. Then—

Smash! Crash! Again he let Buck have it with both his rock-hard fists, one on the point of the jaw, the other flush on the nose.

Buck went over, turned a complete somersault in the dust of the road, and lay panting.

But it was only for a few seconds. Buck was an hombre of rawhide and whalebone. He thrived on punishment. His jaw had a big lump on it. His nose was crimson and swelling to an enormous size. But his fighting heart was big with courage. He wasn't licked—not by a jugful of molasses!

Steadying himself on his saddle-

bowed legs, he peered out of bulging brown eyes at his foe, who stood there with a superior grin on his heavy features.

"Help me, Hannah!" Buck snarled, advancing more cautiously this time. "If I don't wipe that grin off yore ugly pan, fella, my name ain't Buck Foster!"

Curly Jake backed away slowly. He was beginning to respect this two-fisted buckaroo, whom he had looked on as a joke at first.

He had taken a few punches from Buck's hard fists, and they had stung. Jake had already socked the tough old ranny with enough force to rock him to sleep, but here was Buck taking it all and coming back for more.

And now Buck suddenly dropped his caution and again sprang forward to the attack. His fists lashed out in a savage assault on Curly Jake's face and body.

Jake struck back, but this time, there was no denying Buck Foster's advance. He bored in, smashing, smashing, smashing. He battered through Curly Jake's guard. The bully began to retreat slowly—step by step.

Crash! Crash! Buck landed twice on his chin—squarely on the button.

Curly Jake's eyes began to glaze. His knees were turning to water.

Crash! Crash! Buck changed his attack and sank his knotty fists right up to the wrists in the man's fleshy stomach.

"Ouff! Ouff!" With each blow, Curly Jake let out a grunt. The wind was knocked out of him. He put his hands over his waistline.

And that was Buck's cue to shift his attack to the jaw again.

Crash! Crash! Once more the veteran Montana cow-puncher put all the power of his rawhide muscles

into a pair of sweet punches to the other man's chin.

Curly Jake's head snapped backward. His legs buckled under him. He sank onto the wooden sidewalk—out cold!

Buck Foster spat on his hands and danced clumsily around his fallen foe, his shaggy bearskin vest and woolly Angora chaps flapping as he moved.

"Git up an' fight, hombre!" he invited.

Curly Jake opened one eye, then closed it again. He had no stomach for more fighting with a ranny who didn't know enough to stay down when he was licked. This Buck Foster just wasn't made of the stuff an ordinary man is made of.

No, sir! Curly Jake was through with fighting for that day!

He continued to lie there on the sidewalk, peering through half-closed eyelids at Buck Foster.

And then, Curly Jake saw another cow-puncher come and grab Buck by the shirt sleeve and lead him away.

This second cow-puncher was red-headed, and he wore an ordinary working range outfit—jersey, overalls, and cow boots. But on his head was a much decorated black sombrero, with a steeple crown and enough tassels and gold lace and other doodads to suit a Mexican general. It certainly wasn't the kind of headpiece you'd expect to find on an American waddy.

"Come on, Buck!" this red-headed puncher was saying to the older ranny. "Yuh know Billy said we wasn't ter git in no trouble."

"Does yuh want me ter stand by while this big bully's beatin' up a pint-sized jasper?" Buck demanded.

"Well, yuh licked him, didn't yuh?" Joe asked.

"Yeah, an' I made a durned good job of it!" Buck admitted, with a touch of pride in his leathery face.

"He shore pasted yuh a good one on the beezer," Joe remarked, noting Buck's swelling nose. "Come on! Let's git back ter the camp! Chow'll be ready by the time we reach there!"

"Chow, huh?" Buck said, his hands going to his lean stomach. "That reminds me. I ain't ate nothin' since——"

"Aw, come on!" Joe dragged him forcibly along toward a near-by hitch rack where they had left their cayuses. "All you ever think of is when it's time fer yore next meal!"

Buck wiped his hand across his grizzled mustache. "Waal, thet's a durned good subject ter think about, carrot-top!"

The two Montana waddies forked their cayuses and rode lazily out of town.

It was getting toward noon. Their boss, Billy West, had gone somewhere on business of his own—probably to do with buying a likely lot of "feeder" cattle to ship north to the Montana ranges.

They came at last to the gully where the Circle J cook, Sing Lo, had pitched camp.

The little Chinaman's flat, yellow face broke into a broad smile when he saw Buck's bashed appearance. He offered to dress the wounds, but Buck insisted on eating first.

So Sing Lo bustled around to prepare the midday meal. Soon he had steaks for his two companions and himself sizzling over the wood fire. A large pot of coffee began to send off a pleasant fragrance, and a batch of hot biscuits was set to bake in the Dutch oven.

Buck Foster's battered nose sniffed the air. He stroked the ends of his grizzled mustache gently.

"By ganny!" he murmured. "That shore smells like real grub."

When Sing Lo had the meal ready, the two waddies attacked everything with the appetites of hungry wolves.

After he had filled his lean old belly, Buck let Sing Lo doctor his bruised and battered features with herb lotions and bandages and court plaster.

When the doctoring was over, Buck declared that he was all tired out and insisted on lying down for a nap.

Joe Scott, too, decided that he felt tired, and that he ought to sleep after his heavy meal.

So both waddies took off their boots and hats, rolled up in their blankets on the ground, and soon were deep in slumber.

Sing Lo pottered around the fire, cleaning up his pots and pans, and cleaning up the remains of the feast.

The little Chinaman was smiling broadly and singing to himself—a shrill melody from his native land.

And when he had finished his tasks, Sing Lo settled himself in a comfortable spot where the sun wasn't too warm, and he, too, gave himself up to sleep.

Joe Scott awoke first. It was a rude awakening. Men seemed to be swarming all over him. One sat on his feet. Two others had his arms pinned down. A fourth man had a strangle hold on his throat.

Rolling his eyes, Joe saw that Buck Foster had just come awake while being treated in pretty much the same fashion as the redhead.

Joe fought and kicked and struggled—but in vain. Too many hombres were sitting on him. He couldn't make any headway against such odds, especially as his gun was gone.

Before he was really wide awake,

he was hog-tied like a dogie that tries to dodge the branding iron. He couldn't move hand or foot.

Buck Foster, too, was just as completely tied up. Sing Lo was nowhere in sight, and Joe hoped that the little Chinaman had managed to escape.

Now Joe got a glimpse of the man who seemed to be in command of the party that had captured him and Buck. And the redhead couldn't help a gasp of surprise as he saw that it was the man with whom Buck had fought in Grubstake that morning—the outlaw known as "Curly Jake"!

With him were a bunch of half-breed and ragged white outlaws of the lowest type.

Now Joe heard Curly Jake giving them their orders, and a sense of danger pricked at his skin and gave him a creepy feeling along his spine as he listened.

"Leave the old buckaroo here!" Curly Jake commanded. "Rap him over the head with yore guns if he gits hard ter manage!"

"Say, yuh ornery bullyin' skunk!" Buck Foster roared at Curly Jake and made a desperate effort to break free of his bonds. "Just let me git my hands free an'——"

Crash! A mean-looking hombre clouted Buck behind the ear with the muzzle of a six-gun, and the veteran waddy slumped to the ground unconscious.

Now Curly Jake was speaking again. "The redhead's the one we want!" he explained. "Put on his hat, throw him across a hoss, and bring him to the chief!"

A timid, yellow-faced half-breed asked a question in a voice that trembled slightly.

"Is—is thees El Rojo, Jake?"

A cunning expression showed in Curly Jake's dark eyes.

"Mebbe it is," he answered. "Manuel wants ter see him, anyway!"

Joe Scott was then lifted clean off the ground and flung across the saddle of one of the outlaws' horses, so that his feet hung down on one side of the animal, and his hands on the other. His fancy sombrero was jammed tightly on his head. And riding in this fashion, the redhead began his journey to Manuel's hide-out in the mountains.

CHAPTER VI.

DOOMED!

IT was a mighty uncomfortable way of traveling—take it from Joe Scott. The sand and dust kicked up by the horses' hoofs got in his eyes and nose and throat, making him choke and cough.

At the last moment, before starting, one of his captors had got the bright idea of running a length of rawhide under the cayuse's body and lashing Joe's wrists and ankles together. This didn't give the redhead a Chinaman's chance of getting away.

The hombre who had done the tying took care to draw the rawhide tight, too, and it cut Joe's flesh cruelly.

After what seemed like a thousand miles of riding over cactus-grown desert flats, the trail became steep and rough. The party was following a trail into one of the desert mountain ranges.

At last, the terrible journey came to an end. Joe's cayuse was halted. One of his captors began to fumble with the rawhide fastenings on his ankles and wrists.

Then, with an impatient oath, the man slashed the fastenings. Another of the bandits dragged Joe off his horse and set him on his feet.

Joe tottered and swayed. He would have fallen if some one hadn't caught hold of him. His legs and arms were numb. His whole body was aching.

But Curly Jake and the others gave their red-headed prisoner no time to think of his pains and bruises.

He was hustled inside the adobe and taken before the outlaw leader—Manuel.

There was a sneering smile on Manuel's sallow face as he studied the young waddy who had been brought before him.

In his hand, the outlaw held a sheet of paper.

"So you are the hombre who pretends to be El Rojo!" he murmured, as if speaking to himself.

"I ain't pretended nothin'," Joe answered.

"You were here yesterday," Manuel went on, his eyes flashing through narrowed lids, as he studied his prisoner.

"I never——" Joe began.

"And you tried to shoot me and my men," Manuel continued his accusations. "You fired through the window."

"Yo're a durned liar!" Joe Scott told the outlaw boldly.

The outlaw chief's sallow face flushed with anger. His eyes blazed. He clenched his fists and took a step forward. Then, with a great effort, he controlled his rage.

"You—you peeg of a gringo!" he muttered. "You shall pay for that. No one calls Manuel a liar an'——"

"That's 'cause yuh've got all these skunks scared of yuh," Joe put in, his freckled face bursting into a wide grin. "They don't dare tell yuh the truth!"

Joe was feeling more like himself again. He was beginning to enjoy this little talk with the outlaw.

Manuel now stepped forward and held the sheet of paper in his hand in front of Joe's eyes.

"Did you send me thees message?" Manuel demanded.

Joe looked at the paper. There was a brief message in pencil-printed letters on it:

MANUEL—I am coming for you at sundown to-day to take you to the gallows. The hangman is waiting for you. Be ready for me.
EL ROJO.

Joe spelled the message out slowly. He was a good deal better than Buck Foster at reading and writing, but he was no wizard at it.

When he had finished, the redhead stared straight into Manuel's glittering dark eyes.

"No, hombre," he said slowly. "I didn't write that thar message. But I shore agree with them sentiments! This gent who calls himself El Rojo has got the right idear!"

While Joe stood there, grinning at his own boldness and defying Manuel, the latter's cruel mind was thinking up a suitable revenge with which to punish such daring.

When he finally spoke, his words came out slowly, each one carefully weighed.

"I am not sure if you are El Rojo or not," Manuel said. "But you are a dangerous fool. So this afternoon I am going to put a black mask on your face and your sombrero on your head, and I am going to hang you as an example to other fools who defy Manuel!"

The outlaw chief paused. Joe remained silent. He could think of nothing to say at the moment.

"I will pin this letter to your shirt," Manuel went on, holding up the note from El Rojo. "Then every one will know for certain that El Rojo is dead. You will be buzzard

bait before sundown, you red-headed fool!"

A chill ran down Joe Scott's spine. Some one surely was walking over his grave at that moment.

Buzzard bait!

Outside the window of the adobe that Manuel used as his hide-out, a small, black-clad figure was crouching on top of a packing box. Every word spoken inside could be plainly heard by the little hombre on the box.

And when he learned that Manuel planned to hang Joe Scott that very afternoon, his flat yellow face took on an expression of horror, and his slant eyes widened with fear for the safety of his pard. For this listener was the Circle J cook, Sing Lo, who had hidden from the outlaws when they raided his camp and had followed them to this hiding place.

Trembling in every limb, the little Chinaman almost fell off the box on which he was standing and ran for the shelter of a group of boulders. There he had left his favorite piebald cayuse.

Every one in the outlaw gang was crowding around the unfortunate Joe. So nobody noticed Sing Lo as he rode away.

As soon as he was out of sight of the adobe, Sing Lo turned into the twisting canyon trail that would take him out of the rugged bad lands and drummed with his heels on the lazy piebald's flanks.

The cayuse stirred itself at Sing Lo's desperate urging and made good time back to Grubstake.

All the time, the little cook's mind was in a whirl. He wanted to save Joe Scott from being hanged. And the only person he could depend on to effect the redhead's rescue was his boss, Billy West.

But Sing Lo wasn't sure where he

could find Billy. The young Circle J boss had left the camp early that morning, saying that he had some business to take care of, and would be back that same day.

Sing Lo supposed that Billy wanted to look over some feeder stock at one of the near-by ranches. But he had no idea which ranch to try first,

So it was with a heavy heart that the little Chinaman rode his piebald cayuse into Grubstake.

There was a chance that Billy might have completed his inspection of the cattle in which he was interested and that he might be in Grubstake now. So Sing Lo kept his eyes open as he rode along the single street of the town.

At first, the Circle J cook's yellow face was solemn, for he could see no sign of Billy West.

And as he neared the end of the street, his expression became more and more woebegone.

Suddenly a yelp of joy broke from Sing Lo's lips. His whole face brightened. His mouth spread into a wide smile.

"Mistle Billy! Mistle Billy!" he yelled.

He threw himself out of the piebald's saddle. In his eagerness, he stumbled and fell, sprawling face downward in the dust of the road. He picked himself up quickly and hurried on, brushing the dirt out of his face and clothing.

Billy West was at the corral of the livery stable, talking to the owner of the place. With him was his big chestnut cayuse, Danger.

Sing Lo rushed up to Billy and caught him by the sleeve of the shirt.

"Mistle Billy! Mistle Billy!" he cried out in excitement. "Mistle Billy!"

"What is it, Sing Lo?" Billy turned to the eager little Chinaman

with a friendly smile on his bronzed young face. There was a twinkle of amusement in his usually serious gray eyes.

"Mistle Billy! Mistle Billy!" Sing Lo repeated over and over.

Billy knew from the Chinaman's excited manner that something terrible had happened. Sing Lo didn't get as wrought up as this over nothing.

"Excuse me, pard," Billy said to the livery man. "I'll see yuh again!" And he turned away to go with Sing Lo.

Danger followed at his master's heels.

"What is it, Sing Lo?" Billy asked, when the two were alone.

"Mistle Billy!" the little Chinaman gasped.

"Don't keep repeating 'Mistle Billy' over and over," Billy said. "Talk slow and tell me what's wrong!"

"Oh, Mistle Billy, bad homblays hangee Mistle Joe!"

"Some bad hambres have hanged Joe!" Billy exclaimed, his face paling under its tan.

But Sing Lo shook his head violently at this. "No! No! No!"

"Well, what *has* happened, Sing Lo?" the Circle J boss asked, a puzzled expression on his face. "Talk slow—one word at a time now—and tell me from the beginning."

Sing Lo, after several false starts, then managed to give Billy a fairly clear account of what had happened to Joe Scott and the danger that was hanging over the redhead at that very moment.

Billy's face was serious when Sing Lo had finished. "They didn't capture Buck, then?" he asked. "They just hit him over the head and left him?"

"They not wantee Mistle Buck," Sing Lo explained. "Me fixee up

Mistle Buck's head. Him all light now."

"Is Buck in town?" Billy asked.

Sing Lo shook his head. "Him lesting back at——" he began, and then his slant eyes caught sight of a horseman racing in a dust cloud toward town.

Billy, too, saw the incoming rider.

"I wouldn't be surprised if this was Buck now," he murmured, after studying the blurred figure.

And that's just who it proved to be, for in a few minutes, Buck reined his panting cayuse to a sliding halt, swung out of the saddle, and came striding toward where Billy and Sing Lo stood.

"Yuh look like yuh been arguin' with a catamount," Billy remarked, after a brief study of Buck's patched-up appearance.

But Buck paid no attention to his boss. Instead, he glared furiously at Sing Lo and clutched the little Chinaman by the collar of his loose-fitting black coat.

"Say, yuh low-down heathen grub spoiler!" he roared, shifting his grip to Sing Lo's ear and twisting it. "What d'yuh mean by leavin' me alone when I'm almost dead? Yuh ongrateful little coyote, yuh—— Ouch!"

Buck's last remark was caused by the fact that Sing Lo, unable longer to stand the pain of having Buck punish his ear, had suddenly stamped down hard on Buck's right foot, choosing a spot which he knew was particularly tender.

"Ouch!" Buck said again, and he let go of Sing Lo's ear and went hopping around on one foot. "By ganny, yuh'll suffer fer this, yuh yaller-skinned gopher! I'll stake yuh out on an ant heap! I'll wrop yuh in a green rawhide and leave yuh out in the sun. I'll——"

"Only tit for tat, Mistle Buck,"

Sing Lo interrupted, rubbing his sore right ear tenderly. "You twist poor Chinees' ears. Poor Chinees step on yo' pet corn. Tit for tat, Mistle Buck!"

"Yo're fired from Circle J from this minute!" Buck declared angrily.

But Sing Lo shook his head, and his slant eyes twinkled with mischief.

"No can do, Mistle Buck," he murmured. "Only Mistle Billy can fire Sing Lo!"

"Waal, Billy——" Buck turned and look around him. Then his jaw dropped, his eyes bulged under their shaggy gray brows. A comical expression of dismay spread over his battered face. "By heifers, whar is he?"

For, while Buck and the Chinaman were having their argument, Billy West had mounted Danger and ridden away.

And now Sing Lo was tugging at Buck's bearskin vest and pointing up the street, at the same time crying out in a voice shrill with excitement:

"Look, Mistle Buck! Bad hom-blays coming to hang Mistle Joe!"

CHAPTER VII.

NECKTIE PARTY.

THEY rode into Grubstake with the stamp of murder on their faces—a dozen cruel-hearted desperadoes of Manuel's outlaw gang. They were the scum of the border—men of mixed breed, mongrels of the human race.

In their midst, his hands tied to his saddle horn, rode Joe Scott. His face was slightly pale under its freckles, but his jaw was set firmly, and his blue eyes glinted with defiance and contempt for his captors.

Curly Jake rode ahead of the party. His beefy face was flushed

with liquor, and he was in an ugly temper. Manuel had accused him of letting El Rojo escape when the outlaw band had raided Grubstake a few days previously. Harsh words had been spoken, and Curly Jake was sore at his chief.

Well, this time, there'd be no doubt about this red-headed hombre's being made into buzzard meat! Curly Jake would see to that!

Bringing up the rear of the party were the two half-breed gunmen, Pedro and Juan.

The former slouched in the saddle of his cow pony, a scowl on his low-browed, brutish face, as he muttered constantly to himself.

Juan, as usual, was jaunty and smartly dressed, with a bright new red sash around his slim waist. And as he rode, he puffed lazily on the *cigarillo* between his lips.

The party headed straight for the jail, in the rear of which was a large yard, surrounded by an adobe wall.

The jail building was now empty. The gate of the yard swung wide open. For since the Manuel gang's last raid on Grubstake there had been no law there.

In the middle of the yard grew a gnarled old cottonwood—the town's official gallows.

Joe Scott felt creepy fingers playing along his spine as he saw the sinister tree. He'd been hoping that Billy would get word of his danger in time to come to his rescue.

By this time, the news that a hanging was about to take place had got around the town. Citizens left their business. Barroom loafers and saloon bums and other curiosity seekers came swarming to the scene—to gawp and wonder, but not to help the victim of the unlawful execution.

At Curly Jake's orders, the men worked quickly. A rope was thrown

over a strong branch of the tree. Joe's horse was made to stand underneath. A hangman's knot was arranged. The noose was slipped over Joe's head, and the knot placed under his left ear.

Joe's eyes swept the crowd in a last vain hope of catching a glimpse of some friendly face. But he saw only his foes and the morbid sight-seers of the town, who had come to see a man die with his boots on.

There was a scuffle at the gateway. Some one was trying to force his way through the crowd. Voices were raised in anger. Then one voice, louder than all the rest, bellowed:

"Git out o' my way, you varmints! That's an innercent man they're hanging'. That's my pard! Let me git through, yuh skunks!"

Joe's heart leaped on hearing that voice. Good old Buck!

Here he came, charging through that mob of riffraff, elbowing men aside right and left, sometimes lashing out with his fists when they didn't move fast enough to suit him.

Curly Jake turned with an oath to Pedro and Juan, who sat their horses beside him.

"Get rid of that old buzzard!" he ordered. "He mustn't stop this——"

Bang-bang! Buck had his gun out now. His first bullet clipped the brim of Curly Jake's hat.

Others of the gang turned to see who was interrupting the necktie party.

Joe Scott looked on, puzzled and bewildered. And then a sound overhead caused him to glance upward.

A man had suddenly appeared from some hiding place among the branches of the cottonwood. He came out onto the branch from which the gallows rope was dangling, lowering himself by his hands, and dropped right onto the back of Joe Scott's cayuse.

Joe's blue eyes were big with surprise. For the man who had suddenly appeared from his place of concealment in the tree was wearing a fancy black sombrero, and the upper part of his face was covered by a black mask. And beneath the sombrero was a thatch of bright-red hair.

A knife appeared in his hand. With a swift stroke, he slashed the rope that tied Joe Scott's hands to the saddle horn.

Then he shoved a gun into Joe's hand—one of his own long-barreled Colts, with a handle of yellowed ivory.

"Come on, cowboy!" he whispered. "We got to shoot our way out of this! Are yuh game?"

Was Joe Scott game? Give him the smallest fighting chance, and he'd try to shoot his way through an army!

With Buck taking up the attention of part of the outlaw necktie party, the fresh attack by Joe and the masked hombre who rode behind him took the would-be murderers completely by surprise.

Bang-bang-bang! Joe and the masked stranger blazed away into the crowd. The cowardly gunmen gave way before them and tried to lose themselves among the citizens of Grubstake.

A path was cleared toward the gateway.

Joe touched his cayuse with the spurs and sent it charging out into the open. Ahead of him, stood a big black horse, its reins thrown over its head and trailing on the ground.

"Just a minute!" whispered Joe's masked rescuer. "I'll ride my own hoss now!"

He swung down from his position behind Joe and ran over to the black. He mounted quickly, throw-

ing a swift glance over his shoulder to see if any one was following.

A crowd was milling about the gate of the jail yard. But there was no attempt at pursuit. It looked as if Curly Jake and his crew of cut-throats were thrown into panic by the sudden appearance of a man whom they believed they had murdered.

With the superstition of their kind, they must have thought the masked stranger a ghost.

And now two figures separated themselves from the crowd. Both were easily recognized by Joe Scott. For one was the lanky form of Buck Foster, mounted on his own cayuse, and the other was the small, black-clad Chinaman, Sing Lo, forking his sleepy piebald.

They came toward Joe and the masked hombre at a gallop.

Buck Foster was puffing with excitement. His brown eyes were aglow, and with one hand, he was stroking the ends of his mustache with an air of pride.

"By ganny, carrot-top!" he exclaimed. "Did yuh see how I made them skunks quit? It shore was a sight!"

"Yeah, yuh was the whole show, mosshorn!" Joe chuckled, his freckled face wearing a wide smile, for the first time since his narrow escape from the hangman's rope. "Nobody else did nothin'. Yuh licked 'em all by yore lonesome!"

Buck jerked his thumb toward the masked rider, who had gone on a little ahead. "Waal, *he* helped some," admitted the veteran.

The stranger suddenly reined in his cayuse, wheeled about, and waited for the others to catch up. They were now about half a mile out of town.

"I reckon I'll be ridin' north into the hills," he said, still speaking in

the hoarse whisper he had used when he first appeared from his hiding place in the cottonwood. "I'm plumb glad to have met you gents!"

"Hold on a minute, stranger!" Joe Scott exclaimed. "Are yuh really El Rojo? I want to thank——"

But with his last words, the stranger in the big sombrero and the black mask had wheeled his mount, touched it lightly with the spurs, and sent it racing away to the northward.

A few minutes later, horse and rider disappeared in an arroyo.

Joe shrugged his shoulders and looked at Buck.

"I reckon that gent don't want ter be thanked," the redhead remarked.

