

EVERY "BOY SCOUT" SHOULD READ THIS

AMERICAN WEEKLY INDIAN

BY COLONEL SPENCER DAIR

TRACKED TO HIS LAIR



"OF A SUDDEN, A WHITE SPECTRE
DASHED OUT ONTO THE PLAINS"

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INDIAN

BY COLONEL FELMER DAVIS

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THE PURSUIT OF THE MIDNIGHT HARBOR

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VOL. I

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TRACKED TO HIS LAIR

OR

The Pursuit of the Midnight Raider

By COL. SPENCER DAIR

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS.

THE MIDNIGHT RAIDER—A daredevil Indian chief, known as Scalping Louie, who breaks from the Indian reservation and proceeds to steal cattle and burn houses, being finally brought to his well-deserved end by a cowboy who has the assistance of an aged scout.

SAM BOWSER—Owner of the Double Cross ranch, in Arizona, who is roused from bed by an eerie cry, finds a spectre hovering over his cattle corral and while he is quieting his cowboys, sees his cattle stampeded by the apparition. Starting in pursuit, he trails one bunch of cattle to a dangerous swamp in which he comes near losing his life by being sucked into a mud hole, then is nearly burned to death in a fire set to drive out the Midnight Raider and finally has the satisfaction of seeing one of his cow-punchers send the miscreant to his doom.

SARAH BOWSER—His wife.

HENRY HAWKS—Owner of the Star and Moon ranch, whose buildings are burned by the renegade Indian chieftain. He joins with Bowser in the trailing of the raider to his lair.

AMY HAWKS—His wife.

DEADSHOT PETE—Cowboy on Double Cross ranch, who fires the bullet that ends the raider's life.

SANDY—Foreman on Double Cross ranch.

PINKY—Cowboy in the Double Cross outfit.

KI YI—Foreman on Star and Moon ranch, who helps Deadshot.

DUDE—Cowboy on Star and Moon ranch.

GROUCH—Cowboy on Star and Moon ranch.

SLIPPERY NIG—Half-breed scout, with a grievance against Scalping Louie, and is called by Deadshot to run him down.

CHAPTER I.

A MIDNIGHT ALARM.

"O-u-e-e!"

Piercing and shrill, from the tense stillness of the night sounded this eerie wail.

In terrified alarm, Sam Bowser rose in his bed to his elbow.

As he remained thus, trying to decide whether the awesome shriek was a cry of distress from some human being or was an imagining of his mind, his wife awoke.

"What was that?" she gasped, excitedly.

"You heard it, too?"

"I—I thought I heard something. It sounded like the

very soul being drawn from some woman. U-ugh! It makes me shiver to think of it."

"Well, there aren't any women nearer than thirty miles, except you, so it couldn't be that."

"But some one might be carrying a woman off or murdering her. Just because Amy Hawks is the nearest one we know of, doesn't make it so there mightn't be some poor creature being killed."

To this, the man made no response, and together they listened intently for a repetition of the awful wail.

"Guess it must have been some coyote got kicked while he was smelling round the cattle. This is the fi——"

But the words literally stuck in Bowser's mouth.

Again the shriek, bloodcurdling in its gruesomeness, rang out ere he could finish what he purposed to say.

This time there was no mistaking the cry.

It seemed to come from a woman in awful distress and to be close at hand.

"There's some mischief afoot!" exclaimed the man, as, heedless of his wife's protests, he leaped from his bed, seized his rifle and rushed to the door.

Yet, when he threw it open, there was nothing to be seen!

The silence and the darkness of the night were overwhelming—as only the silence and darkness of the plains of Arizona can be.

Sam Bowser was the owner of the Double Cross ranch. With no neighbors nearer than thirty miles, he and his wife, Sarah, lived in the home ranch house. This building faced the South. To the right, and some sixty feet distant, was the bunk-house, where the cowpunchers lived when not on the range. To the North and between the two houses was a horse corral. Directly back of this was a second corral for the cattle, so large that it seemed more like a big pasture enclosed by barbed wire than a yard.

Only the day before had Bowser's men driven the pick of his herds back to the home ranch in order that they might be shipped away to the great cattle markets of the Middle West.

Scarcely had the ranch owner opened the door than lights blazed in the bunkhouse, followed an instant later by the rush of the cowpunchers, as, guns in their hands, they crept cautiously from their shanty to learn the cause of the alarm.

"Steady, boys! Don't go to shooting up the country!" warned Bowser, running across the yard to join his men.

"What did you make of it, Sam?" demanded a tall, leathery cowpuncher, who served as foreman.

"You've got me, Sandy. The missus 'lows it's some woman being murdered."

"But there ain't any women round here," protested another of the men, who had been christened "Pinky" by his fellows because of his fondness for decorating his saddle and bridle with anything of the color.

"That's just what I told her," declared the ranchman, evidently glad to learn his opinion found support. "But she 'lowed that didn't make any difference, that one or a dozen could be brought here. I sort of had an idea it might have been a coyote."

"Wal, it warn't no coyote," drawled the third of the boys attached to the Double Cross outfit, who revelled in the title of Deadshot Pête. "I been on these plains too long not to know every tone and variation of the songs them sneaks sing."

"Then what was it?" demanded Sandy. "Seems to me, if it was some man or woman being done to death, they'd keep up more of a continuous yelling."

"Unless it's too late," commented Deadshot, significantly.

This suggestion that perhaps the gruesome wails which had roused them all from their sleep might have been the dying protests or appeals for help of some human being caused the men to become silent.

"Don't see how we can do any good so long as we don't hear the thing again to give us a definite idea of its direction," remarked the ranchman, after a period of several minutes peering into the darkness and listening had been productive of neither sight nor sound. "Guess we'd better get back to our bunks and wait till daylight."

"Reckon you're right, Sam," returned his foreman. "It's either too late, as Deadshot says, or we must hear it again so's we can get our bearings."

But neither the owner nor the outfit of the Double Cross was destined to get any more sleep that night!

While talking, the men had been looking toward the South.

Chancing to turn so that he was facing the cattle corral, Pinky suddenly uttered an exclamation of wild fear, then clutched Sandy by the arm, wheeling him about, as he pointed Northward with trembling hand.

Amazed at such action on the part of their bunkmate, the others followed his gaze.

Apparently floating through the air, directly above the cattle corral, was a white spectre!

CHAPTER II.

THE RAID.

"Ghosties!" gasped Sandy, in a voice scarcely above a whisper.

"No wonder we couldn't place it—but I knew it warn't no coyote," asserted Deadshot.

For several minutes the men gazed at the awesome thing as it flitted hither and thither.

"By the blood of my mother! But I'm glad the crittur never took it into its head to visit us on the range," breathed Pinky.

"Same here," chorused Sandy and Deadshot.

"It means trouble—you see if it doesn't," continued the latter. "The only other time I ever see anything like it was the night before the Piutes dashed down on old man Turner's ranch and killed all but me and a low-down gambler called Crooked Joe."

This assertion that the eerie spectre floating before their eyes was not the first one he had seen instantly claimed the ears of his companions, though they kept their gaze riveted on the apparition.

"What was *that* one like?" breathed Pinky.

"It was all lit up, like fire. The Piutes said it was a curse put out by their Medicine Man."

"But how'd you manage to get away from the Injuns and escape the massacre?" inquired Sandy, in whom Deadshot's tales of his experiences always aroused suspicion of their truthfulness.

"Me and Crooked Joe sloped as soon as the light in the sky was discovered. Mark my word, man dear, *every time you sees anything in the air like ghosties, it means trouble!*"

"Well, you aren't going to get out of it this time by digging out," broke in the ranch owner, who had been listening with increasing alarm to his cowpuncher's story, and feared the effect it might have upon the rest of his men. "I need you all to-morrow to get the bunch to the loading station. So don't think you can sneak off."

"We can't eh?" demanded Deadshot. "Who's a going to stop *me* if I want to go?"

"I am, with this rifle I've got in my hands," returned the owner of the ranch, calmly. "I don't want any trouble. But I won't stand for any of this nonsense about spirits, trouble and running away. If any one of you tries to get a pony from that corral to-night, I'll put a shell into him. Just keep that in your heads."

The unexpected turn of affairs had amazed the other cowboys, and, forgetting all about the spectre, they watched the ranchman and his helper.

"You kinder got the drop on me, Sam," growled the cowpuncher, "so I 'low I'll do just as you say. Besides, I didn't mean nothing anyhow."