They finished their journey to the camp in silence. Both waddies were busy with their own thoughts.

It was while they were unsaddling that a sudden idea occurred to Buck Foster.

"Sa-ay!" he exclaimed, pausing in his task, and pushing back his old black Stetson on his grizzled head.

"What is it?" Joe asked.

"I wonder whar Billy's went?"

Joe shook his head, a puzzled expression on his freckled face. His blue eyes looked troubled. "I didn't see him a-tall when them varmints was tryin' ter hang me."

"Mebbe they've captured him," Buck suggested.

"I'll ride back ter town and see what I kin find out," Joe said. "But I ain't goin' ter wear that mangy ol' black sombrero yuh bought fer me. I believe the durned thing's got a curse on it."

"Aw, yo're as bad as these breeds," Buck said, with a note of contempt in his voice. "That thar sombrero is the finest that money kin buy."

"It ain't no headpiece fer a Montanner cow-puncher," Joe argued.

"Yuh'd ought ter be proud ter wear it," Buck retorted.

"I wouldn't want ter be found dead in it——"

"Another little argument, huh?" a voice behind the redhead interrupted.

Joe whirled about—to find himself looking into the smiling face of his boss.

"Glad to see yuh escaped the necktie party, Joe," he said. "El Rojo told me he'd git yuh free——"

"Yuh mean yuh seen that hombre, El Rojo?"

"I got a message from him," Billy explained, and he pulled a folded piece of paper from the pocket of his vest. "Take a look at it."

Joe took the paper and read it. The words were in pencil-printed letters, and the Circle J redhead recognized them as the same kind of lettering as the note which the outlaw Manuel had shown him—the message in which El Rojo had told Manuel he was coming to take him to the gallows.

This message which Billy now showed Joe was as follows:

BILLY WEST: Bring your men to the place of which I told you in Blanco Canyon to capture Manuel. Be there at sundown. Do not fail me. EL ROJO.

CHAPTER VIII.

COLD JUSTICE.

DUSK was gathering in Blanco Canyon when the three Montana waddies rode through it nearly an hour later. To the west, the sky was crimson and purple and gold with the hues of the desert sunset.

Billy West had cautioned his two hands to keep silent, and Buck and Joe were obeying the order, although both rannies were itching to unlim-

ber their jaws and start their tongues wagging.

But their boss had warned them that they were going toward the secret hiding place of Manuel, the outlaw. Their horses' hoofs were muffled with strips of sacking and old blanket. So they advanced without any sound to tell of their coming.

Then Billy suddenly turned into a side canyon and led them to the foot of a narrow trail that led up to the rim rock.

"This way," he said, in a low voice. "We'll hev to leave our hosses in the mesquite yonder."

Buck Foster looked at the steep trail and started to grumble. "Say, does yuh expect—" he began.

"Silence!" Billy whispered sternly. "If yuh wants ter go back ter camp, yuh kin start right now."

And that took all the wind out of Buck Foster's bellows, for the time being.

The three hid their horses in the mesquite and started up the trail. Billy went in the lead, with Joe following next. Buck came last.

The two younger waddies made the ascent without much difficulty. But Buck was slow and clumsy, and he slipped several times. Also, he had to stop to rest and puff. But he finally made it and sat, gasping for breath on the top of the mesa.

When Buck had got his wind back, Billy again took the lead and conducted his two saddle pards to the rim of the valley in which Manuel's adobe house had been built.

A dry watercourse cut a gash in the side of the cliff at one point. Billy climbed down it a little way, motioning to Buck and Joe to follow.

They came out presently on a ledge, from which they would get a

clear view of everything in the valley below them.

Billy pointed out the adobe building, half hidden among the boulders.

"There's Manuel's hangout," he whispered. "And now look thar!"

He pointed again—this time to a pair of huge boulders near the spot where the canyon opened out into this basin.

"Yuh see," Billy explained, "if we'd 'a' kept to the canyon trail, those gents hidin' down there would 'a' given us a warm greeting!"

Buck and Joe looked, and both gasped with surprise.

"Waal, the sneakin' skunks!" the veteran waddy muttered under his breath.

"The dirty polecats!" Joe growled.

For there were eight hombres lying in wait to dry-gulch any hostile visitor who might approach Manuel's headquarters through Blanco Canyon.

"When I give the whistle signal," Billy said. "give those skulkin' varmints a dose of hot lead. You stay here, Buck! And you, Joe, take up your position a little farther along this ledge, behind that rock!"

Joe moved as Billy suggested. Then the Circle J boss crept away, again climbing to the summit of the rim rock, and was lost to the sight of his two waddies.

Buck, left alone, was itching to get into action. Sweat trickled down his leathery neck and forehead, in spite of the fact that the coolness of the desert night was at hand. His eyes were fixed on the hiding men Billy had pointed out to him.

It seemed as if he'd waited an hour, but it was really less than ten minutes when the signal came—a low, penetrating whistle that he recognized as Billy's.

Buck lost no time going into action.

"Git out o' thar, yuh sneakin' huckleberries!" the veteran shouted, and began to blaze away for all he was worth.

The valley was filled with the thunder of six-guns, as Joe Scott got into the fight. And it wasn't long before the bandits, lying in ambush below, spotted the position of their attackers and began to shoot back.

Lead began to fly around Buck's ears. Chips of rock broke off and stung his cheeks. In his eagerness for the fray, he came out from under cover, showing himself recklessly. But his shooting was straight and true.

He could see Joe Scott, too, fighting it out with the gunmen below. Joe had crawled out to the rim of the ledge and was exposed to the lead that Manuel's men were sling- ing at him.

More outlaws came rushing to join in the attack on the Circle J waddies. Flying lead spat- ted furiously against the ledge and the cliff. More than one bullet nicked Buck's leathery skin. But the veteran's jaw was set, and he settled down to his work with grim purpose.

Man after man of that crew of hidden murderers went down before the deadly fire of the Montana cow- punchers.

A roar broke from the Circle J veteran as he saw the havoc his bul- lets were working in the ranks of the outlaws.

"Good fer you, carrot-top!" he shouted at Joe Scott. "We got them varmints on the run! Give it to 'em now, yuh——"

And then Buck paused, open- mouthed, his guns in the act of com- ing down into aim.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" he murmured under his breath.

For down below in the narrow val- ley, Buck saw a rider suddenly ap- pear, spurring a big black horse straight between the two groups of hidden gunmen.

He flew past them with the speed of an arrow. The sound of his cayuse's pounding hoofs came clearly to Buck as he craned his neck to see over the rim of the ledge.

"By ganny!" Buck exclaimed. "Thar's El Rojo again!"

The veteran Montana waddy's eyes bulged with amazement as he saw the mystery rider. There was no mistaking the big black sombrero with its wealth of gold trimming, the black mask covering the upper part of the man's face, and the thatch of red hair that showed under the brim of the sombrero.

And to make the picture complete, the rider was holding one of the frontier-model Colts with the yel- lowed ivory handles in his right hand. The left-hand gun was still in its holster.

Within twenty feet of the long adobe building, the masked rider reined in the big black, slid out of the saddle, and slapped the horse on the side of its neck, chasing it into the shelter of the near-by boulders.

Then El Rojo faced toward the door of the outlaws' retreat. Both the long-barreled, ivory-handled guns were in his hands now.

His voice rang out in a defiant challenge that floated back to Buck's ears.

"Come out hyar, Manuel and yore skulkin' killers! Come out an' meet El Rojo face to face!"

For a few seconds, there was no answer. Then, like the sudden rush of a Texas norther whirling down

on the plains, three men swarmed out of the doorway, guns blazing.

The first was the burly, apelike Pedro.

Right on his heels, came the slim gunman, Juan.

And last, came the big American desperado, Curly Jake.

The moment they were out of the doorway, they began shooting. A withering blast of lead swept toward the lone figure of El Rojo.

His body swayed. But it was hard to tell whether he had been hit, or if he had merely made a side-step to avoid the bullets of his foes.

Yet both the big ivory-handled guns of El Rojo were leveled and blazing away, jumping slightly in his hands with each pull of the trigger. And his shooting was straight and steady.

Pedro was the first to go down before the deadly fire of those terrible sixes. The ugly half-breed's firing was hurried. Probably he was uncertain in his mind whether this was a man or a ghost he was fighting. His bullets flew wild. But those from the guns of El Rojo went straight to their mark.

With his thickset body drilled twice through the chest, Pedro slumped to the ground and lay there, his life ebbing away.

A moment later, the dapper little gunman, Juan, pitched forward on his face, arms flung wide, and lay without stirring.

And then Curly Jake joined the last round-up. A slug from one of the ivory-handled Colts drilled him squarely in the center of the forehead. He spun around, the guns dropping from his limp hands as they exploded.

Then he fell, sprawling right across the body of Juan.

And now another figure appeared in the doorway of the long adobe building. It was the tall outlaw chief, Manuel.

For a brief moment, the two faced each other in silence—Manuel, the killer and plunderer, the terror of the border, and El Rojo, the man of mystery.

Both had their guns in their hands, but neither made a move at once.

An ugly snarl showed on the sal-low face of Manuel, as he saw his three gunmen lying dead on the ground. It was the snarl of a cornered rat, and it twisted his straight gash of a mouth sharply down at the right corner.

Then, as if some one had given a signal to start shooting, both men raised their guns and began to trigger them.

Bang-bang-bang-bang! Just four shots rang out.

But it was the hand of El Rojo that was the steadier and the quicker.

A sharp scream was torn from the twisted lips of Manuel as the masked fighter's bullets crashed into his brain. Then the scream was suddenly silenced, and he dropped to the ground like a felled steer in the slaughterhouse.

El Rojo stood still as a statue for a space of perhaps ten seconds. If he had been hit by either of Manuel's bullets, he showed no sign of injury.

He moved forward swiftly, knelt for a moment beside the outlaw, feeling for some sign of a heartbeat.

Then he was on his feet again in a quick, catlike leap, and racing toward the boulders where he had left the black cayuse.

He rode past the few panic-

stricken outlaws of Manuel's gang who still lived after their fierce gun battle with Buck and Joe. They made no move to stop him. Most of them were too badly wounded. And the rest looked at him as if they were seeing a ghost.

As the masked rider came near the place where Buck and Joe were stationed overhead, on the ledge of the cliff, he called out to them in his strained, hoarse voice:

"Git back to yore camp as quick as yuh can. The governor's sendin' a detail of State rangers to clean up the rest of these varmints. They'll take care of the dead an' wounded. Get goin', the two of yuh. Yore boss'll join yuh at the camp!"

"Say, hombre, where——" Joe Scott started to ask about Billy West.

But El Rojo was already off. He had touched the black with his spurs and sent it racing into the twisting reaches of Blanco Canyon, before Joe could get his question out.

Buck Foster walked cautiously along the ledge to the spot where Joe was crouching.

"I reckon, carrot-top," the veteran remarked, curling up the ends of his grizzled mustache with his gnarled fingers, "that the fun's about done."

"Wonder why Billy left us," Joe Scott said, a thoughtful expression in his blue eyes.

"Mebbe he figured that Manuel and them other three was El Rojo's meat," Buck suggested.

"I shouldn't be surprised," the redhead added, "if Billy wasn't right behind some o' them boulders, ready ter finish the job if El Rojo failed ter git his men!"

Buck Foster looked at the sky. There were only a few streaks of gold and crimson showing over the rim

rock toward the west. The daylight was fading fast.

"Let's git out o' hyar afore it gits pitch dark," the veteran growled. "I ain't no Rocky Mountain goat."

"Yuh ain't even a horned toad when it comes ter climbin'," Joe said, with a grin.

CHAPTER IX.

EL ROJO UNMASKS.

WHEN the two waddies reached their camp, they found their boss already there, waiting for them. Sing Lo had just finished bandaging an ugly wound where a bullet had grooved its way across Billy's ribs on the left side. A few more inches to the right, and the slug would have pierced his heart.

Billy's face was a little white from the pain of having the wound doctored, when Buck and Joe rode into the camp.

"By heifers, Billy!" Buck Foster exclaimed. "I didn't see yuh get hit. Where was yuh?"

"Aw, you can't see nothin'," Joe told the grizzled ranny. "Yuh'll be goin' round tellin' everybody yuh cleaned up them outlaws all by yoreself."

"Glub pile!" Sing Lo called out. "Come an' get it!" And that put a stop to the jawing of the two saddle pardners for the time being.

The little Chinaman now brought forward a steaming stew pot which gave forth a savory smell. He dished out generous portions for all three waddies, and then helped himself.

It was the Mexican dish known as *pollo con arroz*, or "chicken with rice," which Sing Lo had been taught to prepare by a Mexican cook.

Buck Foster complained, after the

first mouthful, that it was too highly seasoned and burned his mouth. But Joe Scott told Buck that he was getting old and soft, and ought to be fed on bread and milk at his time of life.

That remark naturally got Buck's dander up, and the battle was resumed with new fire and vigor.

Billy West was quiet and had little to say. He didn't even bawl out his two saddle pards and order them to stop. He just let them talk themselves out.

After they had finished, Sing Lo cleared up his dishes and pots and pans, and the whole camp turned into their blankets early.

In a very short time, snores were coming from the blanket rolls of Buck Foster and Joe Scott. Sing Lo was fast asleep, too, but he was a light sleeper and made no noise.

Billy West lay very still for nearly an hour after the others had become lost in their slumbers.

Then the Circle J boss got up. He went over to Sing Lo and made sure that the little Chinaman was fast asleep.

Billy's next move was to the Circle J corral, where Danger had been put with the rest of the Circle J remuda.

He saddled the big chestnut and led him to the mouth of the gully. There he mounted and set off at a fox trot, heading north.

A huge paloverde, its branches outlined against the clear desert sky in the moonlight, served as a landmark for the spot Billy was seeking.

He rode into an arroyo and presently came out again, leading a big black horse. Then he headed toward the northeast and rode steadily for half an hour, until he reached a small adobe ranch house.

Here he was expected, in spite of the lateness of the hour. A small, wrinkled man with bushy white hair and a very large white mustache was at the gate of the ranch yard, waiting for him.

"Hey, thar, West! I felt it in my bones yuh'd be here ter-night!" the old rancher called out.

"Yore bones guessed right, Dan Shelton," Billy answered, as he dismounted and clasped the hand which the other held out to him.

Old Dan Shelton's face was eager. His eyes looked into Billy's.

"What news, son?" he asked.

Billy did not answer at once. Instead, he went to the big black horse and removed the saddle roll from its back.

Then he spread the roll out on the ground.

"I'm returnin' the things I borrowed," he said. "See that they're all there."

He knelt and handed the contents of the roll to Dan Shelton, one by one.

First he gave the old rancher a crushed black sombrero, with a lot of gold trimming and tassels decorating its brim.

Then he handed up a black mask, large enough to cover the top of a man's face.

The next object to come out of the saddle roll was a gleaming metal badge. It was the same badge that Billy had removed from the body of the Ranger, Tom Shelton, a few days before.

Old Dan Shelton turned the badge over and his steel-blue eyes misted. He thrust it hurriedly into his shirt pocket.

Then Billy picked up a gun belt with twin holsters. In the holsters were two fine Frontier-model Colts,

with carved handles of yellowed ivory.

"I'm returnin' yore son's guns, Dan Shelton," Billy said quietly. "They're plumb fine shootin' irons."

Old Dan Shelton took the ivory-handled guns and handled them lovingly.

"The guns of El Rojo—yore son!" Billy added softly.

"Tom was plumb fond o' them guns," the old man murmured. "How many notches should I put in 'em?"

"I wouldn't spoil those handles." Billy answered. "But if yuh want ter make a small nick fer each hombre those guns have punished fer the murder of yore son, Tom, yuh'll hev to carve four!"

"Four!" old Dan Shelton exclaimed.

"There were the three murderers who spiked him to the jail door," Billy said slowly. "And there was the one that give them their orders ter do the killin'."

"Yuh—yuh don't mean these guns have killed Manuel?" old Dan Shelton asked, his voice trembling.

Billy nodded without speaking.

The old man's face glowed with joy. He seemed suddenly to become ten years younger.

"Manuel and the three murderers of my son! They've all been punished!"

Billy's face was solemn. His serious gray eyes looked straight into those of old Dan Shelton.

"Yes." A faint smile now touched the corners of Billy's straight mouth. "And every one of them died, believin' it was El Rojo himself who had come back from the dead to avenge his murder."

"Yuh don't tell me!" Dan Shelton exclaimed. "But who was this red-headed hombre who's been ridin' to avenge El Rojo?"

Billy's smile now widened into a grin. He thrust his hand inside his calfskin vest and brought out a soft fuzzy object.

He placed it on his head and spread it out, so that it fitted closely to his skull. It was a fiery-red wig. Then he took the sombrero and mask from Dan Shelton's hands and put them on.

A gasp of surprise broke from the white-haired rancher.

"Then it was *you*, West! *You* avenged the killin' of El Rojo! I kin never thank yuh, pard. I'll report this to the governor, and he'll shore——"

"I ain't lookin' fer rewards or anything like that," Billy said quietly.

He removed the hat and mask and handed them back to Dan Shelton. Then he took off the wig and put it back into the pocket of his vest.

"I got to give this back ter my chink cook," he explained. "It belongs ter his magician's outfit."

"I'd shore like to do somethin' for——" Dan Shelton began.

But Billy cut him short. "I was proud to wear the Ranger's badge and use the guns of El Rojo to bring his murderers to justice!" he said simply.

He held out his hand. Dan Shelton gripped it firmly.

"So long, pardner, and a million thanks," the old rancher murmured fervently.

"So long, ol'-timer, and good luck!" Billy answered.

Then he turned, swung easily into Danger's saddle, and sent the big chestnut at an easy trot over the cactus-dotted flats, heading to the southwest and the Circle J camp.

Dan Shelton watched him till he was out of sight, his eyes misting, a far-away smile on his wrinkled face.

He waved his hand toward the

spot where he had just lost track of the Circle J boss and his horse.

"Adios, El Rojo!" he whispered.

Prob'ly Buck an' Joe won't never find out who El Rojo was. Mebbe it's jest as well. There'd be shore ter be an ar-

gument, with Buck a-claimin' thet he knowed it all along. But thet Manuel skunk never had a chance, from the time Billy took his trail. Thet young Montana hombre is shore sudden death on varmints, when he gits goin'. Watch fer another Circle J story in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.



THE END OF A TRAIL TOWN

ALL the trail towns of the West had their ups and downs, and Dodge was no exception. When groups of cowboys came in, with three months' dust of the trail in their throats, and their wages in their pockets, they were given a riotous welcome by the inhabitants, good and bad.

Gamblers, bartenders, slick card cheats, honest merchants, and bad men were all glad to see them, and many of them did their utmost to separate them from the money that had been earned by months of danger, stampedes, and exposure to sun, rain, and blizzards.

When the railways brought supplies to Dodge direct, the big wagon-freighting trade, that had been kept alive by Dodge as its supply station, was killed at one blow. Commerce went out with the saloons, dance halls and gambling houses.

When the trail drivers came no more, and the big wagons took other routes, there were no thirsty cowboys to drink and be fleeced, no teamsters to rob, no cattle to rustle, no one to shoot out the lights.

So Dodge died—suddenly and with her boots on.

Property was no longer of any value. The owners just went away. A tenant could live in any house, and make his own choice, without paying a cent of rent.

There was no market for live stock, for no one had any money.

Land was of so little value that a man who was leaving swapped a quarter section for a skinny cow, so as to have milk for his children on the road. When he found that the other fellow couldn't read, he slipped in another quarter section, and the swapper didn't know what he was getting for the critter.

But Dodge was not destined to stay dead forever. It came back to life gradually. At first, it was squatters who drifted in, because land and dwellings could be had for nothing.

When it was found that the surrounding land, that had been considered good only for grazing, could be cultivated, settlers seeking homes came along with their families. They bought broad acres cheap. There were no cattlemen to drive them away or to cut down their fences. So they worked hard and they prospered.

Experienced farmers from the East and from Europe, with age-old knowledge behind them, made experiments on the land with success. Alfalfa and wheat took the place of cattle and grass. Fat milch cows grazed in the green pastures, and agriculture brought a more enduring prosperity than that of the fleeting riches of gambling halls and saloons. A new Dodge rose on the old site. A Dodge that is very much alive today.

Trouble at the Water Hole

A YOUNG Westerner, Joe Greer, had the courage to go in for sheep-raising at a time when that industry was looked upon as the lowest and most hated occupation that a human being could engage in.

But Joe believed that sheep-raising was going to be a great thing for Texas, and he gathered a good flock of woollies together. His ranch was in the wild Edwards Plateau country, and on his land was the famous Green Lake, that never went dry.

A hard, dry season was on, water was at a premium, and Joe Greer fenced the lake. By this action of self-protection, he incurred the enmity of the cattlemen for many miles around.

Residents and drifters, all hated sheep and fences, so the fence was cut faster than Joe could mend it.

When fights became dangerously frequent, Joe appealed to the Rangers, and a detachment was sent to Green Lake.

They arrived at midnight and hitched their big horses in a cedar brake about two miles from the Greer house. Close to the lake was a little cabin in which the Rangers waited for the enemy to show up.

The next morning, some punchers appeared with about fifty head of cattle. They opened the gate of the fence and drove the herd through to the water. This was not against the law, but fence-cutting had been made a felony, and the Rangers waited to see what would happen next.

In the afternoon, the same punchers returned with another herd and cut down the fence to save time, driving the critters right

into the lake, where they drank their fill.

One lone Ranger was in a live-oak clump. He called on the cowmen to surrender, but they replied with strong language and a bullet that struck the Ranger under the right arm.

The firing then became general, and one of the Rangers received a wound that put him out of the fight for the time being.

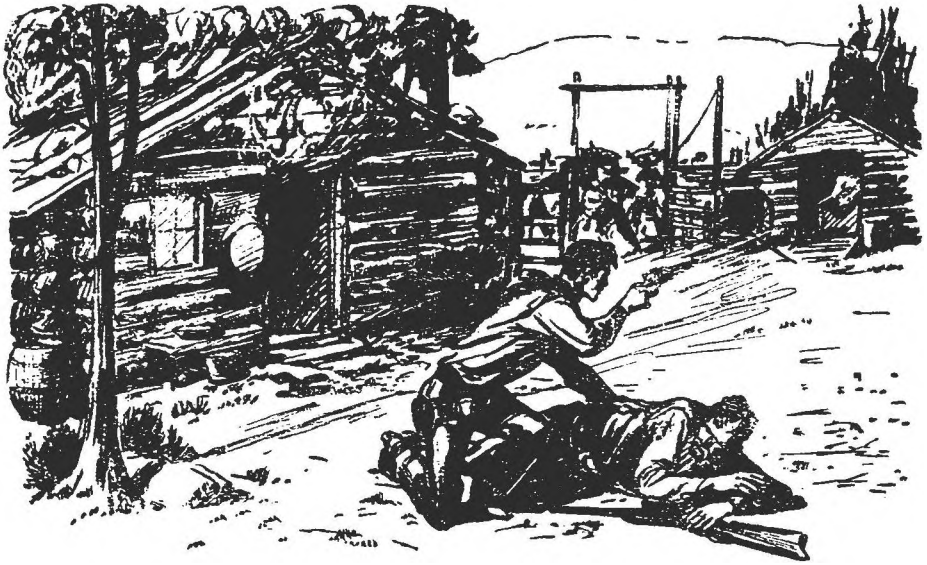
Soon the cowboys were running for safer quarters. Three of them escaped, while one fell with a bullet in his chest and was dead before he touched the ground.

The Ranger was pretty badly wounded, but he was cared for at the Greer home. Joe rode alone to Junction for a supply of ammunition, and came back in the morning, bringing a doctor with him.

The dead cowboy was buried by the side of another fence-cutter who had been killed some months before. When his effects were turned over to the sheriff, it was found that he was a convict who had escaped from jail in Lampasas County, where he was serving a term for murder.

Joe Greer was not troubled much after this last fight. When he first started on Green Lake he had about found hundred head of sheep, two ponies and a wagon. Later he ran goats as well as sheep, and became the owner of thousands of acres of land.

He convinced many cattlemen that sheep-raising would be of great benefit to Texas, and those who took his advice regarding both sheep and goats are now reaping their reward.



Snake Smoke

By Nelse Anderson

Author of "Skunk Tracks on the Bar L," etc.

THE threat of doom hung over the nester ranch on Sugar Creek. It had come with the twilight, when the foothill birds had stilled their chirping, and the coyote was sending his lonely cry from the craggy ledges of the Big Cloudy Range.

Inside the shadowy cabin, young Tim Noggle sat propped in a bunk, recovering from a week-old snake bite. His thin face was chalky in the gloom, and his eyes burned like embers. He was listening to the deep voices of two hombres who sat at a rickety table, unaware of the fall of night.

"The wild bunch will play square with yuh, nester, if yuh play square with them." Gault Satin was speaking to Tim's white-haired father. "Take yore choice. Earn ten bucks

a week from the owl-hoot tribe, or turn stool pigeon for the law an' earn a one-way ticket to Boot Hill."

Old man Noggle replied in the tone of one who had lived through many hardships and was not frightened by fate.

"I ain't looking for trouble from no man. All strangers are welcome to my home. I mind my business an' don't ask questions. They mind theirs. I don't stand bullyin' from nobody."

Young Tim could barely see the grin that twisted Gault Satin's lips. The gathering dark concealed the tall, lean outlaw as it would a stalking wolf.

Satin was a trail wolf. His pack of human varmints had cleverly evaded the traps and bullet poison

of the law for years. In every Texas post office a photograph of Satin's hollow-cheeked face hung on the "Wanted" boards.

That was how Tim knew the stranger, who had ridden into the Noggle homestead not an hour before, with two bone-handled guns tied down on his black chaps.

"I wouldn't bully yuh, nester," Satin said to Tim's father. "Me an' the bunch could easily steal yore two-bit herd. We watched yuh for a long time, an' we found out that yuh was on the level. We want yuh to stay hyar an' prosper. But yuh've got to be neighborly."

"Neighborly!" The word made Tim's flesh creep. He and his father might just as well get sociable with a family of rattlesnakes. Being neighborly with the owl-hoot tribe meant serving as lookouts and grub packers, carrying word to them of the approach of suspicious strangers and receiving mail for them in the distant post.

Satin's gang was holding a big herd of stolen horses and steers back in the mountains. Tim had almost stumbled upon their hide-out when he had been unlucky enough to step on a sleeping buzztail.

One of Satin's riders had found him knifing open the bite to let the poison drain out. The rider had brought Tim home as a gesture of friendship, and now Gault Satin had come to collect on that favor.

"I'm thanking yuh for what yuh did for my boy," old man Noggle said to the outlaw boss. "Yo're welcome to anything I own, but yuh can't have my soul, stranger. I ain't pardin' with no outlaws. I ain't fighting yuh, either. That's the business of the law."

"The law, eh?" Satin snorted. "There ain't no law in these parts. Have yuh yet seen a tin-badge pro-

tectin' yore interests? Suppose some fool deputy should come proddin' inter our stampin' grounds? How long would he last? Nester, I kin give yuh more than the law ever could. An' yo're lucky ter git it."

Tim heard his father's chair scrape in the gloom. He could just see him get to his feet, an oaken figure with broad shoulders slightly bent from years of range work. The homesteader's face was lined, and his gray eyes were not as sharp as they had been, but he still had enough strength in his big hands to take a man like Gault Satin apart.

"Stranger," Noggle said with controlled emotion, "it's getting past my bedtime."

Tim watched the outlaw rise. "I git the drift," Satin sneered. "Yuh aim ter turn down my proposition. Yuh can't do that, sod-buster. Listen ter me—there's a fire all ready ter light on the top of Squaw Mountain. If any posses come this way, yuh better sneak off an' light that fire. Savvy?"

Tim stirred restlessly. He wanted to keep his temper as his father kept his, but he could not. He wrapped his fingers around the butt of an old horse pistol concealed under his blankets.

"We ain't sod-busters," Tim snapped. "Me an' pop was wiped out by the drought back in the Panhandle. We don't take nothin' from—"

"Hush up, son," old man Noggle ordered, as Gault Satin twisted his head and fastened glittering eyes upon the young fellow.

"The fang of a rattler ain't near as painful as the bite of a bullet, younker," the outlaw snarled. "If yore pap is too ornery ter make the trip ter Squaw Mountain, yuh fork a pony up thar pronto. If yuh

don't——" Satin tapped his gun butts. Then, drawing himself up with a chuckle, he turned to the front door. "Adios." He was gone, the door swinging shut behind him.

"Snake!" Tim Noggle cried.

"Hush up!" the homesteader cautioned.

They listened to the hoofbeats of the outlaw's horse play out in the night.

For days, Tim and his father tried to cast off the dreadful spell cast upon them by Gault Satin. They knew not what to expect: A shot from hiding, a raid upon their meager herd of Herefords, or a sudden range fire that would destroy their cabin, barn, and corral.

They neither saw nor heard riders. Their lonely life continued as it had for the six months that they had been homesteading the Big Cloudy foothills. But they no longer felt safe.

The snake bite in Tim's calf was almost healed. He took to doing chores about the ranch yard and urged his father to tend to calf work down in the pine draws.

It was difficult to get old man Noggle to leave his son even for an hour. Had the rancher not sunk his last cent into this new outfit, he might have pulled his stakes and taken Tim to a new range. But to leave now meant that the old fellow would have to find a job paying mighty poor wages.

"We'll stick it out here, pop," Tim argued. "Those outlaws will be leaving the Big Cloudies soon. Nobody but yuh an' me know where they are, so nobody is coming hunting for them."

Old man Noggle shook his white head and bit his lips. "The arm of the law is long an' strong, son. Don't ever forget that. Those raid-

ers have stolen cattle. They can't escape forever."

Tim wondered about the law as his father rode off on a pinto to chase calves out of the brush. The boy had seen very few lawmen in his life, living as he did on the range and learning his lessons at the fireside.

He had heard cowboy stories of men settling their own troubles with guns and not by aid of courts. When his chores were done, he liked to sit on the sunny doorstep, cleaning the big horse pistol that had belonged to his grandfather.

He was at work with oil and rags one day, a month after Gault Satin's visit, when a rider appeared at the end of the valley that ran down from the foothills to the east. Tim's blue eyes narrowed, then went wide. He caught the glint of sunlight on a piece of metal which the horseman wore on his buckskin vest.

Here came the law. What chance did he, a lone man, stand against an entire wolf pack? Ranchers might turn to him for help, but he could bring only trouble to the Noggles.

A frown creased Tim's tanned forehead, and he was filled with a deep disgust for this single rider who might think that he could whip the owl-hoot tribe by himself. Slipping the horse pistol into his blue cotton shirt, Tim stood up and waited.

The deputy approached at an easy trot. On his saddle horn, he balanced a Winchester. There was a cool smile at his lips. Deeply burned by sun and wind, he was clean-cut, square-jawed, handsome in a fashion.

"Howdy, hombre!" the rider called, checking his buckskin. "I'm Jack Brice. Yo're Tim Noggle. I heard about yuh an' yore boss, back

yonder in town. How yuh makin' out?"

It was man-to-man talk, and Tim felt himself liking the visitor. But caution warned him to be careful. He watched the deputy swing down from the saddle and come striding forward, hand outstretched.

"Jim Noggle will be home shortly," the boy said briefly, in the manner of one who lived in the wilds and gave little information to strangers. But he was forced to take Jack Brice's strong grip and shake.

"Nice outfit yuh have hyar," the lawman spoke up. "I wish I had one like it myself. Some day," he added, winking a brown eye, "I'll quit the long trail an' settle me down."

"Huh!" Tim grunted, thinking that the deputy talked too much on such short acquaintance.

"Roundin' up skunks is a sorry business," Jack Brice went on. "But somebody has got to do it. I was a fool to sign on. The pay is small, the hours long, an' most of us end up in a dry canyon with a slug in our ribs. It must be right peaceful, ownin' a spread like this."

The boy stirred restlessly. He wanted to correct the deputy's opinion, but an inner voice warned him against showing his hand. For all he knew, Jack Brice might be drawing him out.

Perhaps Brice wasn't a deputy. Law badges are easy to counterfeit. Tim had heard of such things.

He turned his eyes to the south, wondering if his father had detected the arrival of the stranger, and he saw old man Noggle coming at a hard gallop from a draw.

Brice saw the homesteader, too. "He shore kin ride, can't he?" he said appraisingly. "Noggle is from the Panhandle, ain't he? Folks in

town have a lot o' respect for him. Yes, yuh two fellows have a lot of courage to live off hyar by yore lonesome."

Tim said nothing and watched his father applying quirt and spur. The old fellow seemed plenty excited. He jumped his buckskin across a creek to reach the ranch yard by a short cut. Then he came pounding in and threw himself out of the saddle like a young waddy instead of an old cattleman.

"Howdy, Noggle!" Brice called.

Jim Noggle clumped forward, his gray eyes flashing, his face hard.

"What's he want, Tim?" the old fellow demanded angrily.

"Don't know," the boy replied. "He jest arrived."

Noggle breathed with relief. "Look here, deputy," he said coldly, "my homestead claim is all legal hyar. If yuh want ter look my stock over, go ahead. The hull place is yores. I ain't got nothin' ter hide."

Jack Brice flushed with embarrassment.

"I don't want to inspect nothin', cowboy," he spoke up. "The law is backin' yuh up. It ain't pesterin' yuh. It's my business to drop in an' chew the rag with hombres like yuh, Noggle. We like to let yuh know that we're on the job. There ain't nothin' to get excited about."

Tim watched his father swallow hard. "Mebbe I was a bit hasty," old man Noggle admitted sheepishly. "Will yuh have beans with us to-night? I can't offer much more."

Jack Brice shook his head and turned to his buckskin. "I ain't got time to stop," he said, and swung into the saddle. "After I do a little job up in the Big Cloudy Range, I might come by an' accept that invitation."

Tim stiffened. His eyes fastened in helplessness upon the lawman. He wanted to tell him of the danger in the mountains, but he couldn't. He glanced at his father and found him pale and haggard.

Brice grinned at them. "Don't say nothin'," he chuckled. "I kin read what I want to know in yore faces. I don't blame yuh. Don't be fools. Send off the signal, hombres. I've got a few tricks up my sleeve that the owl-hooters don't know about."

He threw in his hooks and galloped away.

For a long moment, Tim and his father stood watching the lawman crossing the valley. Then he was gone into the pines. The boy felt a cold shiver go down his spine. Did the law suspect them of being in cahoots with outlaws?

"Are yuh going to light the signal, pop?"

Old man Noggle trembled. "I can't, Tim. I jest can't do it."

Tim squared his shoulders. He was not yet sixteen, but the woods had very few secrets that he didn't know. He had learned that a coyote pack will flee if warned of an enemy's approach.

But that same pack might fight savagely if suddenly surprised. The same might hold true for Deputy Brice and Gault Satin's pack of human varmints.

"If yuh don't light the fire, pop, I'm goin' ter do it," Tim spoke up. "The lawman expects us to send a signal. He'll see the fire, an' it will warn him. Satin will see it an' put his tail between his legs."

Old man Noggle stepped back, brows knit. "No, Tim," he said hoarsely. "I can't do it."

Tim turned swiftly, leaped, and hit the saddle on his father's buckskin.

"Satin will think I'm paying back the favor for bringing me home after the snake bite," he called. "Don't worry, pop."

"Tim!" his father shouted. "Come back."

The boy toed the stirrups as the buckskin leaped out. Bent forward, he struck down the valley at hot speed, headed for a game trail that led to Squaw Mountain.

II.

The smoke of that fire which Tim Noggle lighted on Squaw Mountain could be seen for thirty miles around in the late afternoon. There was no wind, and the green wood smoldered on into the sunset, sending its warning signal to the outlaw tribe that an enemy was approaching.

With the fall of darkness, Tim and his father could look out of their cabin window and see the fire blinking like a red eye from the mountain range.

"Yuh shouldn't have done it, son," the homesteader argued. "We're no better than murderers."

"Jack Brice will see that fire an' watch his step, pop," Tim replied. "He might have stumbled into their snake nest an' had no chance. He even told us to send a signal. He must suspect that Satin has been bullying us."

"Mebbe so, mebbe not," Jim Noggles muttered, shaking his head. "We ought to pull our stakes, boy. One lawman can't protect us, an' we can't fight a hull wolf pack. Trouble is comin' our way. I hate ter go ter bed."

Behind a barred door and without candlelight, the two sat waiting for the worst. It was long after midnight before they received a warning. Their ears caught the

bark of a frightened fox from the brush behind the barn. They tensed.

Through the open window came the tinkle of spurs crossing their ranch yard in the deep shadows of night. They heard the swish of chaps at the side of their cabin. Then a voice called through the window, the husky voice of Gault Satin, who was afraid to show himself.

"Noggle! Are yuh awake? It's me, yore pard."

Tim felt his father's hand on his knee. "What do yuh want, Satin?" the homesteader growled.

"Are yuh alone?" the outlaw called. "Yuh better not double-cross me, nester! I'm takin' a big chance on comin' hyar. My gang has yore cabin surrounded. Talk fast. What did yuh set that fire fer?"

Hot rage swept through Tim's young veins, and he could not restrain the impulse to confess to sending the signal.

"I struck the fire, Satin," the boy called out. "We're even now for helpin' me with the snake bite. I'll light no more signals for yuh."

"Quiet, son!" old man Noggle snapped.

Gault Satin's dark face appeared at the window. "Yuh sent the signal, kid?" He chuckled and tossed a buckskin bag into the cabin. "There's a reward for yuh. Buy a cutter an' learn how ter use it. Yuh'll make a good raider some day. Who is out huntin' fer me?"

Tim saw his father lurch forward, squirrel rifle at his hip. "Yuh skunk!" old man Noggle shrilled. "My boy will never ride the owl-hoot trail. We're through with yuh. We set no more signals. I've got a good mind ter shoot yuh down

where yuh stand. Clear off my range."

Satin's face vanished from the window. "Buzztails!" he was heard to exclaim. "It must be the law on my trail, or the sod-buster wouldn't have the nerve ter say that." There was a pause. Then Satin called: "Yuh'll be hearing from us, nester. I'm figuring that jest one hombre is trailing me. If there's more, yuh better say so."

"I say nothing, yuh murderer!" old man Noggle shouted.

Tim heard Satin's spurs jingling away. A gripping silence fell, broken now and then by the far-off echo of a coyote. The boy slipped to the window, peered out, half expecting to see the red of fire creeping through the chinks in the barn.

But there was no sign of Satin and his wolf crew. The night was dark, mysterious, threatening.

"Sit down, Tim," Noggle ordered. "Dawn will tell the tale."

Out behind the Noggle barn, Gault Satin was worried as he swung into the saddle of a black bronc.

It wasn't often that the outlaw found so safe a hide-out as the Big Cloudy Range. He had been re-branding stolen cattle there all winter, while the hue and cry over his past raids died down.

His gang had been busy for a month moving the doctored steers to crooked buyers down in Mexico. But Satin still had a herd of fine broncs in a hidden valley, and he didn't want the law to find them.

"It must be that sneak, Jack Brice, on my trail," Satin growled, and turned his mount through the brush toward the foothills. "It would take a slick-tongued fox like him to turn the nester agin' me."

The only deputy that the outlaw feared was Jack Brice, who had been after him for two years—ever since the day that Satin had shot down Brice's brother in a bank robbery. Jack Brice had sworn to get Satin. There was nothing yellow about the lawman. He had shot it out with a dozen gun slingers in his time, and Satin didn't want to meet him.

As the outlaw guided his bronc into the pines, he whistled, and shadowy figures joined him. Satin's gang numbered but six now. The other members had gone south with the stolen stock.

Six were not enough to ferret out a clever deputy in the Big Cloudy Mountains. Satin explained the situation to them, and then decided upon playing a waiting game for Jack Brice.

"We'll let him walk into a trap." Satin chuckled. "It's time we put an end ter him."

Single file, the gang rode up through the foothills, slipping from one gully to another, following brushy game trails. In the dark, an Indian could not have found those hidden routes unless he had traveled them many times in the day. Satin had no fear of being surprised by Jack Brice, but he was as cautious as a coyote.

"Stop that smokin' back thar," he called behind, twisting in the saddle. "Who has that jinglin' bridle? Tie a bandanna into it. Hey, Squinty, yuh an' Drag come up an' take the lead. I've got some thinkin' to do."

Satin's bronc pulled off the narrow path to let two outlaws pass, and at that moment the unexpected happened. The two horses ridden by the passing outlaws halted as if in fear of something up the trail.

Satin's eyes flashed to a bend in

the path ten feet away. He wasn't positive, but he thought he made out a dark shadow slinking into the brush. His quick ears caught the snap of a twig and the scrape of branches across leather chaps.

"Look out!" he shouted, diving over the flank of his bronc as he went for a gun. "It's Brice. He's in that thicket."

The words were hardly out of Satin's throat when a voice called back:

"It's yuh that I'm gettin', Gault Satin, yuh cutthroat!"

Crash-sh-sh! Satin's six-gun bit crimson streaks in the night, filling the foothills with rocking thunder.

The outlaw dodged to the right as he shot once, dodged again as he fired, and again. He knew not where his enemy was hiding, so he cried to his men to rake the brush with lead, and their guns blasted.

"I'll meet yore bet, skunks!" Jack Brice's voice lifted from a corner of the thicket where the outlaws had not shot.

Satin ducked low to the earth, and it was lucky that he did, for there was a roar of exploding powder and bullets whistled out of the brush and over his head. Satin's gang dived from their saddles, shooting back.

He heard two gunmen scream in agony. Then the broncs stampeded back down the trail. Jack Brice's voice called to Satin to show his hand.

The outlaw boss had had enough. He whirled and darted into the pines, heedless of the branches that raked his clothes and tore his hat away. He ran for his life, filled with a gripping terror of the lawman. Behind him sounded the panic-stricken cries of his men

stampeding away from the lone deputy.

"He's a mountain cat!" Satin gasped. "He kin see in the dark."

Thought of his black horse sent the outlaw cutting back to the game trail again, but he reached it at a point fifty yards below the place where the deputy had surprised him. Two horses were trotting along the route. Satin caught one and vaulted into the saddle.

Some one called to him. It was one of his band. The hombre came running up and took the second mount.

Spurring on down the trail, Satin ran into two more of his gang, both chasing mounts.

"Keep together," the outlaw leader cried. "We'll draw him out to the open draw on the nester ranch an' trap him."

The four outlaws followed Satin down through the foothills at break-neck speed, through gully and buck-brush, down sloping cliffs and across two rocky streams. A herd of terrified deer couldn't have made better time.

They swept out into Jim Noggle's bull pasture and found gray dawn inching into the eastern sky. Mists were rising from the grass and scudding low across the open stretch.

Satin didn't care for a battle in daylight. "Brice won't show himself here," he yelled to his men. "Head up to the nester cabin. We've got a score ter settle. That sod-buster put Brice on us."

Guns in hand, the five outlaws roared through the bull pasture toward the Noggle ranch yard.

III.

Inside the cabin, old man Noggle and his son roused from their bunks to the pounding of hoofs.

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They had been dozing with their clothes on, the father with a squirrel rifle beside him, Tim clutching the big horse pistol with six loads. The door was barred, the windows shut, but they were no safer than rabbits trapped in a hen yard.

"Smoke 'em out!" Tim heard Gault Satin's voice cry out, and then the sound of hoofs passed around to the rear of the cabin where there were no windows.

Tim saw his father leap across the room. "Lay low, son," the homesteader called. Then, shouting to the outside through a chink in the log wall: "Satin, clear off my spread afore I salt yore mangy hide with lead."

Tim slipped off the bunk, and just as he did so, he smelled smoke. The light of dawn had not yet crept into the cabin. His eyes flicked to the rear wall, and he spied tongues of flames licking through the floor boards.

He knew instantly that the outlaws had thrown burning hay under the cabin sills, and that within five minutes the entire place would be a roaring furnace.

"Pop!" Tim cried. "We've got to run for it."

Crash! Guns roared outside, and the windowpanes burst under a hail of lead. Tim saw his father ram his squirrel gun through a chink in the logs and shoot with deadly intent. A howl of agony echoed from the open, and the boy knew that old man Noggle had not missed aim.

"Stay back, Tim!" the homesteader exclaimed. "Jack Brice is somewhere around. We've got to hold 'em off."

"We can't hold 'em off with the cabin burnin'," Tim replied, bounding for the front door.

Grabbing the big bars that fas-

tened the entrance shut, he tossed them down, kicked the door open, and leaped back. Guns thundered outside, and lead came shrieking through the doorway into the cabin room.

"Come on out, sod-busters," Gault Satin's voice echoed from near the barn. "This is the payoff."

Tim saw his father jerk his squirrel rifle out of the chink in the logs. "Stay where yuh are, son," the old fellow ordered. "I'll give them a dose o' lead."

With that, the homesteader sprang for the front door and plunged through. Tim leaped after him, horse pistol in hand. He heard a weapon crack from down by the barn and saw his father stumble.

Tim lurched forward to catch that, and that act saved the kid's life. As he did so, two more weapons roared from the corral, and bullets swept past him.

But his father was already down, squirming on the earth. Tim fell beside him, horse pistol in hand.

Wham! The kid slammed one bullet at a chink in the barn from which came a wisp of powder smoke.

He heard a man scream—not Gault Satin. Tim flicked his weapon toward the corral and spied two figures levering fresh cartridges into smoking Winchesters.

"Snakes!" Tim yelled, and fired—once, twice!

Born as he had been on the range, using firearms ever since he was strong enough to lift a .22-caliber gun, and too poor to waste lead, young Tim Noggle made those shots count. His first bullet knocked one ragged tough over on his back, and his second caught the next in the shoulder and spun him around.

"Run, boy," old man Noggle

called from the earth. "I'm a goner. Get away. Satin's in the barn."

Tim came to his feet, earing back the hammer of his horse pistol.

"I'll smoke him out, pop."

"Tim!"

The kid darted across the yard, headed for the open side door of the log barn. Before he got there, he heard the squeal of a bronc behind the building. He figured at once that Gault Satin was fleeing.

Tim didn't realize that Gault Satin's yellow streak had been awakened by the shooting of four of his gang. The nester kid suspected that the outlaw feared the arrival of Jack Brice.

Running for all he was worth, Tim turned the corner of the barn and spied the rump of Satin's bronc vanishing into the pines. Those pines covered the slopes which led up through the foothills to the Big Cloudy Range.

The forest would hide Satin's retreat to his hide-out, and Tim immediately took alarm that Satin was going to gather more of his gang for a raid.

"I can't let him," Tim gasped. "I've got ter stop him."

There were two other outlaw mounts behind the barn. Tim sprang for the nearest. He forgot about Jack Brice, the lawman. The kid had been reared in a country where punchers took care of their own feuds. And for the shooting of his father Tim was now ready to follow the red trail through fire and brimstone.

With kicking heels and a crackling hand, the kid sent the outlaw bronc crashing into the brush. He knew something of the country ahead. His hunting had led him to the base of the mountains, and it was up there that he had been

bitten by a snake while prodding into a stony pass. He did not have to sight Gault Satin in order to follow him.

Through thick forest and up craggy gulches, Tim pushed his bronc unsparingly, all the while wondering about the speed of Satin's bronc. Behind the nester kid, the sun rose in a fiery bath, and the mountain mists dissolved. The high peaks ahead took shape.

Tim sped on, climbing slants choked with buckbrush, eyes searching for the outlaw fugitive on the open benches, and failing to find him.

It was an hour after leaving the nester ranch before Tim reached the shale base of the Big Cloudy Range. The pines fell away. The going now was all slide rock and ledge. One hundred yards up lay the small pass through which Satin had gone or must go deeper into the mountains.

Tim cocked his horse pistol, bent forward, and let his panting cayuse pick out its climbing path. He realized that a bushwhacker hidden in the pass above would be able to draw a bead on him. He twisted in the saddle, glanced left and right.

And then his eyes fastened on the top of Squaw Mountain, five miles to the southeast. It was from the top of that peak that he had sent the signal fire to the outlaw tribe on the afternoon before.

To his astonishment, a smoke spiral still rose from the mountain.

"That can't be my old fire!" Tim gasped. "It shore ain't. Thar wasn't enough wood to burn so long. Not enough to give off that smoke."

He drew rein and halted, puzzled. Who could have set the new fire? Why? Was it a member of Satin's gang warning the boss that Tim Noggle was on his trail? If such

was the case, Satin might already have reached the pass and be holed up there.

A cold caution lay hold of Tim. He slid down from the saddle, stood gazing up at the pass, then made a resolution to go on foot. Gun ready, he began climbing, ducking from one boulder to another, showing as little of himself as possible.

In a few minutes, he was at the mouth of the wide defile, and there he halted behind a shelter of rock, listening. A dead silence gripped the mountain country.

And that was another warning to Tim, who knew that his approach could not have stilled the voices of the birds and chipmunks so quickly. He listened for long, and then his quick ears picked up a sound that froze his spine.

It was the trembling of the dry tail of a diamond-back rattler, perhaps the same snake that had sunk its fangs into Tim's leg a month before. The reptile's hole was just within the mouth of the pass. Tim could have tossed a pebble to it from where he stood.

He hunched forward, gun gripped steadily, eager to slam a bullet into the five-foot enemy that was the cause of his meeting the owl-hoot tribe.

Again, he heard the warning sound of the snake's tail, and he knew it was coiling to strike.

"Yow-ee-ee!" a human voice lifted in terror.

Not twenty feet from Tim's eyes, a lanky figure leaped out from behind a big boulder. Gault Satin! The outlaw held a six-gun. His face was white, his eyes wide, his teeth bared. Fastened to his right leg was the head of a diamond-back, its long fat body thrashing the earth as Satin kicked to throw it off.

"Satin!" Tim shouted.

Satin's eyes were upon the nester kid. The outlaw had been waiting for him. Their weapons flipped into aim and crashed. It might have been that the snake slowed Gault Satin's finger on the trigger, or it might have been that the nester kid was faster by a fraction of a second.

As Tim's horse pistol kicked, he saw the outlaw stagger even as the man's weapon flamed in reply. Tim felt Satin's bullet shave his cheek, missing.

With a horrible scream, Satin went down, arms clawing the air. There was a black hole in his chest. He landed on the slithering snake, and it slipped out from under his quivering body, and slid into a hole in the rocks.

Fascinated, Tim Noggle stood his ground, not knowing whether the outlaw was dead or not. Then, his ears caught the sound of hoofs. He whirled. Down the shale slope, a horseman had appeared—a rider in a buckskin vest to which was fastened a silver badge.

"Deputy Jack Brice!" Tim exclaimed.

"Hey, hombre," the lawman called. "Did yuh git the snake?"

Tim drew a deep breath and waited for the deputy to come up.

"I got the worse snake o' the two," the nester kid said. "He shot Jim Noggle, an' he paid for it."

Jack Brice swung down from the saddle, walked forward, and stared at the dead outlaw.

"Satin tricked me right to the

end," the deputy growled. "I swore I'd kill him." Then, turning to Tim Noggle: "What warned yuh? Was it the smoke signal on Squaw Mountain? I set it for yuh."

Tim's eyes widened. "Yuh set that signal?"

Brice grinned. "I must have reached yore ranch right after yuh left. Yore father told me that yuh was chasin' Satin."

"Pop's alive?" the nester kid questioned.

"Alive an' cheerful," Jack Brice chuckled. "He was shot in the leg. I left him to ride to Squaw Mountain, where I could use my field glasses to spot where Satin was headin'. I saw him hole up in the pass, so I figured I'd better warn yuh, pard, like yuh warned me yesterday."

"Huh!" Tim Noggle grunted, and he turned to focus his eyes back over the slopes of the foothills, where another spiral of smoke was rising into the sky. It was the smoke of his burning cabin. "I reckon the law has come to the Big Cloudies," he muttered. "But too late to save pop an' me from going broke."

"I wouldn't say that, hombre." Jack Brice smiled. "There's a five-thousand-dollar reward on Satin's head. The biggest part of his gang was captured by the Rangers, three days ago, about fifty miles north o' hyar. Yuh an' Jim Noggle will have a home worth seein', an' I'm going to be a guest there often."

"A mighty welcome guest, Jack Brice," Tim replied.



Ramrods Of Death Valley

By William A. Todd

Author of "Risky McKee Crosses A Deadline," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE SPELL OF GOLD.

THROUGHOUT the sagebrush of Nevada, they were known as the "Young Bunch." There were five of them, none old enough to vote. They became famous while working for the Bullet 45 spread, owned by old Ben Banning, who let them run wild.

Each season, they toured the State rodeos and came loping home with almost every prize from bulldogging to calf-roping. In the spring and autumn trail races to market,

their herd always won and took high price. If a dance was within a hundred miles, they would be present at the first squeak of the fiddle. They'd ride two hundred to join a posse.

They were a harum-scarum, gun-toting bunch of rannies. Their jealous neighbors often grumbled that they would end up as ramrods for a more infamous outfit, the "Wild Bunch."

But whenever they struck town with whoopees and flaming smoke-poles to celebrate pay day, nobody mistook them for owl-hooters. For

their leader, "Whitey" Dale, was easy to identify by his shock of white hair standing on end. He had the trim build of a young lightweight and wits as sharp as a bowie blade. His buckskin bronc had been classified as a "killer" until he topped it off.

With Whitey as foreman, the Young Bunch had helped add another three thousand acres to the Bullet 45 spread. They pulled it through a drought and a plague of grasshoppers. But they couldn't save the life of the owner when he caught pneumonia.

Whitey would never forget the night that he stood at Ben Banning's bed, listening to the boss's last words:

"Whitey, we'll be meetin' ag'in on the happy hunting ground. Keep smilin'. Don't yuh or the Young Bunch let out a pip when the parson sinks me under the sod. I'm leavin' the Bullet 45 to my cousin back East. Sashay ter the junction an' give him a real .45-caliber welcome. *Hasta luego*. Until we meet again."

And so the Young Bunch—Whitey, "Sky," "Pudge," "Red," and "Dizzy"—rode stiff-lipped and heavy of heart to the railroad junction in obedience to old Ben's last orders.

When the train pulled in, they shot out every window in the two coaches. With Comanche war whoops, they greeted the new boss, who they thought might measure up to the Banning standard.

But the hombre who staggered trembling from the train was a runt in a checkered vest and a derby hat. The Young Bunch stared in amazement, sliding their guns back into their holsters. As soon as the constable came up, the runt fired the five rannihans on the spot.

That's how come, one late-spring day, Whitey Dale led the Young Bunch into Cliff Drop.

A good four hundred miles lay between them and their old home range. Broke, hungry, disgusted, they had sworn to stick together through brimstone and rickets.

What if the Eastern dude was running the Bullet 45 into the ground? The spread would never be the same without old Ben Banning.

The Young Bunch wanted to forget their grief for the old boss, who had been a real man. And the best way to forget was to see new places, to thrill to new excitement, to find a new task to be done.

They could have found no better place than Cliff Drop. The shabby trading post was perched high on a shelf of the Sierras. Below it stretched an ocean, dried up millions of years ago, and now a vast caldron of sand and cactus—Death Valley!

Word had just come to Cliff Drop of a fresh discovery of gold down in that blistering furnace where each year many adventurers met their doom. Cliff Drop was the jumping-off place for the trip through heat and sand. Cliff Drop was the last source of water and supplies for those who aimed to fight thirst and starvation.

Now, as Whitey Dale sighted the smoke columns of the old trading post, he twisted in the saddle and turned slate-colored eyes upon the four behind.

"The town is roaring, hombres," he said without his usual grin. "See them covered wagons an' tents? That means strangers arrivin', an' gamblin', an' gun trouble. We've got to keep in our fighting horns."

The four bent over their pommels and gazed up the sage-dotted bench to the town that might give them

hope and food. There was no flush of excitement in their tanned faces. Life for them had become a serious problem. They listened to Whitey talk on in the careful tones once used by old Ben Banning when giving round-up instructions.

"This visit won't be like when we had money to burn an' fun to find. We need a grubstake." He nodded to the tallest member of the outfit. "Sky, yuh ask at the express office if they want any guards for the stage or pack trains."

Lean and lanky Sky pulled a long frown. "The way I savvy this deal," he said, "is that no matter if we get only one or two jobs, the hull five do the chore."

"An' we split the profits five ways," Whitey added, turning to a tubby rider. "Pudge, yuh make the rounds of the stores. Ask if they'll buy any deer meat that we shoot. Red," he said to another, "yuh look over the corrals for hosses to bust." He looked at the strongest rider. "Dizzy, yuh never was much good at talkin' business. Yuh an' me will visit all the joints an' learn the gossip. We might pick up a hot tip on some quick mazuma."

The Young Bunch rode on, each vowing to do his best for the others, each hoping to be first to turn a dollar into the empty treasury.

They approached the canvas-topped wagons at the edge of town. Sullen stares were turned upon them by the campers. They passed through the scattering of tents. Grizzled men stepped away, whispering.

Those gold hunters were trying to gather enough courage to move down into the sizzling inferno where fortune beckoned. They were suspicious of all riders who traveled light and packed saddle guns.

"It looks like folks in chaps an' ten-gallon hats ain't awful welcome," Whitey remarked, leading into the dusty main street of town.

There, the hitch racks were thronged with brons. Belted and booted men loafed on the plank sidewalks. From gambling halls and saloons came murmurs of harsh voices and the call of the monte man.

Cliff Drop was seething with excitement. Barkers waved from cabin doorways, advertising safe convoy to wagon owners headed for the gold strike. Shady gents in canvas booths were trying to sell mining claims to yokels.

Whitey reined into the mouth of an empty alley and swung down from the saddle. His pards followed suit.

"Dizzy," the boss of the Young Bunch addressed the husky member, "I've changed my mind about yuh coming with me. Better stay here an' guard the cavvy. I don't like the snake odor of this town." Then, to the others, "All right, boys, do your stuff! We meet back here in an hour."

The outfit separated.

Whitey hitched up his gun belt and trailed his spurs down the plank sidewalk to the center of activity. His pulses swelled to the fever of the town. It was like rodeo day, only a strange current ran beneath the shouting of friends meeting after years of estrangement.

The spell of gold was upon the crowd. Each man's hand was against his brother's in the scramble for riches.

Whitey's eyes missed nothing. He spotted tinhorn gamblers who had been run out of his old home town. He noted all faces, many of which reminded him of "wanted" posters that hung in post offices.

He read the brands of hitched ponies and doubted that their real owners had ridden them into town.

Life was running high, wide, and handsome. The lid couldn't stay down long in Cliff Drop.

The boss of the Young Bunch turned into a saloon, the New Strike, which plainly had just opened for the boom trade. Halting inside the swinging doors, he gazed at the smoke-hung faro tables and the bustling bar that ran down the right side of the big room.

Business was good. Whitey Dale found himself in on the deal right off the bat. His quick ears singled out the voice of a gray-haired cattleman standing at the brass rail. The hombre was speaking loudly enough for most every customer to hear:

"I'll pay a hundred dollars to every drover who'll help me deliver the longhorns to Gold Spring. What more could yuh ask, boys? Yuh get fed all the way to the new strike. Yuh have a grubstake when yuh arrive. I don't care who says I can't drive a herd through the desert. Those longhorns will go a week without food an' water."

Interested, Whitey shifted toward the bar to hear more. The rancher was beginning to attract a small group of roustabouts. His proposition sounded a bit suspicious to Whitey. Perhaps that was because it promised such a handsome profit so quickly. And the boss of the Young Bunch was not the only one who thought that, for now one of the roustabouts at the brass rail questioned the cattleman.

"What aire yuh goin' ter do with cattle in Death Valley?" Whitey heard the roustabout ask. "Don't yuh know thar's no grass down thar, an' very little water? Are yuh pulling a new kind o' skin game on us?"

It was fight talk.

Whitey Dale tensed, wondering what the play would be. He saw the cattleman's hand drop to a gun butt. There was fire in the old old hombre. The mark of the range was upon his leathery cheeks. His blue eyes glinted like chips of ice, and he faced the unshaven roustabout without fear.

"I take no insults from your kind," the longhorn owner snapped. "I aim to sell those steers to the prospectors for a hundred dollars each. The gold camp needs fresh beef. They'll pay high in yellow dust. But your likes ain't wanted to share it. Now git out, yuh skunk, afore I throw yuh out by the scruff o' the neck."

A grin curled Whitey's lips as the roustabout paled, swayed backward, then whirled and fled, leaving a gap in the crowd of bystanders. The boss of the Young Bunch seized this opportunity to push forward.

The rancher's proposition sounded better to him now. He meant to nail it, but even as he moved, he was late. In front of Whitey stepped a dark-skinned man in a Mexican sombrero, who laid a claw-like hand upon the cattleman's shoulder.

"Hombre," the dark-faced one said in a silken tone, "I will take the job. I have ten friends in town who will ride with us. We will drive the steers safely through the desert. It is a deal. Yes?"

Whitey stopped in his tracks, his eyes fastened hard upon the fellow in the sombrero. There was no mistaking the man. Whitey recognized him from description. It was "Yaqui Joe," whom dozens of northern ranchers blamed for the loss of fine horses.

His glittering black eyes and high

cheek bones bespoke of mixed blood in his veins. Built like a lean panther, Yaqui Joe had once been the best bronc rider in the West, but had given up the rodeo arena for the higher profits of the owl-hoot trail.

Now Whitey saw the cattleman squint at Yaqui Joe. For a breathless instant, the boss of the Young Bunch feared that the rancher would not recognize the crook. Then the cattleman did, with a sharp intake of breath.

"You help drive my stock?" the longhorn owner cried, shaking the raider's hand from his shoulder. "You, Yaqui Joe! Blast yuh, I'd sooner cut my throat right in this barroom."

In that brief moment, Whitey felt the lid lifting off the pot. His ears caught the swift hush that fell in the saloon. He then heard boots scrape as customers drew out of the line of fire along the bar. He saw two gun-hung toughs slide up behind Yaqui Joe to support his play against the cattleman.

Yaqui Joe's face went white, then flamed with rage. Leaning toward the rancher, he curled his lips back over glistening teeth. Then, his right hand jerked downward for a gun.

"Dog of a gringo!" the raider screamed.

What chance did the rancher have against the trail wolf and his two henchmen! Whitey saw the jobs for the Young Bunch vanishing. But it was not that fact that sent him into action. It was the code of the range, that cowmen should stand together against the rustling pack.

With a shout of warning, the boss of the Young Bunch hurled himself forward, his right fist swinging for Yaqui Joe's jaw.

CHAPTER II.

DESERT BOUND.

A ROAR of panic swept the barroom as Whitey's fist landed on Yaqui Joe's chin with the force of a mule's kick. The blow knocked the raider sprawling into the two toughs behind him.

Those two had their weapons out and shooting, but the floundering body of Yaqui Joe going down to the floor tripped the tough pair and threw their aim out. Their bullets crashed into the bar beside the gray-haired rancher.

Before the pair could shoot again, Whitey was upon them with the speed of a wolf. His hand drove out and grabbed the swerving gun barrel of the nearest tough. He tore the weapon loose and smashed the butt of it into the second tough's face, dropping that man onto the downed figure of Yaqui Joe.

At the same time, he saw the gray-haired cattleman leap in and strike down the first tough, who had lost his weapon to Whitey and was going for another.

"Look out!"

Whitey did not know who called the warning, but he ducked, and it was lucky that he did. From somewhere across the barroom, a gun crashed. Whitey heard lead sing past him and chunk into a body. He lifted his head, saw the gray-haired rancher stagger and shoot at a corner. Whitey caught the cattleman as he fell.

There was no time to lose. For all Whitey knew, the saloon might have been filled with Yaqui Joe's men. With the rancher in his arms, the boss of the Young Bunch scuttled to the corner of the bar, dived around it, and dropped his burden on the floor.

Now, half sheltered by the

counter, he hearkened to the pound of boots and the crash of glass outside on the main floor. Customers were stampeding toward doors and windows.

Whitey jerked his gun from its holster and crept out from the sheltering corner of the bar, to peer into the room. He could hear somebody shouting above the bedlam:

"The fight is over," a husky voice said. "The first gent ter show a gun will git a snootful o' buckshot."

Whitey was astonished to find the saloon empty, except for the two tough friends of Yaqui Joe. They lay unconscious in front of the bar. But Yaqui Joe himself was gone.

At the back of the room, leaning over a piano with a shotgun in his hands, stood the beefy-faced owner of the New Strike.

Whitey caught his breath and jerked back into the shelter of the bar's corner.

"Hold your slugs, hombre," the boss of the Young Bunch called. "I didn't start this jamboree. Yaqui Joe's your meat."

"Yaqui Joe is gone," the saloon owner's voice replied. "Pack your wounded friend out o' hyar. This is a place of business, not a slaughter house."

Whitey looked down at the prone cattleman, to find his chest wet with crimson. He lay still, eyes tight shut, face as white as a skull. His lips quivered.

"Thanks, cowboy," he gasped. "Yuh tried your best. I know yuh, Whitey Dale. I seen yuh ride at the——" He broke off.

The boss of the Young Bunch swallowed hard. "Save your strength, partner," he cautioned. "You'll need it, if you're driving into the desert. Rest easy. We licked them coyotes. You've hired yourself the Young Bunch."

Boots sounded from somewhere in the barroom, and Whitey glanced out of his shelter. He spied a tall, horse-faced waddy coming in the front door with a cocked gun in his hand. It was Sky Capper, who was so thin that he had come through a dozen gun fights without being nicked by lead.

Behind Sky came a tubby hombre who was as bow-legged as a bulldog and looked like one on the prod. He was Pudge Laramie, who never was known to miss a scrap.

When the newcomers spied Whitey, he laid a finger to his lips, for the wounded cattleman was trying to speak again.

"I'm driving a longer trail than the desert," the longhorn owner whispered. "My stock is in a sink hole two miles east o' Cliff Drop. They're yores, Whitey Dale. I ain't got no folks." He coughed. "I give the herd to the Young Bunch. Turn my roan loose in front o' the saloon, so that it kin go wild. Good luck, Whitey. Yuh shore did lick that buckin' hoss in Carson City last year."

A gasp, and he was gone. A man who left his all to the Young Bunch. They were never to know his name.

Drama ran swift in Cliff Drop.

The shooting fired Whitey, Sky, and Pudge to a reckless fury that sent them hurrying to the street. They three were always the quickest with guns in the Young Bunch. Had any stranger tried to stop them or to question them, powder would have exploded.

But they found the plank sidewalks deserted, cabin doors closed, shades drawn throughout the town. Down the road at an alley entrance, a big-chested Swede moved into view. His mouth flopped open, and he stared at them.

It was their pard, "Dizzy" Benson, who never knew when trouble was afoot. But once Dizzy was told about it, he was plenty hard to keep quiet.

"Have yuh seen a half-breed snake in a straw sombrero?" Whitey called.

"I seen somebody like that ridin' out o' town with a dozen others like that," the husky Dizzy yelled. "How much longer do yuh want me ter guard our brones?"

"That's what I term brains," Whitey snorted to Sky and Pudge. "Mebbe by to-morrow, Dizzy will know what happened."

Then Whitey spied another young waddy entering the foot of the main street. The puncher was bare-headed. It was Red Smith, who shaved his hair off every week because of its embarrassing color. Red could always be counted upon to meet some old friend wherever he went, and now he had in tow a man clad in buckskin jacket and leggings.

"Look!" Whitey exclaimed. "Our outfit is going to pot fast. Here comes Red from the corrals with a relic o' bygone days. Yuh couldn't expect him to stop Yaqui Joe on the way out." He turned to the bar-room. "Come on inside."

Followed by the fuming Sky and Pudge, Whitey clumped into the New Strike to claim the body of the longhorn owner. As they lifted the dead rancher and carried him to the doors, they were kept covered by the saloon man and his shotgun.

Outside, they found Red jingling up, all grins.

"Look who I found, pards," Red called. "It's our ol' friend, Buckskin Hammond. He's jest back from the gold strike. He's poppin' with wild tales." Then Red saw the dead rancher and gaped.

Whitey flicked a glance at the weather-beaten "Buckskin" Hammond, who had often stopped at the Bullet 45 for a night's rest.

"Howdy," the boss of the Young Bunch said to the old fellow. "You're just in time to join a funeral. Excuse our lack o' politeness right now."

Buckskin's eyes popped as Whitey carried the body to a roan tied up to the saloon hitch rail. The dead rancher was hung across the saddle of his bronc. Whitey led the animal out to the main street and up it, while Buckskin followed Sky and Pudge, who tried to explain things in an undertone to Red.

On up the roadway, the funeral party moved. Heads popped from windows to watch them. Doors crept open as they passed. Cliff Drop was eager to begin business again. The town took death without a wince.

On the rim of a cliff overlooking Death Valley, Whitey and his pards buried the unknown rancher. They packed the grave with heavy stones so that the coyotes would not dig it up. And after they had unsaddled the dead man's roan and slapped it on the rump, sending it away to freedom, the Young Bunch was in no mood to return to Cliff Drop.

Buckskin Hammond met the occasion with wisdom.

"Come on down to my camp on the creek back o' town," he invited. "I've got beanses an' jerky slum."

So, a half hour later, the Young Bunch was seated about Buckskin's camp fire, accepting much needed grub and coffee. This food, the first in days, bolstered up their spirits. None of them had found work. Now they listened to Buckskin rant on about the gold strike.

"Yuh won't git chow like this

down in that blazin' furnace," he boasted. "I reckon that's whar yo're headed. Why, a smart hombre could collect more money runnin' a hash house than diggin' nuggets by the barrel. I'm buyin' me a flock o' burros an' a load o' canned goods. Then I'm goin' back ter Death Valley ter make my fortune as a hash slinger."

Whitey snorted and found Red staring at him. "Buckskin was tellin' me at the corrals," Red said. "that a plate o' beans costs a dollar in Gold Spring. Apple pie is six bits a cut, only yuh can't git it. Smoked ham with one spud sells for a dollar fifty. An' steaks, why there ain't no such thing as fresh beef in Gold Spring, is there, Buckskin?"

"Steer meat would cost five bucks a slice down thar," the old trapper replied.

"Huh!" Whitey grunted. "It sounds loco to me."

Pudge, the tubby waddy, moved uneasily. "We wasn't figurin' on goin' ter Gold Spring, was we, Whitey? We're punchers, not miners. I'm shore strong fer these beanses o' Buckskin Hammond. Any more left?"

"Not so fast, yuh sawed-off hawg!" the tall Sky interrupted. "Yuh might be short an' round, but I'm long an' thin, an' it takes an awful lot ter quiet my fightin' instincts."

"Yuh all know thar's plenty ter go around twice more," Buckskin chuckled. "How about yuh, Whitey?"

"Not for me, hombre," the boss of the Young Bunch said. "I'm chewing my cud on a few late facts. It's about the longhorn herd. Yuh all seem to have forgotten that we inherited a lot o' beef on the hoof."

"So we did!" Sky ejaculated.

"What was that poor rancher doin' with longhorns in Cliff Drop, Whitey?" Pudge asked. "Longhorns ain't no good no more. The cattle buyers all want white-faced Herefords. How many did the feller will us?"

Whitey set down his tin plate and got to his feet, scowling.

"Yuh all act like a herd of ornery relatives at the wake o' their rich uncle," he snapped. "Yuh ain't even grateful for that rancher's gift. I'm figuring that he was some poor fellow that went broke on the drought. Mebbe he was keeping the longhorn herd just because it reminded him of old times. Mebbe that kind of lean stock ain't in it with our modern shorthorn stuff. But that rancher had a good head on his shoulders. He was meaning to sell those longhorns for three times what a shorthorn would bring."

"Sell them whar?" Sky demanded.

"Down in Death Valley, where a steak would cost five bucks a cut," Whitey snapped.

"Waal, shoot the whiskers off my chin!" Buckskin Hammond exclaimed. "Do yuh mean that daid hombre was goin' ter drive stock ter Gold Spring? By gumption, he could do it. Shore he could, by drivin' at night an' restin' in the day time. The gold camp would go crazy ter git fresh beef. One steer would bring a hundred bucks. Why didn't I think o' somethin' like that?"

Pudge leaped to his feet. "Too late now, Buckskin!" he cried. "We've got the longhorns, yuh ain't. Whar are they, Whitey?"

"In a sink hole two miles east o' Cliff Drop," the boss of the Young Bunch replied. "Saddle up, an' leave enough beans to Buckskin for supper an' to-morrow's breakfast."

For the first time since the death of old Ben Banning, the future brightened for the Young Bunch. Where they had been completely lost, now they had a guiding star, a job to be done, a real adventure ahead. As they cinched their broncs, Buckskin Hammond told them how to get to Gold Spring and warned them against the privations of the desert.

With yips, the Young Bunch galloped away, scoffing at Buckskin's warnings. They were rapidly calculating their profits upon arriving at the gold camp. They might make enough to return to cow country and buy a herd of Herefords and lease a range. Hope was high in their hearts.

And as swiftly as it had sprung up, it was destroyed.

Whitey's sharp eyes found the sink hole. His buckskin beat the others across the sage to the depression. He topped the rim and plunged down the slant, expecting to find a herd of longhorns waiting.

The sink hole was empty.

"Buzztails!" Whitey exclaimed, slowing his bronc to a walk.

Below him, there were many signs that cattle had been grazing here. The sparse grass was trampled. Prints showed plainly—prints that led southward up the bank of the sink, and over it.

Whitey threw in his hooks, cried to his approaching pards, and struck out over the trail.

"Rustlers! Some snakes beat our time here. It looks like they're taking the herd to Death Valley."

The tall Sky came roaring up beside Whitey's stirrup. "It must be Yaqui Joe," he suggested. "Didn't yuh say that he parleyed with the rancher?"

The boss of the Young Bunch

was staring at the cliff which overlooked the desert.

"It shore is Yaqui Joe," he snapped. "Nobody else would have the nerve. That explains why the skunk left town so quick. He's got a big gang o' gun-slingers with him, boys."

Pudge was pounding up. "We kin lick 'em, Whitey. Yuh ain't goin' ter let him git away with our herd, are yuh?"

In the west, the sky was beginning to turn red. No dust cloud showed above the distant cliff rims. Dust would have told where the stolen cattle were. Lack of it indicated that Yaqui Joe had already gone down from the upland and was at the floor of the dried-up ocean of cactus and sand.

"Shake out your saddle rifles, hombres," Whitey said grimly. "We're going to hunt coyotes by the light o' the moon."

The Young Bunch galloped west, to Death Valley.

CHAPTER III.

LEAD FROM NIGHTHAWKS.

DOWN in the desert, the crimson tints of the sunset had departed more swiftly than from the high shelves of the Sierras. Night was pooling its purple shadows in the troughs of the dunes. Stars winked into life to light the darkening vault of the heavens. The nose of the moon poked over the southeastern horizon, and the white sands became mirrors to reflect its silvery rays.

In the cooling breezes of night, a herd of cattle moved slowly westward. Their horns were of unbelievable breadth and sharpness. Such lean, rangy critters were the kind that had made the cow country what it is. They had fought

against wolves and cougars, summer droughts and winter cold, and had plodded hundreds of miles to market.

Their cousins, the shorthorn Herefords, could never have withstood such rigors. It had taken water holes blown with dynamite, barbed wire, closer railroad points, and cultivated fodder to establish the shorthorns with their meatier bodies.

Now across sands which no Hereford could travel, the herd of longhorns were being goaded to their utmost by a band of twenty heartless raiders.

"Drive fast," Yaqui Joe ordered as he rode up and down the flanks of the bawling stock. "What does it matter if we kill half the beef? We will charge twice as much for what's left. The gold camp will pay, or else——" He patted the black butt of a six-gun.

Despite the half-breed's many rustling crimes and his life with thieving Indian tribes, he was no cattleman. Five nights of torturous journey lay ahead of him and the herd, five days of camping under a blistering sun that would send the mercury up to one hundred and twenty degrees.

Any ordinary drover would have tried to save the strength of those longhorns from the very first mile in the desert. But not Yaqui Joe, who knew no sympathy for man or beast.

"What's the matter back there with the drags?" the outlaw yelled, spurring to the rear of the herd. "Keep that stock movin', yuh *mozos*. Git ter work with lariats. Or I'll use a gun barrel on yore skulls."

Those men at the drags, doing the hardest work, were the peon members of Yaqui Joe's band. He could bully them without fear of revenge.

His quick gun and hot temper held them in terror.

They had seen him burn nesters alive in their homes and torture prospectors who refused to divulge the hiding places of gold caches. Now Yaqui Joe's commands set them lashing the lagging steers with the ends of their reatas.

The raider chief wheeled his black mount and dashed up the sand to the swings and leaders, where his gringo lieutenants were beginning to find the work hard. Whisky bottles were being passed from saddle to saddle. These riders hated any kind of work. They were outlawed from the ranges. No matter what the division of spoils, they grumbled.

"Hey, Yaqui Joe," one unshaven hombre yelled in rebellion, "I'm beginnin' ter think yore plan ain't so wise. I know cattle. These critters ain't ever goin' ter reach Gold Spring."

Another gringo added: "The dogies are gettin' rannicky. They know the desert don't mean 'em no good. We've shore bit off a big chaw, Yaqui Joe."

The raider's black eyes narrowed, and his hand crept to a gun butt. He didn't like this driving job any more than the gringos did, but it was part of a treacherous plan.

"When we reach Gold Spring, he shouted, "the gold hunters will treat us as friends for bringing this stock. Keep driving, hombres. Yaqui Joe knows what he is doing."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth than the unexpected happened, informing Yaqui Joe that his plan was not so sure as he had thought.

Zing-g-g! A rifle bullet, coming as if from nowhere, sliced through the cone of his sombrero.

He jerked erect in the saddle, pulling his gun loose as he did so.

His ears caught the crash of powder from off at his right. His eyes flicked in that direction, just in time to catch sight of a red tongue of flame licking out from the top of a dune one hundred yards away.

"*Carambal*!" the raider chief exclaimed. "Look, *hombres*! We are attacked."

A shock of fear brought the raiders to a sharp halt. Guns sprang into their hands. They eyed the dune top, but could see no enemy. As they sat their saddles, waiting for a second shot to come winging in at them, they realized that they were easy targets under the light of the moon.

One of their number lost his head, and he began to blast wildly at the dune.

Instantly there was a reply, but not from the cone of sand. Flame burst from behind a giant cactus twenty yards to the left of the dune.

"It's one dry-gulcher!" Yaqui Joe shouted. "He's runnin' now. After him."

With a chorus of fiendish howls, Yaqui Joe and his gringo henchmen spurred forward. Their weapons drowned out the pound of hoofs and the bellows of the herd that they deserted. They couldn't see their enemy behind the cactus plants, but they kept throwing hot lead in the hope of dropping him.

Then, with a rush, they were at the spiny growth, and they found the entrance to an arroyo behind it.

"Rout him out! He's gettin' away."

Reloading spent guns, the raiders swept into the deep trough, and raced through it in a hail of sand and gravel. They emerged upon a low flat that was rimmed around with sandy hills.

Two hundred yards away, a lone horseman was fleeing across the flat

like a low-sailing nighthawk. The raiders jerked carbines free, whipped them to their shoulders, but their shots were too late to catch the fugitive, who vanished into a cut in the hills.

Yaqui Joe exploded with rage.

"Halt!" he cried to his men. "Yore brons can't catch that coyote. He's mounted on a fresh cayuse. We've got the cattle to worry about."

"The cattle!" a gringo ejaculated. "Listen!"

Yaqui Joe twisted his head, listening. From back across the broken desert came the echo of blasting six-guns and the bellow of terrified steers.

A cold shudder went down Yaqui Joe's spine. He didn't have to be told what was going on back there at the drive which he had foolishly left. He could hear the hair-raising whoops of an attacking party, then the roar of a breaking stampede.

"Save the herd!" the raider yelled, whirling his black horse back into the arroyo. "We were tricked. Ride, *hombres*!"

Reckless with rage, Yaqui Joe tore up the arroyo, six-gun in hand, murder in his heart. His bronc swung out of the end of the defile and flashed past the cactus that stood there. Yaqui Joe focused his eyes across the open to the place where the herd had been marching.

Now, he saw four horsemen with blazing weapons and whirling slickers charging down on that spot. In the light of the moon, those four waddies made a horrible picture of death and destruction.

And already they had driven panic into the longhorn herd. With bawls of terror, the stock was whirling in its tracks and fighting to get away from the four horsemen. The floor of the desert trembled under

the impact of hoofs. Horns tossing, backs humping, the herd was off on the stampede, mowing down Yaqui Joe's peon drivers who stood in its way.

"Quick!" Yaqui Joe yelled, as his gringo followers appeared from the arroyo behind the cactus. "Shoot to kill."

Guns whipping up, the raiders began pumping shots across the sands, but the four punchers had already swerved to the south. Just as quickly as the lone rider had escaped back on the flat, now the four raced away, like mavericks that had never felt the bight of a rope.

Screaming with rage, Yaqui Joe gave pursuit, shooting desperately. Lead came whistling back at him, missed, and some of it found berth in the bodies of the raiders who followed their chief. Then the four members of the Young Bunch were gone, vanishing into the shadows cast by the tall dunes.

Yaqui Joe flung up an arm for his men to halt.

"Don't follow!" he yelled. "They'll pick us off from hiding. We know them. They're the sneaks who backed that rancher in Cliff Drop. They want the cattle."

One gringo lieutenant spat at the sand. "Waal, the stock is now well on its way back to the Sierras," he growled. "Do yuh aim ter round it up?"

Yaqui Joe's glittering eyes turned to his band, and he saw fear and rebellion written in their unshaven faces.

"No," he sneered, "we go on to Gold Spring, where the cavvy can rest. We ain't through with those mavericks. They tricked us once. But not the second time. They'll be walking right into our trap in Gold Spring like flies into the web of the spider."

A grunt of relief sounded among the raiders. It was easier to kill and rob than to drive steers. The profits in Gold Spring were something to look forward to.

Bottles passed from man to man. Cigarettes were lighted. Some of the raiders rode off to check up on the men shot down and the peons caught on the horns of the stampede.

Yaqui Joe dismounted, took a big goatskin water bag and gave his horse a drink.

"There's plenty of time, hombres," he said. "We can reach Gold Spring by to-morrow midnight. But save yore water. It's more precious than gold dust in this desert."

CHAPTER IV.

NIGHT RIDING.

THE fifth night after the capture of the longhorn herd found the Young Bunch getting close to Gold Spring. There wasn't a man among them who hadn't felt the rigors of the torturous drive, and their tempers were at keen edge. Practically all their water had been given to the broncs, and the steers had been forced to get what little liquid they could from cactus leaves.

Now, groaning for drink, the herd staggered on buckling legs across the sands. Behind them, at the drags, rode the big-shouldered Dizzy Benson, everlastingly flailing his slicker at the laggards, ready to keep at his job until he dropped.

At the right swing, Red Smith yipped through cracked lips and swayed drunkenly in the saddle. Across the bobbing backs at the left swing, Pudge Laramie was hunched over his pommel, trying to voice a range chant.

The tall Sky Capper was up at the lead, stiff as a post, guiding the

drive on in the night like a ghostly leader of the dead.

None of those four had taken as hard a beating from the desert as Whitey Dale, who rode scout on his chunky buckskin. Now he was vanishing into the sink holes at the north of the herd; now he was prodding into arroyos at the south, looking for sign of foes.

He had limited himself to three swallows of water a day, giving the remainder to his horse. He had spent hours in the blazing sun trying to find tender desert shoots to feed his horse, while his pards slept.

Whitey knew that their safety depended on his animal's swiftness. He nursed the bronc at every opportunity, walking miles beside it when sure that the sands were clear. His eyes, red-rimmed from staring into the moonlit distances, missed nothing.

And so it was that he discovered a lone figure staggering across the dunes toward the bawling herd. His six-gun sprang into his hand. He kned his buckskin forward, wondering who that man was that waved and shouted. Could it be a ruse on the part of Yaqui Joe to draw him into an ambush?

Whitey circled the visitor to discover if there were men behind him. He listened tensely in hope of identifying the hombre's voice. Then he did.

"Buckskin Hammond!" Whitey cried. "What's he doing on foot?"

Whitey rode toward the scarecrow figure that came swaying down the bank of a dune.

"Whitey!" Buckskin called hoarsely. "I thought I'd never find yuh. Gallopin' gumption, but I've walked fer a million an' two miles." And then he sank to the sands, exhausted.

The boss of the Young Bunch
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was quickly beside him, offering a canteen in which a bare half pint of water remained.

"Buckskin, yuh old fossil, what's happened to yuh? Hey, don't take all that water. Yuh can't be as thirsty as that."

The old trapper rolled his eyes upward, licking precious drops of liquid from his lips. Then he shoved out his feet and lay flat on his back, sighing contentedly.

"Take off my boots, hombre," Buckskin pleaded. "My hoofs are on fire. I'll tell yuh a tale that'll make yore hair stand on end."

"Spill it," Whitey instructed. "I'm all ears."

Buckskin said that he had missed seeing the Young Bunch, five days before, when he left Cliff Drop with five burros loaded with supplies. Evidently the longhorns had taken a more southern route across the desert than the old trapper. Buckskin's burros traveled faster than the stock and reached Gold Spring in four nights of travel.

"Yaqui Joe has the camp in the palm of his hand," Buckskin Hammond revealed. "He's got twenty gun slingers with him. They've fenced off the only spring, an' are holdin' it against two hundred prospectors. If yuh want water, Yaqui Joe charges yuh twenty-five bucks a quart, or a hundred dollars a gallon. Yuh've got ter have water ter live. There's nothin' yuh kin do about it."

Whitey's mouth dropped open, then snapped shut. "But what about them two hundred prospectors workin' around Gold Spring?" he demanded. "Why don't they smoke the snakes out?"

Buckskin shook his head. "Can't be done," he growled. "They're scared stiff o' Yaqui Joe. He's givin' some o' them free water on the sly,

so they'll name the miners what start to organize against him. There's a murder every hour in Gold Spring."

Whitey's head twisted and gazed down the sand at the troop of longhorns plodding northeast toward Gold Spring.

"What happened to your burros an' the canned goods?" he asked the trapper.

Buckskin made a wry face. "Yaqui Joe got everythin'. When I hit the camp, my burros had ter drink. I couldn't see 'em drop dead on me. That thievin' snake took everythin' I owned in pay for water for 'em. He gave me a pick an' shovel an' told me ter grub fer gold or hoof it back ter Cliff Drop. Nobody in Gold Spring has a hoss. An' nobody kin walk across the desert without a canteen. That murderin' skunk has the bull camp in the hollow of his hand, an' it won't be long before he has every grain o' gold dust."

The story sounded so incredible to Whitey Dale that for a moment he suspected that the old trapper had lost his mind in his desert travels. Then the boss of the Young Bunch decided that Buckskin was speaking the truth.

Whitey had been learning the value of water in Death Valley. If Yaqui Joe controlled the supply at Gold Spring, Whitey doubted that twice two hundred prospectors would be able to whip him. The raiders would fortify themselves at the spring, and wait for the camp to succumb to thirst.

"Can yuh fork a bronc, Buckskin?" Whitey asked. "We've got two spare hosses that belonged to Yaqui Joe's raiders."

The old trapper sat up and stared at his bare feet.

"I kin ride, but no more hikin' fer

me," he replied. "What do yuh aim ter do, Whitey?"

"Take a little look-see at Gold Spring," the boss of the Young Bunch said. "We can get there before dawn. The longhorns aren't due to arrive until the day after tomorrow."

Buckskin made a face. "It would be suicide for us to go to Gold Spring," he said. "Yaqui Joe's men are always watchin' the desert. They've beefed at least twenty prospectors that were headed into the strike in the last week."

"They won't nail us," Whitey snapped, turning to his bronc. "Yuh know the lay o' the land. I'll go fetch a hoss for yuh. We've got to talk with the miners. There ain't no other way out."

"Jest as yuh say, Whitey," the trapper replied. "But I think yo're loco."

Leaving the other four members of the Young Bunch to keep driving, Whitey and Buckskin rode hard across the desert. The moon had gone down, and many of the stars were blinking out, so that the dunes were wrapped in shadows and the clumps of mesquite were hard to detect.

Had it not been for the darkness, they never would have reached the line of hills that reared out of the sands like a rocky island in the center of a vast, dead sea. Twice, they spotted scouts in the distance, and avoided them.

Like two wolves, Whitey and Buckskin slipped through the low troughs of the desert, now halting to listen, now going on. Their bridles were wrapped in rags to prevent jingling. They had removed their spurs. Guns in hand, they came to the barren slopes that

marked the outskirts of the oasis of Gold Spring.

"Them hills are full o' shafts," Buckskin whispered as he led the way into a deep gully that coursed up through the slants. "The gold runs in veins, almost pure stuff. The prospectors work the claims at night, when it's cool, an' they sleep in the holes in the daytime."

"Like rats," Whitey remarked under his breath. "It's funny what a man will do for gold."

Shortly, through the night, came the sound of picks and shovels from the shafts being sunk into the hills. And as Whitey and Buckskin moved on up the gully, they would hear the muffled boom of dynamite in the distance. It was not until they reached the end of the defile on a broad table that they spotted the gleaming fires of the prospectors.

There was something weird about the scene, and Whitey felt a cold shiver go down his spine. Now it was almost impossible to determine if they were being spied upon from hiding.

There was no doubt but that Yaqui Joe's men were stalking the night, keeping tabs on the gold hunters. Perhaps some of the miners were being robbed of their caches. In the scramble for riches, each man must be afraid to leave his claim, and it was no wonder that they were unable to organize against the raider gang.

Buckskin halted.

"It's dangerous to go on across the flat, Whitey," he said huskily. "Gold Spring lies in a small valley beyond the cliff. Hosses kin be seen easy. An' I don't reckon I kin hoof it. What do yuh aim ter do?"

Whitey considered, then swung down from the saddle. "I want to get the lay of the land, pard," he whispered. "Part of my plan is to

let the prospectors know that the Young Bunch is coming. If yuh could start the word around by telling some of the miners that yuh kin trust, then I'll go on foot an' take a look-see at Yaqui Joe's stronghold. We'll meet back here just before dawn."

Buckskin scowled. "I don't like it, Whitey. Mebbe I better go with yuh. Yo're plan ain't no good. Even if the Young Bunch did get the miners organized, yuh never could rout Yaqui Joe from the spring."

"Mebbe there's a way to rout him before he can make a defense," Whitey insisted. "Once we get the snake away from the water, he's done for."

"There ain't no way," Buckskin argued.

"I'll think o' one," the boss of the Young Bunch chuckled, and with a wave of his hand, he left Buckskin to his own ends.

It was an easy task to cross the table, for clumps of prickly pear and giant boulders offered quick shelter in case of discovery. Whitey skirted several mine shafts. He didn't know the prospectors and feared that he might meet up with one who was in league with Yaqui Joe.

Buckskin knew them better, having been in the camp for some time. So Whitey was letting the old trapper parley with the right ones.

Reaching the end of the table, the boss of the Young Bunch found a deep dark valley stretching below him. He could not figure its exact size, but judged it to be about one hundred acres. The black outlines of bluffs stood out in the purple night on three sides. The southern end appeared to give onto the desert, and it was from that direction that the longhorn herd would enter the oasis.

Whitey stood looking downward, trying to make out the camp by the flickering lights in tents and shanties. He knew it would be wise to wait for dawn, in order to have a better view, but his restlessness drove him to investigate immediately. Holstering his six-gun, he started to descend the cliff, listening to the echoes that floated up from the valley.

Once, he heard a man shouting. A dog howled from somewhere in the camp, and Whitey wondered what kind-hearted prospector was paying for its water.

As he neared the foot of the bluff, he heard three shots. There was no way to tell where they had come from, nor why they had been fired. Perhaps Yaqui Joe's men were putting a foe away for good.

"The skunk!" Whitey ejaculated. "I should have dropped him on that night of the stampede, but I was foolish enough to miss him. He an' me are going to meet soon."

Moving toward the oasis like a ghost in the night, Whitey was surprised to see cottonwood trees here and there. Near each one stood a tent, pitched so as to be shaded during the day.

There didn't appear to be any actual town. Gold Spring was a camp, spread out far and wide. Whitey passed abandoned wagons which had come through the desert by some miracle. He noted heaps of earth where prospectors had sunk claims, found no gold, then gone up to the hills to new diggings.

Soon, the boss of the Young Bunch could make out the outline of a flimsy stockade made from mesquite. He halted in the shadow of a cottonwood, knowing that behind that stockade lay the valuable spring.

The breeze brought the smell of

horses, and presently he heard the clump of hoofs. As he stood, hand on his gun butt, he spied five riders coming from the south toward the stockade.

The five called out, and a gate swung open. Whitey saw through it to a corral. He noted two adobe huts beside a pool of water which reflected the lights of a lantern which a man carried. Then the gate closed, and silence fell.

"I wonder if the miners couldn't sneak up close to that stockade an' throw a few sticks of dynamite at it," Whitey spoke softly. "Then, with a rush, we could get inside an' fight it out with Yaqui Joe."

A voice answered him, a voice that made the boss of the Young Bunch stiffen, for it seemed to come from behind him.

"I wouldn't try that trick, hombre," the voice said. "Unbuckle yore gun belt pronto."

Whitey whirled, hand streaking for his gun. He couldn't understand how a man had sneaked up behind him. With a twist of the wrist, he had his weapon out, ready to fire at the first sign of a foe.

His eyes found no one. The ground behind him was deserted. There were no boulders or brush that might conceal the speaker. Dumfounded, Whitey backed against the tree.

A chuckle sounded. Whitey's eyes jerked upward, and at that moment something struck him on the forehead. It was a stone of the size of a cantaloupe, and it packed the wallop of a mule's kick, knocking him down to his knees.

His brain reeled. He let go on the hammer of his weapon, shooting upward as he fought to keep his senses. He heard shouts from the stockade, then the mocking laughter of the enemy hiding in the tree.

He was down, but not completely out. He struggled up to his legs, six-gun kicking in his hand, blinded with pain and not knowing where his shots were going. He heard the blast of another gun, and something struck him a glancing blow along the side of the temple.

It was a creasing bullet fired from above. The world went black, and Whitey Dale pitched forward, hit the ground, bared teeth grubbing up sand.

CHAPTER V.

YAQUI TORTURE.

THE sun was shining when Whitey Dale recovered his senses. For long minutes, he lay flat on his back, aware of nothing but the scorching rays upon his face. There was a throbbing pain in his forehead. Gradually, the reason for it grew in his mind. He opened his eyes.

"He's coming out of it," some one said.

Whitey found himself staring up at two unshaven hombres who stood above him. One of them had spoken to a third man, who sat in a bullhide chair underneath a cottonwood tree. It was Yaqui Joe, lips curled back in a sneer, black eyes glittering with hatred.

"Huh!" the boss of the Young Bunch grunted, and he moved his arms.

A gale of laughter shook the two gringos above Whitey as he found both of his thumbs snared in rawhide thongs. Those thongs were attached to a lariat which led upward into the air and over a limb of the cottonwood tree and then on down into Yaqui Joe's hands.

"Get up," the half-breed raider ordered. "Yuh can make it, cowboy. I've been waiting for the last hour to show yuh a little trick."

Whitey felt his thumbs being

drawn into the air as Yaqui Joe pulled on the rope which led over the cottonwood limb. For a moment, the boss of the Young Bunch lay still, trying to understand what was happening to him. Then, suddenly, he realized what the half-breed intended to do. It was an old Indian torture, that of hanging a man by his thumbs.

"Skunk!" the cowboy cried, rearing up with a suddenness that made his brain reel.

He tried to jerk his thumbs out of the rawhide snares, but even as he did so, Yaqui Joe pulled on his end of the rope, and Whitey's arms were hauled on high. The boss of the Young Bunch could not get his thumbs free. They had been secured with wet rawhide which had dried in the sun and tightened like steel bands.

"Hah!" Yaqui Joe grunted. "Yuh have plenty of fight in yuh, *chico*. But not for long. Yuh will learn what it means to hit me in a saloon, an' then to come sneaking into my camp. Ha! Reach up, gringo! The more yuh struggle, the worse it is."

Whitey's arms were straight upward, his thumbs numb, and he half expected to see them jerked off. Pain radiated through his muscles, and he felt deathly ill. Red fire danced before his eyes, and he could no longer see the two toughs and Yaqui Joe. He stood, swaying, their howls of mirth in his ears.

"Pull him up on his toes!" one of the men yelled to the half-breed. "Make him take it, boss!"

"No," Yaqui Joe chuckled. "We must save him. I will let him stand flat on his feet for this afternoon. He will be a good sight for the Young Bunch when they come tonight with my longhorns."

Whitey caught his breath.

"Shore, we know all about the

herd," one of the gringo toughs stepped near and said into his ear. "We've been watchin' yuh fer two nights, hombre. We don't like drivin' stock. Yore pards will bring the critters right up to the gate o' the stockade, an' then we'll pay for them in lead. Har-har-har!"

"Yuh shore will pay plenty," the boss of the Young Bunch yelled in rage. "Yuh'll pay with yore mangy carcasses, yuh high-smellin' snakes."

Suddenly Yaqui Joe was before Whitey, and slapped him across the face with his hand.

"Dog of a gringo!" the half-breed snarled. "Yuh'll be screamin' for mercy before long. I leave yuh now. Let any miner try to take yuh down, an' a rifle will speak from the stockade. *Adios, chico*. When you die as yuh stand there, I shall come to spit in yore face."

"Scum!" Whitey flung back at the half-breed, who strode away with the two toughs. The boss of the Young Bunch saw them vanish within the gate of the stockade. He caught the glint of sunlight on the pool before the gate closed, and not until then did he realize that he would have given his life for a cold drink.

Whitey stood there, listening, arms stretched up, unable to move an inch without putting a strain on his thumbs. Now and then, he heard a horse nicker from the stockade. There was no other sound in the entire valley.

He wondered if there were men in the tents pitched beyond the fortified spring. How many of the prospectors already knew of his plight.

"Buckskin Hammond!" Whitey exclaimed, hope surging into his breast.

Then he realized that Buckskin could do nothing. If the trapper approached the cottonwood tree,

he'd be shot down. Buckskin would know that and keep away. So would every other hombre in the gold camp. Whitey Dale was doomed.

Hours dragged on, and Whitey's entire body was gripped with new agony. The muscles in his calves drew tight. His arms were like lead, and if he did not keep them straight up, his thumbs weighed against the rawhide thongs. He could look up and see that his thumbs were swollen to twice their size.

It was not until the shadows of twilight that Whitey saw the first prospectors. They came in pairs down from the hills surrounding the valley. They skirted his cottonwood and went on to the stockade, where the gate opened. The boss of the Young Bunch saw the miners hand over small bags of gold dust, and receive bottles of water and canned goods in return. They were like beaten dogs begging for morsels of food. With shuffling gait, they went on back to the hills and their diggings.

"Yellow!" Whitey growled. "Not a man among them. How could Buckskin get them to fight?"

Darkness fell, but the cool breezes it brought were scant relief to Whitey Dale. He suffered horribly. Sometimes, he thought he would faint. He tried not to think. His body was paralyzed from head to toe.

It didn't seem possible that he could last throughout the night. Sooner or later, he would have to give up, let his knees buckle, and then hang by his thumbs, swaying, a feast for the buzzards that would come with the dawn.

It was long after midnight when he heard a muffled thundering in the south. For a while, he thought it was a cloudburst. Then, he sud-

denly recognized the sound as coming from the throats of a hundred thirsty cattle.

"The Young Bunch!" Whitey cried out, and his voice carried into the night.

From the stockade, there was a mocking reply.

"We're waitin' for them," said Yaqui Joe, "an' it's goin' to be funny when they see yuh. How do yuh feel, *chico*?"

Whitey ground his teeth with rage. Strangely enough, the sound of the cattle made his agony easier to bear. He listened to the herd coming on into the oasis from the south. He could tell from a note in their bawling that they had smelled the spring.

"They'll stampede soon!" he gasped, and as he spoke, a desperate hope took hold of him.

He swung to stare at the stockade about the spring. It was built of mesquite limbs, but it was not solidly put together. It was a flimsy structure provided only to hide the position of the raiders behind it. A running horse could easily have crashed through it. What would an entire herd of longhorn steers do?

"Nothing will stop that herd from getting water," Whitey said aloud. "Nothing will stop them. Doesn't Yaqui Joe know stock? Doesn't he realize what will happen when those longhorns reach here? Is he loco enough to think that those critters will stop right outside his gate an' wait to be let in?"

Now, the thunder of the herd increased, and the boss of the Young Bunch detected the clicking of wide-spread horns and the pound of hoofs. He strained to see off in the night. His eyes picked up the flash of a six-gun. Was it fired by one of Yaqui Joe's scouts, or was it a shot

from one of the Young Bunch who was urging the cattle on.

"I can feel somethin' in my bones!" Whitey cried. "Buckskin has told my pard. I know they're planning to help me."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when from far behind Whitey a rifle suddenly spoke. He heard the sing of a bullet, which passed over his head by at least three feet.

Immediately, shouts sounded from within the stockade, and guns spurted flame from between the logs of the gate. They were shooting back at the hombre who had fired the first shot.

Again, Whitey heard the crack of the rifle from some spot far behind him. There was a tug at the lariat rope which drew the rawhide thongs up into the air to the limb of the cottonwood.

Now, he heard Yaqui Joe's men yelling excitedly within the stockade. It seemed that they were going to come out to nail the lone marksman, who fired again, and again there was a tug at the lariat rope.

"Buckskin!" the boss of the Young Bunch gasped. "He's shooting me down from this torture. He's——"

Crack! Another shot, and the lariat rope parted.

Whitey pitched headlong to the ground, falling behind the trunk of the cottonwood tree. Even as he did so, a dozen weapons flamed from within the stockade and lead came smacking into the cottonwood. But Whitey was safe behind it.

"Whitey!" the voice of Buckskin Hammond shouted. "Hold out, cowboy! Thar's at least fifty miners hidin' around hyar. We're goin' ter clean out the snake nest."

"Buckskin, yuh ol' mosshorn!" the boss of the Young Bunch yelled

back. "Do yuh know what's going to happen?"

Buckskin's reply was drowned out but a thunderous burst of shots from the stockade, inside which Whitey could hear Yaqui Joe shrilling orders.

The boss of the Young Bunch put his teeth to the knots in the rawhide thongs that bound his thumbs. Now the earth was trembling, and he could see the longhorn herd coming on the stampede.

Moonlight glistened on their horns and painted their bulging eyes a fiery red. Bawling, tongues out, they swept toward the stockade like an army of four-legged fiends, as hair-raising a sight as Whitey had ever witnessed. And behind that bovine attack sounded the crash of guns as his four pardes rode, whooping like Comanches.

"Sky, Pudge, Red, Dizzy!" Whitey Dale cried, and tugged apart his bound thumbs.

He swayed up to his feet just as the herd hit the stockade like an avalanche. The crash deafened him. The longhorns were through, plowing down all men that stood in their way. Whitey staggered out from behind the cottonwood, ran drunkenly toward the scene of destruction, where the screams of gored raiders lifted. He heard the corral rails smash, and a hundred horses and burros were released.

"Whitey!" A rider raced up to him.

The boss of the Young Bunch looked up to see the tall Sky Capper leaning from the saddle.

"Give me a gun, Sky."

"The miners are comin' from all directions," Sky Capper yelled to make himself heard, and he handed down a .45.

Whitey grabbed for it, and ran on to an opening in the stockade. He

plunged through, searching for foes. The bodies of a dozen longhorns blocked his path. The rest of the herd were leaping into the pool of water beside the two adobe huts, and Whitey saw raiders racing into the doorways.

The boss of the Young Bunch kept going hard, never knowing how he was able to work his legs. Behind him, he could hear the miners coming. He knew he'd have to get into one of those adobe huts before it was too late. The raiders could not be allowed to hole up.

Whitey might have been taken for one of the gang in the darkness and confusion. He reached the doorway before the raiders discovered their mistake. Then yells of anger sounded within the black room. Whitey dived into the entrance, his six-gun spitting fire.

He shot to clear a path for himself through the doorway. And just inside, he tripped, and sprawled headlong, and the door slammed shut behind him.

"The puncher is inside here!" the voice of Yaqui Joe shouted. "Kill him! Find him out! Get to the loopholes an' shoot down the miners!"

Whitey rose to his knees, trying to penetrate the blackness inside the hut. He could see no one. He listened to the scrape of boots. He lifted his gun on high as an hombre breathed somewhere in front of him. Whitey lunged, striking downward, and heard his gun barrel strike a skull. A groan, and a man dropped. Whitey shifted aside.

"Who was that?" Yaqui Joe called. "Who got the puncher?"

"That was me tallyin' a snake, yuh skunk!" Whitey called out. "The first sneak that fires out a port-hole will get beefed by me."

"Get him!" Yaqui Joe shouted.

"He's over on the north side o' the room. Charge him."

Whitey ducked down as the floor trembled under the impact of boots. He swung his gun in quick blows in front of him. One hombre caught a swipe in the knee and went down with a howl.

Instantly, four outlaws were on top of the injured man, shooting, gun-whipping him.

Whitey stood up, and cracked down on their skulls with a vengeance. Now he could hear the crash of shoulders against the outside of the door.

"The miners are coming, Yaqui Joe!" the boss of the Young Bunch yelled. "Let them in. Yo're going to pay in full for what yuh did." And as he spoke he moved aside.

It was well that Whitey did. For a six-gun flamed from a corner, spraying the spot where he had been with lead.

The boss of the Young Bunch didn't hesitate. He dived toward the corner which held Yaqui Joe, whose coppery face he could see by the flame of gunpowder. The next moment, Whitey landed on top of the outlaw, who caught his gun barrel and tore it away.

"Get him off me!" Yaqui Joe screamed. "He's got me. My gun is empty."

Under Whitey, Yaqui Joe was squirming like a cougar, using teeth and claws. The cowboy tried to hold him. He heard the door of the hut burst open, and miners charging inside. They were met by a crowd of outlaws, and a free-for-all fight was on, leaving the boss of the Young Bunch to the half-breed.

Suddenly, Yaqui Joe's fingers were at Whitey's throat. The puncher grabbed the half-breed's wrists, jerked at them.

But now the tortures that Whitey

had endured that day were telling on him. He had been carried far on his last reserves of strength and by the nervous excitement of the attack. In a flash, he realized that he was no match for Yaqui Joe.

"Yuh die!" the raider yelled. "I'll die, but I'll take yuh with me."

Whitey reared back, tried to shake the half-breed off. But Yaqui Joe hung to him like a panther with its claws in his throat. The cowboy doubled his fists, beat them into the raider's face. Yaqui Joe howled with agony, but held on.

With his wind cut off, Whitey's brain whirled. He felt himself going fast. He threw a left hand into Yaqui Joe's face and pushed the raider as far away as he could.

Something told him that this half-breed, who did not know longhorns, also didn't know cowboy methods of fighting. Holding him away with a left hand, Whitey doubled his right fist. He put his all into one puncher blow.

It was a right uppercut, starting from Whitey's hip, and it came up between Yaqui Joe's arms and landed flush on the outlaw's chin.

"Ugh!" A grunt. Whitey felt the clawlike fingers relax their grip on his throat.

That was all that the boss of the Young Bunch remembered as he collapsed on top of the outlaw. He lay, not knowing that Yaqui Joe was unconscious beneath him.

Faintly, his ears recorded the heavy concussion of gunshots, which died away. A silence held the hut. Then a flaming torch lighted up the darkness. Whitey felt a bucket of water splash over him, and swiftly he was full awake.

Above him stood the Young Bunch, bruised and battered, wounded, but grinning.

"Yuh got him, didn't yuh,

Whitey?" Sky Capper chuckled. "We got the other adobe hut cleaned out."

Whitey Dale forced a grin. "Is the Young Bunch ramrodding Death Valley?" he asked.

"By gumption, I'll say it is!" ex-

claimed Buckskin Hammond, who staggered forward, a six-gun in either hand. "An' I'm stakin' 'em ter free meals in my hash house, which begins business ter-morrow with the best slice o' beef this side o' nowhere."



THE LONE STAR OF TEXAS

THE man who used one of the brass buttons of his overcoat as a seal on an official document, had no idea that he was giving a permanent emblem to Texas. This man was Henry Smith, who took the trail for Texas in 1821, when he was a little over thirty years of age.

After a while, he settled in Brazoria, and became the first governor of the Mexican Province of Texas, being named at a meeting held at San Felipe, in Austin County.

In those days, overcoats had large brass buttons, and it so happened that the buttons on the coat of Governor Smith had the impress of a five-pointed star. A few days after inauguration a messenger arrived with important papers.

After reading and signing them, Governor Smith remarked, "Texas should have a seal." But there was no seal on hand. So Governor Smith cut one of the big brass buttons from his overcoat, held a match to the sealing wax, made a little pool of it on the papers, and pressed the button on the soft red wax.

The five-pointed star stood out plain and clear, and made a fine seal. It was so satisfactory, in fact, that no one ever hinted at changing it, for no one could think of anything better.

When Henry Smith saw the population of Texas increasing rapidly by large groups of Ameri-

cans pouring into the Mexican Province, he devoted himself to promoting their welfare and protecting their rights.

It soon became clear that the intention of Santa Ana and his officials was to make the Texas colonies thoroughly Mexican.

A decree was issued forbidding any further immigration of Americans. Another decree followed which directed that Mexican convicts should be transported to Texas.

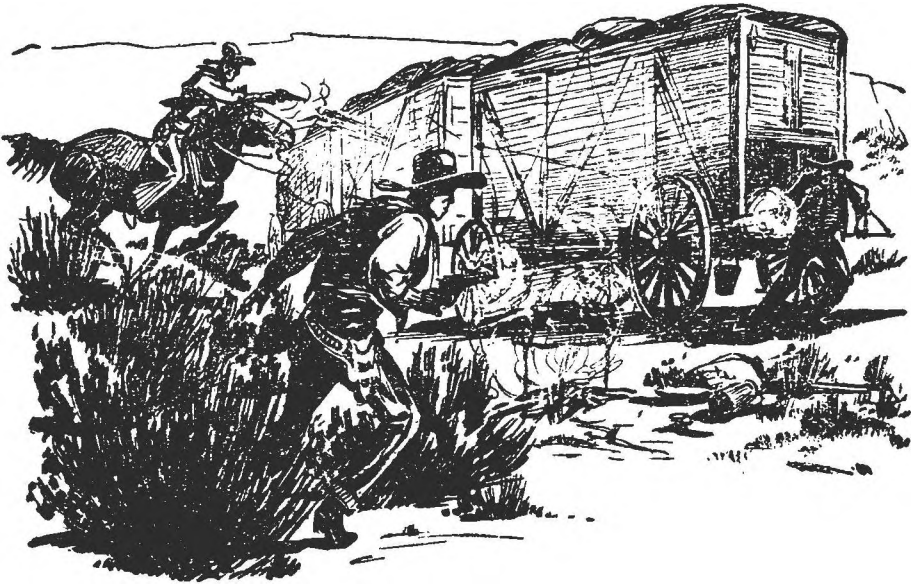
This brought the anger of the Americans to boiling point, as it placed the Province in the class of a penal settlement.

During all the troubles that ensued from this time until the independence of Texas was secured by General Houston in the battle of San Jacinto, Henry Smith was a ruling spirit.

He was in office as provisional governor only four months, but he had proved his executive ability so well that, when Sam Houston was elected president of the new republic, Smith was made treasurer.

As evidence of his fitness for the post, he retained his office during the entire term of President Houston's first administration.

After retiring into private life, the gold rush caught him, and he went to California in 1849, where he died two years later.



Blackstrap And Bullets

A "Shorty Masters" Story

By Allan R. Bosworth

Author of "A Tiger For Tarantula," etc.

SOMETHING mysterious, unseen, had invaded the sleeping camp beside the three freight wagons that bulked vaguely in the gray light of early dawn. "Shorty" Masters, M. D. (Mule Driver), stirred uneasily in his bed roll.

Across the faintly smoking embers of the camp fire, the long, tarp-covered figure of the "Sonora Kid" was peacefully still, and beyond the wagons the six freight mules and a wiry sorrel cow pony grazed in the fringe of the chaparral. All was silent.

Shorty moved again, brushed a hand impatiently across his freckled face, and then suddenly sat upright, tense and listening.

He reached under his pillow.

The cold feel of his black-butted .45 was reassuring.

"Reckon mebbe I was dreamin'!" he muttered. "It shore ain't time to hit the trail, and—— *Oww-ww!*"

The sawed-off, bow-legged mule skinner leaped from his bedding, clawing at the back of his neck.

There was a snort of alarm from the chaparral. The Sonora Kid, whose real name was Willie Wetherbee, sprang into sudden, wide-eyed wakefulness.

"Stick 'em up!" the tall waddy yelled, as he bounded to his feet and threw a six-gun down on his prancing pard. "Stick 'em—— Oh! It's you! What the heck is eatin' yuh, Shorty?"

"*Owww-ee!*" groaned the little

freighter. "I'm stabbed—or mebbe shot! Or—— I know! It's ants, that's what! Red ants!"

Wetherbee snorted. "Ants!" he drawled in disgust. "The way yuh bellered like a branded shorthorn, I thought shore them stage robbers had found out we was haulin' the dinero to the Tarantula bank! And it ain't nothin' but ants."

"Nothin' but ants?" howled Shorty. "Was yuh ever bit by a red ant? If yuh was, yuh know dawg-gone well it hurts jest as bad as be-in' shot. *Oww-ww!*"

Another ant struck between his shoulder blades. Shorty shucked off his shirt as if it was afire. He shook it, and a dozen of the insects fell out.

"I'm jest alive with 'em!" he mourned. "My bed is full of ants! I savvy why—because I loaded them sacks of sugar last night at Stockton. That's why they're pickin' on me."

Willie Wetherbee leaned against a wagon wheel and gave vent to his mirth. Then, suppressing his laughter, he jerked on his boots and went back to the chuck box that was suspended at the end-gate of the last wagon. He was back in a minute with a bottle.

"Here, let me put some vinegar on the bites, Shorty!" he said soberly. "That'll help. And I reckon we better git movin'. It seems like we camped right on an ant bed, and they've discovered that barrel o' blackstrap molasses in the waggin!"

Shorty groaned as the tall cowboy ministered to the bites. Daylight was growing stronger, and the morning was sultry and muggy, with the gray-green mesquites hanging as listless as so many shrouds in the breathless air.

"That feels better," Shorty said. "Kind o' takes th' sting away. Let's

git goin'! The more miles I put between my neck and these here dawg-gone ants, the better I'll like it. Saddle yore hoss, while I hitch the mules!"

The Sonora Kid chuckled again as he donned his batwing cowhide chaps and prepared to go after Tumbleweed, the sorrel cayuse. But there was an air of grimness in the way the tall cowboy strapped his low-holstered .45 around his lean waist.

There had been a series of mysterious holdups on the Stockton-Tarantula stage line. It was plain to see that the bandit gang which had been doing the robberies knew about the shipment of thirty thousand dollars which was expected by the bank at Tarantula. And now the express company and the bank officials had resorted to a ruse—shipping money by mule team and freight wagons.

Shorty seized halters from the pile of harness on the wagon tongue, and went for his six mules. No ordinary animals, these long-eared offspring of a mare named Lucy. Shorty credited them with almost as much intelligence as a human being, and because he loved classical music, he dubbed the team the "Sextet from Lucia."

"Here, Tschaikowsky! Here, Chopin!" he called as he entered the shadowy mesquites. "Come on, Rubinstein!"

The Sonora Kid snorted as he slipped his halter over the velvety nose of Tumbleweed. No mules had a right to such high-falutin' names as were made famous by great composers.

Shorty whirled suddenly. He had heard a noise at the wagons—the sound of a boot slipping on a wheel hub! Willie Wetherbee heard it, too,

as he turned the sorrel to lead the way to the camp.

"Here! What yuh doin' there?" shouted Wetherbee angrily. "I see him, Shorty!"

The freighter leaped sidewise to clear a mesquite that obscured his view of the wagons. As he did so, a .45 roared from the camp, and a heavy slug clipped leaves from the tree where he had stood.

The Sonora Kid's weapon flashed out of his holster in a draw that was as fast as had ever been seen west of the Pecos. He triggered from the hip, and the roar of the gun drowned the echoes of the prowler's shot.

Shorty threw down on the mysterious intruder, and his bullet chipped splinters from the wagon's sideboards. There was an answering spurt of vivid, orange-colored flame, another thunderous roar, and then the man ducked beneath the wagon and scrambled to the other side, out of sight.

An instant later, there was a frantic scurry of hoofs. The Sonora Kid seized a handful of Tumbleweed's glossy mane and leaped astride the barebacked horse. Hitting spurs to the sorrel, he shot across the road with Shorty running after him on foot.

Braang! Br-raang! Wetherbee's .45 blazed twice—three times.

Shorty heard a yell of triumph from the tall waddy's lips and reached the camp in time to see him vanish in the mesquites beyond.

"Dawg-gone him, he hadn't ought to do that!" grumbled the little freighter. "No tellin' how many of 'em are out there in the chaparral! Jest wait till I can saddle myself a mule, and I'll tail after him!"

He grabbed a saddle and started for the freight team once more. Then he heard a crashing in the

brush and turned, ready to go for his gun.

But it was the Sonora Kid, returning. The dark-faced puncher rode up silently and swung to the ground.

"Nothin' doin'!" he said with a grim shake of his head. "He got too much of a start. But look—I shore nearly got him. Here's how close I come!"

He held out a new Stetson, light gray and still unsoiled. There was a ragged bullet hole in its crown.

Shorty grinned. "I reckon he won't be in a hurry to come back! The only thing is, mebbe he seen what was in the waggin!"

"Yeah," agreed the Sonora Kid. "Probably he did. We'd better travel. It looks like we might run smack into trouble!"

II.

The freight outfit rumbled down the divide road a few minutes later. There were twenty miles to go to Tarantula—a good day's haul for mules with three loaded wagons.

Shorty Masters perched on the swaying wagon seat with his gray eyes peeled for trouble and his holster swung around where he could get at it quickly. The Sonora Kid, sitting his saddle with an ease that told of a life on the range, rode warily—now at the side, now in front or behind.

A drop of rain splashed on Shorty's hand. He looked anxiously at the threatening sky. Mud would delay the mules. They had to get that money to Tarantula before night. It was too risky camping out with it here in the lawless stretches of the Big Bend.

"Yuh better grab yore slicker!" drawled the Sonora Kid. "Here she comes!"

Shorty hastily obeyed, and the

tall rider untied his own yellow slicker from behind his saddle. A quick patter of rain drummed the wagon sheets. Thunder crashed, and jagged lightning split the sultry sky.

For a quarter of a mile, the Sextet from Lucia plugged along with flattened ears, through a thunder shower. Then the rain ceased and the sun came out with dazzling brightness.

"That's shore lucky!" Shorty grinned as he removed the slicker. "Gosh, it's warm fer this early in the spring. Hey! Keep away! Stay offn me!"

The Sonora Kid turned to see what was the matter. A cloud of winged insects had appeared as if by magic, and now they seemed determined to settle on the little teamster and his wagons.

"Hah-hah!" roared Wetherbee. "Hah-hah! Flyin' ants! If it ain't one kind, it's another! They shore think yuh are sweet, Shorty!"

"Git away!" ranted the mule driver, slapping viciously at the insects. "It's that dawg-gone sugar I toted into the waggins! Wish now I'd left the slicker off and got myself a bath! Keep off, I told yuh!"

Buzzzzzzzz! A big flying ant zipped into Shorty's left ear, and he nearly fell off the wagon seat as he slammed at it with both hands.

Some of the insects settled on the mules, and the Sextet broke into a trace-jingling gallop.

"If this here—— Git away! If this keeps up—shoo—we'll be in Tarantula by dinner time!" panted the freighter. "It shore looks like they're stayin' with us! The sugar and that barrel o' sorghum molasses—— Git away!"

The Sonora Kid, rocking in his saddle with laughter at his pard's discomfiture, led the freight outfit down the steep, twisting road that

dropped from the divide. Shorty jammed on screeching brakes, but even then the mules did not want to slow their pace. They had no load to pull, now, with the wagons coasting behind.

"Whoa! Look out, Shorty!"

The mule skinner, half blinded by a buzzing swarm of ants, jerked leather hard and grabbed his brake lever to tighten it another notch. Looking up at Wetherbee's warning shout, he saw a buggy turned almost crosswise in the narrow road.

"Whoa, dang yore hides!" he yelled, sawing on the reins.

The Sextet sat back on their haunches, and the freight wagons jarred to a grinding stop. From behind the span of horses that were hitched to the buggy, a small, mild-appearing man suddenly showed himself.

"What're you doing, freighter?" he demanded angrily. "Trying to run over me?"

Shorty's wrath boiled over. "Git that outfit out of the road!" he belted. "We're in a hurry, and we got ants!"

The little man seemed to notice the cloud of insects for the first time when one alighted on his bald head. He slapped at his cranium, caught the ant in the air, and peered at it through dark glasses.

"Flying ants!" he said, as if talking to no one in particular. "They frequently come out after a rain. Very nice specimen, too. I must catch more of them!"

"Yuh can have the whole shootin' match!" Shorty exploded. "Only git that rig out of the road and——"

"Oh! I forgot! I'm sorry. You see, one of my horses has cast a shoe and—well, it's very fortunate that you came along just now. Otherwise I never would have made it to town."

The Sonora Kid was eying the man with open distrust. In spite of his Eastern mannerisms, he wore two new holsters, and a six-gun butt projected from each. There was a saddle tied to the back of the buggy, and one horse was out of the harness. Besides, the man had no hat!

"Say," declared the tall cowboy, "mebbe it ain't so lucky for yuh after all! Mebbe we have met before—this mornin'!"

The little man blinked at Wetherbee through the dark glasses.

"No, I'm sure I haven't had the pleasure of your acquaintance until now," he said mildly. "My name is Sinclair. Peter Willoughby Sinclair."

"Where's yore hat?" Wetherbee demanded pointedly.

Peter Willoughby Sinclair rubbed his bald head. "Hat?" he repeated. "Hat? Oh, I never wear one. Trying to grow hair, you know. Sun blisters your head, nature grows hair to protect it."

"Let me see that hoss yuh claim has thrown a shoe!" said Shorty, slapping aside the flying ants as he climbed from the wagon.

"Of course!" agreed Sinclair. "The off hind leg. He's getting lame. I'll have to lead him. If you don't mind, I'd like to tie the buggy on behind your wagons. I'll pay you, of course. I'll saddle and ride the other horse."

Shorty looked. The horse that was unhitched *did* appear lame, and it had lost a shoe. The mule skinner studied Peter Willoughby Sinclair.

"I reckon yuh must be wrong, Willie!" he said aside to the tall cowboy, as Sinclair snatched at some more flying ants. He shore looks harmless. Hate to leave him stranded out here, too!"

The Sonora Kid nodded. "Meb-

be. Anyway, as long as we got him with us, I reckon he cain't do no harm. Say, Mr. Sinclair, what's yore business—if yuh don't mind the personal question?"

Sinclair beamed. "Not at all, not at all! I'm a—a—well, a naturalist just at present!"

The partners noticed his hesitation, but Shorty was having his troubles again with the ants. Impatient to be moving, the freighter motioned toward the buggy.

"All right, let's git this rig on behind! My name is Shorty Masters, M. D., the which don't stand fer doctor. It stands fer Mule Driver. This here is my pard, Willie Wetherbee."

Sinclair shook hands gravely, then helped get the buggy in the clear until Shorty could drive the wagons past. The little man saddled his good horse, while the partners made the buggy fast on the rear of the wagons.

"Don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come along," repeated Sinclair as he swung into the saddle. "Look! The swarm of flying ants is increasing. I don't know when I have seen such a cloud of them!"

"I don't know, neither!" Shorty grumbled as he fought his way to the wagon seat. "But I know this—I don't want to see 'em again!"

He took the reins, released the brake a notch, and started on down the divide grade. Sinclair rode up toward the front, and the mule driver noticed the little man was eying both sides of the road closely.

"Somethin' funny about that hombre," he muttered in between swats at the ants. "He rides like he was an old hand at punchin' cows. He may be lookin' fer more specimens, and he *may* be lookin' fer some of his pards—the holdup gang!"

III.

The flying ants stayed with them. Down into the mesquite flat, across it, and up the climb of a new divide hill beyond, they swarmed about Shorty's head and alternated between him and the barrel of blackstrap molasses in the third wagon.

Shorty knew that barrel was sticky on the outside—he had helped roll it from the loading platform at Stockton.

"Mebbe half the molasses will be gone by the time we git to Pete Wilson's store," he grumbled, jerking his Stetson lower over his eyes for protection against the insects. "I wish the dawg-gone bugs would git their fill and leave me alone."

The freight outfit was nearing the top of the divide hill now, climbing through a place where the road cut in a narrow pass between cluttered boulders and cedar trees, with the light buggy trailing behind and swaying back and forth in the road. Suddenly there was a crash in the rear.

Sinclair turned anxiously. "My buggy!" he shouted. "The rope has broken! It's rolling downhill!"

The Sonora Kid wheeled the sorrel. Applying quirt and spur, he shot past the wagons as Shorty yanked the mules to a halt and applied the brakes.

Standing in the wagon bed, the little freighter looked to the rear. He saw Wetherbee overtake the careening, swaying vehicle as it gathered speed on the steep slant. Sinclair rode after the tall waddy, reaching for the coiled reata at his saddle horn.

Shorty had no time to note that the little man was shaking a loop into the reata with an expertness amazing for a naturalist. Neither

did Sinclair have time to make his throw.

The Sonora Kid leaned low from his saddle and seized the dragging tongue. Lifting it, he swung it sharply to one side, and the rear end of the runaway buggy crashed into the high bank at the roadside.

A square, heavy box slipped out of the vehicle as it careened and fell on its side. Sinclair leaped from his saddle and ran to stoop over the box.

Braang! Braang! Braang! With breath-taking suddenness, hot lead showered around the freight wagons.

A clatter of hoofs swept into the road below, and guns rolled thunderously.

Braang! Bang!

Shorty Masters ducked as a slug zipped off a rock with a vicious, high-pitched whine. The little freighter came up with his gun in his hand, boiling mad.

Sinclair had done this! Peter Willoughby Sinclair—that was a false name, of course—had tipped off the gang. Now the pards would have to do some fighting, some gun-slinging from way back, if they hoped to save the bank's money.

"Six of 'em!" Shorty muttered between clenched teeth. "Dang the flyin' ants—I wish there was jest six o' *them* instead o' six million! No, there's two more. Outlaws, I mean, not ants."

The horsemen swung into the road at the foot of the hill. Shorty heard an angry yell from Sinclair.

"Help me put this box o' mine in the wagon, Wetherbee!" exclaimed the little man. "Them hombres are after me!"

"After *you*?" Shorty retorted. "Why, yuh mangy shorthorn, *you* must have tipped 'em off! They're after us, not *you*!"

The Sonora Kid ended the argument with a blast from his .45.

"The way it looks to me, we're all in the same fix!" he declared. "If I could jest see to draw a bead, without this cloud o' flyin' ants in front of me!"

Braang! Boom! Bang! The walls of the gulch echoed the thunder of flaming guns, and the roadbed shook beneath hammering hoofs.

Ducking low in their saddles, the eight bandits charged the wagons in a yelling, shooting pack.

"Jest be calm, boys! Pick 'em off easylike!"

It was Peter Willoughby Sinclair. Shorty gasped with amazement as he saw the little man whip up the twin, new six-guns. Gone was Sinclair's Eastern accent, his mannerisms of the tenderfoot. In his hands, the two .45s became flaming weapons of destruction. He had removed his dark glasses.

Braang! Shorty fired over the arched wagon sheet, then ducked into the wagon and back through it. He had to get a vantage point with a clearer view.

Lead daggered the canvas above his head. He came out into the open long enough to trigger a couple of times at the charging men, then made the third wagon with a swarm of flying ants boiling around his head.

"Come on, yuh skunks!"

The last wagon had no sheet stretched over it. Shorty crouched behind a barrel and let go at the attacking riders.

One man dropped. Sinclair's guns barked, and another fell. The Sonora Kid shot a horse out from under a third. Then the charge broke and wavered with a straggling volley that sent wet dirt flying from the gully walls.

"That'll hold 'em for a minute!"

WW-9B

growled Sinclair. "But they'll be comin' back!"

"Say, who *are* you?" demanded Shorty. "And why— Dawg-gone these ants, they're worse 'n' worse! They're so thick I cain't see to shoot!"

"One time a gnat lit on the front sight o' my rifle, and I kept blazin' away, thinkin' I was shootin' at an eagle!" Sinclair related calmly. "If I was you, I'd drop that sticky barrel out of the wagon. Chances are, the ants'll foller it!"

Shorty nodded. "I'll do that!" he decided, and hastened to lift the sideboards of the wagon.

Bang! Braang! The attack began again, under new tactics.

Instead of charging into the deadly fire of the partners' guns, the outlaws dismounted and advanced cautiously, taking shelter behind the scattered boulders. Six of them, now. Only six to three.

The Sonora Kid and Shorty Masters had faced worse odds. Looking at the bald-headed little man, the mule driver had no doubt that Sinclair, too, had been in tight spots before.

Braang! Willie Wetherbee's bullet scratched limestone dust from a boulder where two of the bandits crouched.

Now the men lurched into the open, broke into a crouched, twisting run, and made another twenty yards.

Shorty sucked in a sharp breath of alarm. The outlaws were carrying rifles, now! They intended to get to some vantage point on the gulch walls and pick off the men in the freight outfit.

Then the freighter spluttered and spat out an ant. He grabbed the molasses barrel as if it had been the entire cause of the trouble, and tipped it over the side of the wagon.

Down the inclined sideboard it rolled, struck the gully bank and bounced back. Then, slowly gathering speed, it started down the road—toward the advancing outlaws.

The Sonora Kid reined Tumbleweed over toward the wagons. "Mebbe we'd better leave the buggy and whip up the mules, Shorty!" he advised in a low voice. "After all, Sinclair wouldn't lose so much. We'll lose the bank's money if——"

Shorty waved away a persistent ant. "And what would *you* be doin' while I drove?" he demanded.

"I'll tag along behind and try to fight 'em off!"

"Nothin' doin'. We stick together!"

Crack! Crack! The clean, sharp bark of a .30-30 bit into the tenseness.

Bullets whined in the sultry, ant-swarmed air. Shorty's Stetson leaped on his head as a slug creased its crown.

Then he heard the rumble of the molasses barrel, rolling swiftly down the gravel road. It turned erratically, then took a straight course in the center of the road, gathering white dust on its sticky surface.

Braang! Crack! Rifle shot answered the roar of the Sonora Kid's gun. Sinclair rose in his stirrups, trying to spot one of the men among the boulders.

Crash! The sound of splintering wood jerked Shorty's eyes up from his gun as he reloaded hastily.

He saw barrel staves flying, saw a sticky shower of blackstrap molasses rise into the air and splatter over a wide area as the barrel collided with a boulder.

There was an angry yell from down the hill. A man staggered into the open, wiping the smothering sirup from his face.

Braang! The Sonora Kid's gun blazed.

The man lurched sidewise and fell rolling in agony.

"Look!" Shorty yelled. "The ants are leavin' us! Hooray!"

He drew the first free breath he had taken in an hour. The swarm of insects streamed down the gulch toward the newer, sweeter field of splattered sorghum. More yells came from the outlaws.

"Let's go!" barked Sinclair.

He hit spurs to his horse. Both his guns flamed and roared as he headed down the hill. The Sonora Kid threw Tumbleweed into a gallop, leaning low on the horse's neck and blazing away at the bandits.

Shorty Masters leaped from the wagon, a yell on his lips. He sprinted to the horse Sinclair had been leading. The animal was slightly lame in one leg, but it wouldn't hurt him to run a short distance like this.

Braang! Bang! Braang! Guns hammered the walls of the gulch.

Acrid powder smoke fogged the sultry air. The crack of rifles came from behind the boulders, where men were handicapped by a stinging, blinding swarm of flying ants.

Shorty clattered down the hill, riding bareback, guiding the bridleless horse with the pressure of his knees and an occasional pull on the neck rope. He saw the distorted, sticky face of an outlaw rising above a boulder, saw the holdup man's gun spit fire, and then triggered with his own .45.

The man went down, a smear of crimson showing on his face. Shorty caught up with his partners as their horses threaded the boulders on both sides of the road. For a half minute, loud and smoke-filled, the three blazed away. Then the outlaw guns were silent.

Sinclair rode into the center of the trail, waving his guns. The battle was over.

"Let's get out o' here!" yelled the little man. "Too many ants!"

They rode back toward the wagons. "I thought yuh wanted to collect some more of them insects!" Shorty accused. "Yuh said yuh was a naturalist. We thought mebbe yuh was in cahoots with them bandits. Yuh see, we are haulin' the dinero fer the bank, and——"

"Yo're haulin' dinero for the bank?" interrupted Sinclair. "No such thing! I'm haulin' that money, pardner. It's in that box, there!"

He pointed to the square box that had fallen from the buggy. Shorty and Willie stared at it, then looked at each other.

"We've got the dinero in the waggin!" insisted the mule driver. "Come here, and I'll show yuh!"

Peter Willoughby Sinclair climbed from his saddle and looked. Then he shook his head.

"The express company shore moves in a mysterious way!" he declared. "They split the money, that's what! They sent me out in

disguise—you see, I'm a detective for the express people. They figured if one of us got held up, the other money would get through. I was a little afraid of you boys when I first saw you—that's why I told you I was a bug collector."

"And we figgered mebbe you was the hombre that swapped shots with us this mornin' after prowlin' on the waggins!" gasped the Sonora Kid. "It shore was a mix-up. It ain't quite clear, to me, yet!"

Shorty Masters laughed. "One thing is clear!" he drawled. "That is that the dinero will git to the bank all O. K., and that gang of stage robbers won't be robbin' no more stages. But I reckon the bank owes Pete Wilson the price of a barrel o' blackstrap!"

Thet shore was a mix-up, an' no mistake about it. It's a good thing thet Shorty an' the Sonora Kid didn't start no monkey business with thet waspy little Sinclair jigger, whilst figurin' him ter be a bandick. If they had—waal, the story might 'a' been plumb different. Keep yore eyes peeled fer the next story about the mule driver an' his cowboy pard. It'll be appearin' in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.

PICTURES OF YOUR FAVORITE WADDIES!

The third and last coupon entitling you to a fine picture o' the saddle pards from Circle J will be found on page 140 of this issue. The first two appeared in the April 20th and 27th issues.

Next week, we start printing the coupons which will give you a chance to get a picture of the Soldier of Misfortune, KID WOLF.



Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is offered in order to preserve the old cowboy songs and frontier ballads that have come down to us by word of mouth from our grandfathers. It is also intended to help you folks who enjoy collecting Western songs.

If you want to find the words to some cowboy song, write and tell us about it. We'll do our best to find it for you and publish it in the magazine. If you know any of the old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

We do not send out copies of songs to individual readers. All we can do is tell you in what issue of Wild West Weekly you will find the one you want.

Send all communications, with your name and address printed clearly, to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

PRETTY soon it's goin' tuh be summer, folks, an' yuh kin get out o' the hurly-burly o' city life an' throw yoreselves intuh some nice cool body o' water. That's the life! These hyar first days of spring, I cain't think of nothin' else but lazy days. The which ain't so good fer workin'. Somehow, nothin' seems worth the effort an' I can't—

Waal, let's git down tuh business. Tuh begin with, I'm going to give yuh a song that was sent in some time ago, by a reader, Mr. Alonzo Combs, of California. I've been tryin' tuh trace the song, but haven't been able tuh. If any of yuh folks have seen it anywhar, or if any of yuh know any other version of it, I'd sure like tuh hear about it. It's got

all the earmarks o' bein' a plumb ol'-timer.

Mr. Combs says as how his father sung the song tuh him many years ago, an' before he died, told him the followin' story about how he got it in these same words. Leastwise, they're as near the same as Mr. Combs can remember 'em after all the time thet's passed.

"I was gambling one night in the early spring, in the year of 1893. I was gambling in a kind of a saloon, in a log camp about ten miles north of Fort Smith, Arkansas. There were four men around the gambling table besides myself. The pot was big, over four thousand dollars laid on top of that table, and, of course, every man in the crowd sure wanted that money.

"I was about to deal out the cards, when the saloon door bust open and there in the doorway stood Cherokee Bill. I could see that he was drunk. He was singing 'De Ol' Man' when he came in, and he came right to the table where all of us were playing poker.

"All right, Cherokee, we don't need you here, so get away!" one of the men said—a man I'll call 'Black Hat' because he had one on. That wasn't his real name.

"Oh, you want to get hard, I see," says Bill.

"So before we knew what he was goin' to do, he jumped up on our card table.

"Come on, everybody, and I'll dance you a jig," he called to the men in the saloon.

"They came up to the table and Bill began to sing and dance. He sang 'De Ol' Man.' The card table fell over, and Bill fell with it. Bill got up off the floor and was halfway up when this feller Black Hat drew back and hit Bill a hefty wallop on the jaw.

"The blow knocked him down to the floor again. He sat there for about a minute. I could see murder in his eyes. So I picked up my money off the floor and I lifted Bill up, and I asked him to come with me, which he finally did after a long argument.

"You see, Bill and I had known each other for years. I had known him when he was just a little tot. He was still a kid, too, in my eyes. What happened that night was before he hit the owl-hoot trail, but that trouble was the beginning of that wild trail. Not long after that, Cherokee Bill killed Black Hat and went on the dodge.

"I want to go back and kill that guy," Bill said to me.

"Bill, would you write down that song for me?" I said.

"What song, Mitch?" asked Cherokee Bill.

"That song you were singing a few minutes ago," I told him. "The one about the old man."

"Oh, that song. Sure, I'll write it for you!"

"I thought that if I could get his mind on something else, he'd forget the trouble. So we went to my cabin, and I gave him some brown sack paper and a pen. And so he wrote the song for me. We were up all of that night, singing songs and having lots of fun.' He forgot about Black Hat—for a while, at least."

So that's the history of how Alonzo Combs got the song, an' hyar's

DE OL' MAN

Thar was an ol' man, who lived in de West.
Von-do, von-do.

Thar was an ol' man, who lived in de West.
He had a wife, she was none o' de best.

Come, a labing, sabing, cramp, bab,
vabing,

Rollemeing, rollemeing, crease, and a clang,
clue.

Now, this ol' man did not know how ter
punch cows,

Von-do, von-do.

Now, this ol' man did not know how ter
punch cows,

So he had his ol' wife ter show him how.

Come, a labing, sabin, cramp, bab,
vabin,

Rolleming, rolleming, crease, and a clang,
clue.

Now this ol' man came in from punching
cows,

Von-do, von-do.

Now this ol' man came in from punching
cows,

And he said ter his ol' wife, "Is breakfast
now?"

Come, a labing, sabin, cramp, bab,
vabin,

Rolleming, rolleming, crease, and a clang,
clue.

"Thar, a little bit o' bread, up on de shelf,
Von-do, von-do.

Thar, a little bit o' bread, up on de shelf;

If yuh want any more go cook it yoreself."

Come, a labing, sabin, cramp, bab,
vabin,

Rolleming, rolleming, crease, and a clang,
clue.

He got his whip down from de crack,
Von-do, von-do.

He got his whip down from de crack,

And he made dat whip go *ricked-whack!*

As he brought it down on his ol' wife's back.

Come, a labing, sabin, cramp, bab,
vabin,

Rolleming, rolleming, crease, and a clang,
clue.

"I'll tell yore mother and all o' yore kins,
Von-do, von-do.

I'll tell yore mother and all o' yore kins,

Thet I am jest t'aring up my sheepskins."

Come, a labing, sabin, cramp, bab,
vabin,

Rolleming, rolleming, crease, and a clang,
clue.

Thet funny, meanin'less chorus
makes it a play song, I reckon, folks.
I'm sorry no tune came with the
song, but mebbe some of yuh know
it. Anyway, I reckon yuh join me
in thankin' Mr. Combs fer sendin' it
in along with the story of how his
pa got it.

An' now tuh finish off the day,
hyar's a song thet's always a favor-
ite with you folks, an' thet I never
stop gittin' inquiries for:

THE GAMBLER'S BALLAD

I've got no use for the women,
A true one may never be found.
They want a man for his money;
When it's gone, they'll turn him down.

They're all alike at the bottom,
Selfish and grasping for all.
They'll stick to a man when he's winning.
And laugh in his face at his fall.

My pal was a straight young puncher,
Honest and upright and square,
Till he turned to a gunman and gambler;
But a woman sent him there.

Swift and sure his gun play,
Till his heart in his body lay dead.
When a rascal insulted her picture,
He filled him full of lead.

All night in the darkness they trailed him
Through mesquite and chaparral.
And I couldn't but think of the woman,
When I saw him pitch and fall.

If she'd been the pal she should've,
He might have been rearing a son,
Instead of out there on the prairie,
To be falling by a Ranger's gun.

The cowboy was fatally wounded;
His chances for life were too slim.
Where they were putting his body
Was all that worried him.

He raised his head on his elbow,
And the blood from his wound flowed red.
He looked at his pals grouped about him,
And whispered to them and said:

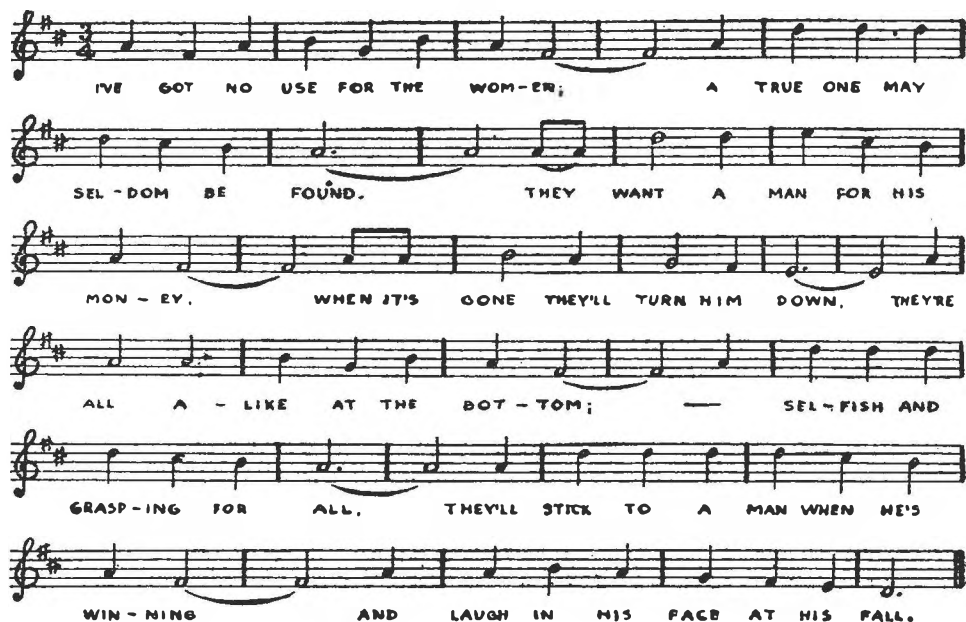
"Oh, bury me out on the prairie,
Where the coyotes may howl o'er my
grave,
And cover me over with boulders,
That some of my bones be saved.

"Wrap me up in my blankets
And bury me deep 'neath the ground,
And cover me over with boulders
Of granite so huge and round."

They buried him out on the prairie,
And the coyotes may howl o'er his grave;
But his soul is at rest with its Giver
From the unkind cut that she gavo.

And many a similar puncher,
As he rides by that pile of stones,
Recalls some similar woman
And is glad that it's not his bones.

This here's the tune fer it, folks!
An' I reckon it's all we got time fer,
this week. So long an' good luck!



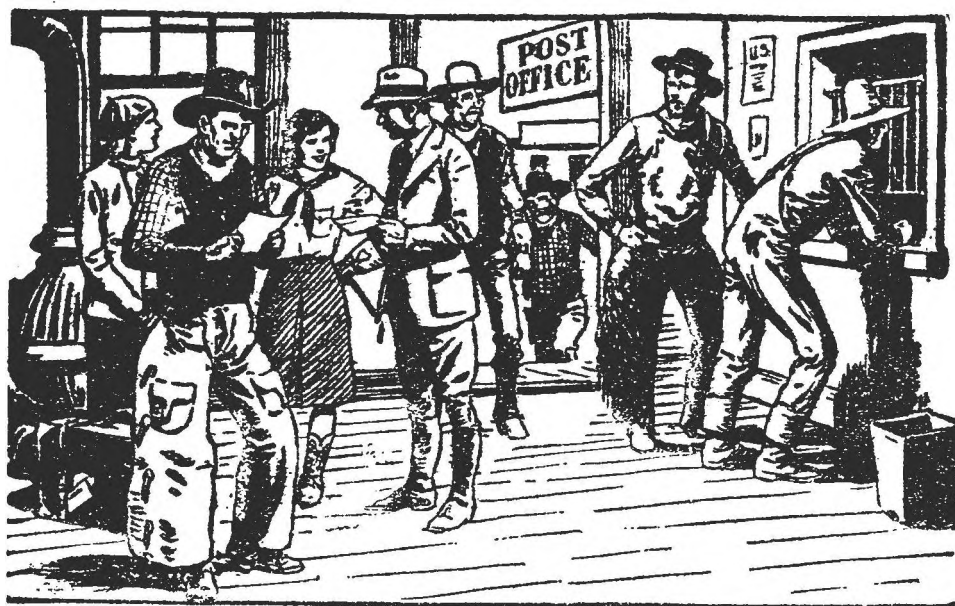
IVE GOT NO USE FOR THE WOM-EN; A TRUE ONE MAY
SEL-DOM BE FOUND. THEY WANT A MAN FOR HIS
MON- EY. WHEN IT'S GONE THEY'LL TURN HIM DOWN. THEYRE
ALL A - LIKE AT THE BOT-TOM; — SEL-FISH AND
GRASP-ING FOR ALL. THEY'LL STICK TO A MAN WHEN HE'S
WIN-NING AND LAUGH IN HIS FACE AT HIS FALL.

Don't Miss Next Week's 3W!

A hard-ridin', straight-shootin' posse gits on Sonny Tabor's trail an' chases him plumb across the border inter ol' Mexico. 'Tain't often that thet badly wanted young outlaw has ter leave Arizona. But he does, an' tangles with a bunch o' crooks an' a troop o' rurales. Things git so hot thet his ol' stampin' grounds seem plumb peaceful. Read all about it, next week, in

Sonny Tabor's Trail To Sonora

By WARD M. STEVENS



Western Pen Pals

Conducted by SAM WILLS—Postmaster

Some day you're going out West yourself to the Western outdoors. It will be a nice thing to have friends out West when that time comes—friends who'll extend a hand o' welcome and put you onto things.

You can make these friends through this department of Wild West Weekly. The idea is to exchange information about different parts of the West—about ranches and camps, getting work, prospecting, and learning to rope and ride.

Letters are exchanged only between men and men, and between women and women. Let's get together and make this department a real help to readers of Wild West Weekly. I'll do my part by forwarding letters between parties likely to be interested in writing to one another. You do yours by always printing your whole name and address carefully on every letter you send to this department; and by giving the name and State of the Pen Pal you choose, as it appears in the magazine, as well as the date of the magazine in which you find him or her.

Address your letters to Sam Wills, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

I RECKON I better pitch right in with the letters, because thar's so many this week that I kin hardly find room enough tuh print 'em all. So, hyar they are:

FOR SONG LOVERS AN' COLLECTORS

Prob'ly the most interestin' sec-

tion o' this department an' sure tuh find favor with everybody.

DEAR SAM: I am an old acquaintance of yours and while you helped me to a few fine Pen Pals, I wish to get some more. I hope girls around twelve—which is my own age—from the West, Canada, and foreign countries will write soon. I am interested in music and, especially, in stamp collecting. DOT D., OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

DEAR SAM: I would like you to print this request, because I hope to get Pen Pals in the West and in foreign countries. I am a boy whose greatest pastime is collecting coins and pictures of movie actors.

EDDIE J., OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, ten years old, confined in bed most of the time on account of heart trouble. I would appreciate it a lot if you could find some Pen Pals for me in the West with whom I could exchange snaps and letters.

J. R. A., OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of ten. My greatest pleasure is to play at cowboy, even though I only have toy guns instead of real ones. My hobby is playing the guitar to accompany my singing and, of course, I prefer cowboy songs. I would like to get Pen Pals with whom I could exchange songs.

JOHN EA., OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a high-school boy, greatly interested in cowboy songs, and I wish you would try to get me some Pen Pals who are following a similar bent. I am eighteen years old.

HAROLD M., OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fifteen. My great hobby is collecting songs and snapshots, and I would like Pen Pals who have the same interests.

DOR A., OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: Will you please try to get some cowgirls to write to me? I like nothing better than to exchange letters and, if desired, I can give any one who writes hints on tap dancing and acrobatic stunts. Everybody, please write.

ROSE D., OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am a young fellow of nineteen, and I am desirous of getting in touch with some prospector out West for information. Being a collector of songs, I would be glad to send to my Pen Pal any cowboy song or mountain ballad wanted, provided I have it in my collection.

ROBERT NOLDER, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl, nineteen years old, interested in songs and music, playing the piano, violin, and concertina. Yet I am an outdoor girl, and ranch life is what I wish to hear about, so please get some Western Pen Pals for me.

TRUE-BLUE RUTH, OF ILLINOIS.

FROM FAR AWAY

If yuh like tuh hear about foreign countries and the people thar, hyar's yore chance tuh make acquaintances.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man of twenty-two. I have worked in a mine for four years, but I am very anxious to find an occupation in the open. Would be very glad to hear from Pen Pals anywhere, especially with information as to working possibilities around the districts where they live.

JACK STONE, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: I am wondering if you could possibly find some Pen Pals for me, especially in New York. I am a young fellow of nineteen, interested in all sports as well as in music and movies. Would enjoy greatly to exchange news and views with boys of about my own age.

JOE BELL, OF IRELAND.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonely boy of fifteen, and I would like to get some Pen Pals from Western U. S. A. as well as anywhere else in the world.

F. RAYMENT, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of nineteen, and I am hankering after Pen Pals of about my own age, especially among cowgirls. I would appreciate it greatly if you would contact me with some ranch girls.

MISS YATES, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonely young soldier of twenty who is greatly interested in the West, and for that reason would like to find some Pen Pals there, although I am ready to answer any one who writes and will exchange snaps.

SWADDY, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: May I also try to get some Pen Pals through your good offices? I am a boy, nineteen years old, and I would like to hear from fellows of my own age, especially those who are interested in outdoor sports and dramatics.

WM. MCKELL, OF SCOTLAND.

LONESOME AN' BLUE

If yuh can realize what it means tuh feel forsaken, I'm sure yuh will hasten an' write a word o' cheer in answer tuh these pleas.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of seventeen, very lonesome, as I moved away from the large city into the country. I am interested in horseback riding and especially military science, having spent three years in a military school where I finished as cadet-major. I would like to hear from Pen Pals anywhere.

CADET-MAJOR, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonely girl of thirteen. I should like to get a lot of Pen Pals of my own age, no matter where, although I hope some Western girls will write. I am fond of outdoor sports, and I also sing and yodel. Western songs are my preferred choice.

VERA P., OF VERMONT.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fifteen with lots of time on my hands, and therefore often very lonesome. I like to write letters and feel that I have many things to write about. So I only hope that there will be many boys to answer this plea. I especially wish to hear from California, Texas, and Montana, and I promise to answer all letters.

RAYMOND L., OF CONNECTICUT.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonesome boy of fifteen, living on a farm where there is little to excite interest. Please get some Pen Pals to write to me, and I promise to answer them promptly and also exchange snaps.

WALTER MIREK, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonely girl of sixteen, and I would like to get in touch with some Pen Pals, especially Western girls, because I am greatly interested in that part of the country. I am fond of sports, but writing letters is my favorite, and I am anxious to start.

VIRGINIA SIMPSON, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: Please accept me as a Pen Pal, because I am very lonely, and I hope that in exchanging letters I will find a comforting pastime. I am a man, thirty-four years old, but I do not put any age limit upon my correspondents.

CARL F., OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I am a very lonesome young man, and I am wondering if you will help to drive the blues away from me. I have traveled quite extensively around the world, so that I have many subjects to write about. The principal thing is that I get Pen Pals soon.

ELI LUX, OF WASHINGTON.

DEAR SAM: I am a very lonesome girl, sixteen years old. My hobbies are dancing, swimming, and the movies, although I am also fond of writing and receiving letters. Please get some girls to write to me soon, and you may tell them that I shall answer all letters and exchange snaps.

LILLIAN BAITY, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

WESTERNERS WANTED

How about it, gals an' boys o' the West? Will yuh put these tenderfeet wise tuh the ways o' the West?

DEAR SAM: I have read about Pen Pals, and now I would like to know whether you could possibly bring me in touch with cowgirls, real ones—tough, shall I say, but intelligent. I am interested in the West and am anxious to learn more about it, especially ranch life in all its aspects. I am a girl, sixteen years old, and promise to be a real Pal to any cowgirl who accepts me as such. Snaps will be exchanged.

IRENE A., OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of nineteen, on the lookout for Pen Pals on ranches in the West. My reason is the desire to get as much as possible information about working conditions, because I have no greater wish than to locate some day in some one of the Western States—Colorado, Arizona, and Utah preferred.

C. R. BOLD, OF MISSISSIPPI.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl, eighteen years old, and I am desirous of having some Pen Pals in the Western States like Texas, Wyoming, New Mexico, and Montana. I am interested in songs, Western as well as hill-billy, and will be glad to exchange with others. Please, Pen Pals, write soon, and I promise to answer promptly and also exchange snaps.

HELEN STR., OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of seventeen, fond of outdoor life, and therefore a great admirer of the West. Please procure some Western Pen Pals for me, possibly some who are interested in songs, of which I have a fair collection, as I play the guitar and sing. Ranch girls are especially invited to write.

GENEVA K., OF MINNESOTA.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man of twenty-three, an ardent admirer of the W. W. W. My great hobby is radio, but I also enjoy all kinds of outdoor sports. Sometime, soon or late, I intend to make a trip through the Northwest, and I would appreciate it a lot if you would try to interest some Western fellows to the extent of writing to me.

TEX R., OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, sixteen years old, fond of sports and greatly interested in anything that has to do with the West. For this reason, I ask you to be good enough to get some Western boys as my Pen Pals. I will gladly answer all letters.

BELODEAU, OF MAINE.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl, sixteen years old, in search of Pen Pals. I am especially interested in hearing from Westerners—girls living in Texas or Arizona. I hope quite a few will answer this plea. Will exchange snaps if desired.

VIVIAN M., OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fifteen, fond of outdoor sports, especially horseback riding and swimming. I desire greatly to learn more about the West, and I would appreciate it greatly if you would put me in touch with Pen Pals in Western States—Texas and Arizona preferred.

NANCY LEE M., OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, seventeen years

DEAR SAM: Please get me some Pen Pals, especially from the West. I am a boy, thirteen years old.

ROBERT R., OF ALABAMA.

DEAR SAM: Here is a fifteen-year-old boy who desires to get in touch with some cowboys in Texas, Wyoming, and Montana. Will answer all letters, because I like to write.

M. CH., OF UTAH.

DEAR SAM: Please secure some Pen Pals for this seventeen-year-old girl, willing to exchange snaps and info with any one who writes, especially ranch girls and Southerners. The first writer will receive a picture of me with my guitar.

HAZEL SCH., OF MINNESOTA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, fifteen years old, eager for some Pen Pals in Utah or other far Western States. Will gladly exchange information and photos with any one, however.

RICHARD SUMNER, OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of eighteen and, as I intend to go West some day, I wish you would get some Pen Pals for me either in Arizona or New Mexico.

LILAH L., OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: I wish you would get some boys living on ranches or large farms out West to write to me. I am a farm boy, myself, sixteen years old.

HOWARD NEGLEY, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am a man, sixty-two years old. For about fifty years, I have made my home in the Northwest, so that I can tell a lot about conditions there, as they were and as they are now. Will gladly answer any one who writes.

FREMONT AUSTIN, OF OREGON.

DEAR SAM: I am an iron worker, thirty-five years old. I have worked on some of the best-known skyscrapers and have traveled a lot, so that I have many interesting things to tell. I would like to have Pen Pals of my own age, anywhere.

GEO. KISSLER, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am a lad of nineteen, greatly interested in the Pen Pal idea, because it offers the chance to hear from all parts of the world. I would be glad indeed if fellows anywhere would respond to this request. I also hope that there will be some Westerners among them.

OBAL EVANS, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: Please accept my plea for a true buddy, anywhere in the world. I support my mother and spend most of my evenings at home to keep her company, so that I have few friends near me. Yet I would prove a true Pal to any one who seeks understanding friendship, and I hope some fellows around twenty-four years old—which is my own age—will answer this plea.

JAMES GLUSAK, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: We are two girl friends, fifteen and seventeen years old, desirous of obtaining Pen Pals through you, anywhere in the world, no matter how old they may be. We like sports and the movies, promise to answer promptly and exchange snapshots, whenever it is desired. We also offer information about our Southern States.

BETTY AND BLONDIE, OF ALABAMA.

DEAR SAM: I would indeed be happy if you would accept me as a new member within the list of Pen Pals. I am a young man, sixteen years of age, and I wish to correspond with some one near my own age, preferably in Canada or the Canal Zone, although I promise to answer all letters received. I am fond of all sports and like to write on that subject.

JESSE TOM, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: Please allow me to present my plea for Pen Pals. I am a boy, fourteen years old, and I would like to hear from boys of that age, anywhere in the world. Any one who desires information about the part of my State I live in, may write, and I shall not disappoint him.

DAN TOMLINSON, OF TEXAS.

That's the lot, an' I dare say it's a fine collection. I did my part toward makin' new frien'ships. Now yuh do yores, an' don't delay writin'.



The Wranglers Corner

All letters intended for The Wranglers Corner should be addressed to The Range Boss, Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

I TELL yuh, gents," says Calamity Boggs, at this week's meetin' o' the 3W waddies at the Wranglers Corner, "thet I ain't agoin' to last out the meetin'. I'm agoin' to die horrible. Somethin' I ate on the way up here is pizenin' me. I kin feel——"

"Gosh, that's too bad, cowboy!" speaks up Solo Strant, better known as the Silver Kid. "Is there anythin' I kin do fer yuh?"

"Aw, don't pay no 'tention ter thet danged gloomy cuss!" snaps Calamity's pard, Shorty Stevens. "There ain't nothin' the matter with him."

The Silver Kid looks plumb bewildered—as if he don't think thet's no way fer a waddy's pard ter be talkin'. An' it ain't till then thet we remembers thet the Kid ain't never met Calamity afore ter-night. He don't know thet the big curly-

haired puncher has earned his nickname by allus wailin' an' moanin'.

But it don't take him long ter catch on. Fer Calamity keeps on in his usual way, till even a teetotal stranger would know thet he was jest talkin'.

Then the Kid gits jawin' with the gang from Circle J, an' the two Shorties—Stevens an' Masters—start chinnin', too. Thet leaves Shorty Master's pard, the Sonora Kid, talkin' with Calamity Boggs.

As we sorts the mail, we hears Calamity wailin' about a cut on his finger thet he's shore is goin' ter fester, give him blood-pizenin' an' finally shore enough kill him.

But even if it is a lot o' fun ter set there listenin' ter all the misfortunes thet Calamity kin think up, there's business ter 'tend ter. So we raps fer order an' hauls out the first letter. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have a few complaints to make. I have read W. W. W. for more than five years. In fact, I figure eight years would be nearer right. I have never been able to remember the exact date I started.

But I know that I bought my first one by mistake. I read it anyway, and liked it so much that I never stopped buying it. It is splendid, the characters so real that one feels he actually knows them.

But here is what I want to complain about. What has become of Blondy of Twin Bells? Is he completely lost out there in the Lost Prospector Hills? Or has Roy Adams sold out and vanished?

Also, where are Vineente, that splendid Indian, and Alf Chase his pard, and Lum Yates, Zeke Olroyd, and Spot Herndon? Your readers loved those characters, they had become part of 3W. Please bring them back.

I must admit that I have no favorites among the rest of your waddies. I like them all. But I am glad that you leave women and girls out of your stories. That may sound funny, coming from a woman, but I really believe that 3W is a better magazine without any love interest in the stories.

Well, best wishes for the continued success of 3W. Here's hoping that you pay some attention to this letter and to the letters of those other readers who, like me, beg you to bring back their old favorites.

Very truly,

THE MISSUS.

Richmond, Virginia.

We shore hate ter hurt anybody's feelin's by droppin' out any o' their favorites. But mebbe there's a hull lot more folks who wanted us ter drop Lum an' Blondy an' some others than there are those who want us ter bring 'em back. Certainly, the mail gave us thet idea, a while back.

It's the old story o' not bein' able ter please everybody. We wish we could, an' thet's a fact. But we jest have ter go by the overwhelmin' lot o' letters from yuh readin' hombres.

Fer instance, if we git several hundred—mebbe thousand—letters sayin' thet a certain waddy ain't so popular no more, an' a few scatterin'

ones sayin' thet he's the best danged rannihan thet ever forked a bronc, we has ter believe the several hundred—or thousand. What else kin we do?

Waal, let's git on with the mail an' see what we got, this week. Here's one:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I am a reader of the W. W. W. and like it very much, although I am only thirteen years old. I buy the 3W as often as possible. Here's the way your characters rate with me:

Sonny Taboꝛ, the Whistlin' Kid, Bud Jones, Hungry and Rusty, Circle J, the Bar U twins, Kid Wolf, and Shorty Masters. I believe that Kid Wolf would rate higher if it wasn't for his voice. The only hombre I have ever heard talk that way is Stepin Fetchit in the movies.

By the way, please have a lot more stories about Señor Red Mask.

Don't mind about anybody who doesn't like your stories or waddies. Just keep your spread as it is, and you'll be all right.

Yours till Joe Scott and Buck Foster make up,

GORDON CASTOR.

Fairport, New York.

Here's the next:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading 3W for quite a while and like it better than any other magazine on the stands.

Although I am a girl, I don't like the idea of having girls in your stories. I suppose I am unusual in that, but just the same, I don't like girls in stories.

As for my favorites, I like Kid Wolf, Señor Red Mask, the Whistlin' Kid, and Circle J. Or perhaps I really haven't any special favorites. I seem to like them all.

When it comes to scrapping, Buck Foster and Joe Scott seem to be a little too hot-headed.

In a recent issue, I read one letter that sure sent me on the prod. It said something about "a lot of silly women." Well, all I've got to say to that hombre is that there are plenty of women who are not silly. Some of them have a whole lot more brains than some men I could mention.

I hope this letter gets into print. If it doesn't, I'll know that all the other letters are fakes.

Yours till Buck and Joe cool off,

JUST A GAL.

Minneapolis, Minnesota.

It just don't sem that we'll ever git rid o' thet gal-no-gal argument. Nearly every readin' hombre—or—gal—has got somethin' ter say about it.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my second letter to the Wranglers Corner, and as my first one was not printed, I hope that this one has better luck.

I agree with the reading hombres who say that girls should be left out of 3W. This is a real he-man's magazine and shouldn't have any romance in it.

I have just thought of a good idea for you, Boss. Why not have a cowboy's vocabulary in 3W? I think this would make a big hit with your readers. You could print a part of it each week—maybe half a page, or something like that—until you had printed it all. I am sure that there are plenty of people who don't know the meaning of many cowboy words and who would sure appreciate the vocabulary.

I think that all your characters are swell, and I don't have any particular favorites. But here are the ones that come first on my list: the Whistlin' Kid, the Silver Kid, the Shootin' Fool, the Bar U twins, Circle J, Cougar Fang, Jimmy Quick, Steve Hardy, the Sonora Kid, Shorty Masters, and last but not least, Tex Carnochen.

Why don't you print more stories about Tex? He was one of the best waddies ever in 3W.

The rest of your bunch are all O. K., except those two drug-store cowboys, Hungry and Rusty.

I'd better be signing off now. Yours till Buck Foster discards thet hunk of moth-eaten lamb's wool that he calls a bearskin vest,
CHARLES WEAVER.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

"By heifers," snorts Buck, as he hears the endin' ter thet letter, "thet am an insult! Who am thet jasper? I'll be a horned toad if I don't—"

"Aw, pipe down, horse-face!" jeers Joe Scott. "Yo're jest sore 'cause thet hombre—who's a plumb smart gent, I figure—has called yore bluff. Yuh knows thet vest is sheepskin, so why—"

They're off, an' fer a good ten minutes nobody kin make hisself heard at the Corner. But whilst the

ruckus is goin' on, we thinks over Charley Weaver's suggestion about a cowboy vocabulary fer 3W.

It seems ter us like a pretty good stunt. Howsomever, we'd like ter git the ideas o' the readin' hombres. So set down an' write us what yuh think o' the scheme.

As soon as Buck an' Joe has calmed down enough, we draws out another letter an' starts readin' it. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Will you please put more stories about Sonny Tabor, the outlaw, in your magazine? He is one of the best outlaws I have ever read about, aside from Billy the Kid.

I am going to give you my list of favorites—in order. Here they are: Sonny Tabor, the Oklahoma Kid, Buck Foster, Joe Scott, Smoky Langdon, Hungry and Rusty, Bud Jones, Jim Hazel, Lum Yates, and Johnny Forty-five.

You ought to get Sonny Tabor to shoot Billy West. That jigger is the biggest sissy on your spread.

George Krumm—how I hate that cowardly Terror of Evildoers!

Throw the Whistlin' Kid to the rattlesnakes!

Yours till Sonny Tabor gets hanged,

LOUIS KLANDER.

Houston, Texas.

We looks over at Billy as we reads thet. Fer a minute, the young boss o' Circle J looks a bit uncomfortable, then he starts grinnin'. He's been a rider on the 3W spread long enough ter know thet fer every letter callin' him names, there's plenty sayin' he's swell.

But Louis Kandler will be glad ter know that his favorite waddy, Sonny Tabor, will be back next week. There's a brand-new story about him by Ward M. Stevens. His pitcher's on the cover, too. The title is "Sonny Tabor's Trail To Sonora," and it shore is a humdinger. None o' Sonny's pards want ter miss it.

An' speakin' o' pitchers, this week ends the series o' three coupons fer the pitcher o' the Circle J pards. Next week, coupons start appearin' fer a pitcher o' Kid Wolf. All the readin' hombres who like the Soldier o' Misfortune want ter be shore ter git this pitcher. It's swell, bein' a plumb good likeness o' the Kid an' his white hoss, Blizzard.

Now, there's jest about time fer one more letter. So let's git at it, an' see what it has ter say:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading 3W for quite a while, and I think it is the best magazine on the stands.

Like everybody else, I have my favorites—the Circle J pards, Hungry and Rusty, Johnny Forty-five, the Bar U twins, Jimmy Quick, and Shorty Masters and Willie. The rest are O. K., but I like these best.

Why don't you print stories about Cir-

cle J every week? Buck Foster is a real he-man, and I want to read more about him. I'd like to buy that bearskin vest of his, if he ever gets a new one.

Billy West is O. K. There never was a better boss than he is.

I haven't much to say about Joe Scott. He is always picking on my pard, Buck Foster.

Yours till Sing Lo puts gopher poison in Joe's grub,
ANITA MAE CHAPMAN.

Cotulla, Texas.

"Cotulla, eh?" says Shorty Masters. "I wonder if she knows the Shootin' Fool. Thet's where he hails from, ain't it?"

We nods. But there ain't a bit o' time left. It's time ter call it another week. So pretty soon, the waddies are all high-tailin' it away, an' the Corner's closed up till next week.
THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

SONNY TABOR'S TRAIL TO SONORA

Novelette

By WARD M. STEVENS

A sheriff's posse make things so hot fer the Southwest's most "wanted" outlaw that he crosses the border inter Mexico—an' finds things jest as hot south o' the line.

POWDER-SMOKE JUSTICE

Novelette

By PAUL S. POWERS

A fightin' waddy escapes from jail, where he's been sent on a framed-up charge, an' right away starts lookin' fer the hombres who sent him there. He finds 'em, an' thet's when the gun smoke starts liftin'.

BULLWHIP ADAMS'S GOLD STAMPEDE

Novelette

By GEORGE C. HENDERSON

When Bullwhip starts out ter help a few prospectors who have struck it rich, he doesn't figure on havin' ter fight, too. But he does—an' the ruckus is shore somethin' ter see.

Also stories of the Whistlin' Kid, by Emery Jackson; the Bar U twins, by Charles E. Barnes—and other characters.

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