"All right, Deadshot. No hard feelings. Let's go over to the cattle corral and see what this white thing is."

"What, go chasing a ghostie?" gasped Sandy, the very thought of any man daring to investigate an apparition seeming akin to sacrilege to his superstitious mind.

"Sure. Why not? It won't eat you."

"Well, *you* can go if you like. But I ain't particular," returned the foreman. "That ain't any part of my job."

The necessity for any one to go, however, was suddenly obviated.

With an abruptness that was in keeping with its coming, the spectre vanished.

"Skulls and crossbones! Did you see that? It just floated away and we looking straight at it!" moaned Sandy.

The uncanniness of the apparition's disappearance impressed even the ranch owner, and he was wondering as to the course he should pursue to reassure his men, when Pinky whispered:

"Let's go into the house before the blamed thing lights on us here!"

The thought that the mysterious spectre might appear face to face with them unnerved these men of the plains—men to whom danger in any tangible form was a delight—and they were on the point of dashing into their bunk-house in utter panic when they were recalled to their normal selves.

Simultaneously with the disappearance of the spectre came a pitching and swaying among the cattle, followed instantly by terrified bellowing and the wildest confusion.

"The ghosties cast a spell on the cattle!" whimpered Sandy.

"Didn't I say it meant trouble?" demanded Deadshot, exulting at the very evident fulfilment of his prophecy.

"Don't stand there talking! Get your ponies and come on! We've got our work cut out for us! What it means I don't know. But I *do* know if we don't steady those cattle down lively, they'll stampede—and then we'll have a merry time!" declared the ranchman, leading the way to the horse corral.

A moment, fearing that the animals had, indeed, been cursed, held the cowpunchers inactive. Then, their life-long training on the plains coming to the fore, they followed their employer and were soon racing to the terror-stricken cattle.

Their fear increasing with every moment, the animals were plunging and lowing, the crashing of their horns sounding like the barking of pistols above the dull roar of the pounding of their hoofs.

"There must be wolves in amongst 'em!" yelled Sandy, riding up close to Bowser. "It's breaking out all over the corral, not in just one place."

"Well, whatever it is, we've got to quiet the cattle, or I won't have one fit to ship away. Get busy, boys!"

But just as the ranchman finished speaking, Pinky let out a yell.

"Look, right in the middle of the corral! The ghostie again!" he cried.

Turning their eyes in the direction indicated, the horsemen beheld the same white form seemingly floating over the heads of the cattle.

"It must be the Old Nick himself!" moaned Sandy. "There'll be no quieting them critturs, Sam, with that thing hovering over them!"

Too well did the ranch owner realize this fact—and he also realized that unless he did something to remove the suggestion of the supernatural from the mysterious apparition, he would be unable to control either men or cattle.

Just what the thing was, he did not know. Yet, being a man of an unimaginative mind, he decided to find out.

Without saying a word of his intentions to his assistants, the owner of the Double Cross threw his rifle to his shoulder, took a hurried sight at the spectral form and pulled the trigger.

As the report rang out, the cowpunchers leaned forward in their saddles, watching the form intently.

To shoot at a ghost required more courage—in view of the traditions relating to ill-luck and curses such an act brought down upon the head of one so rash—than they possessed, and the cowboys fully expected some dire punishment to be instantly meted out to their boss.

For an intense moment, there was no apparent result from the bullet sent at the floating form.

Then a mocking laugh rent the air, and the white spectre vanished as completely as before!

"There's more human than spook to that voice!" exclaimed Bowser.

"Skulls and crossbones! I have it! It's a raid!" cried Sandy.

CHAPTER III.

THE RANCHMAN'S VOW.

The ranchman's assertion that the spectre was of human invention and their foreman's declaration that it was but a ruse to cover the raiding of the cattle, produced an instantaneous reaction upon the cowpunchers.

"By my saddle, you're right!" assented Deadshot. "That's what the trouble is. Somebody's trying to lift the cattle. I've seen 'em started on a stampede too many times not to recognize the symptoms. And here we've been afraid of a spook, giving the thieving cusses just the chance they planned. Say, Sam, I wouldn't blame you for sacking the whole kit and boodle of us!" he added, his shame and contrition evident in his voice.

"Don't waste time being sorry, get busy and help calm the cattle!" returned his employer. "You boys ride round 'em, and get 'em to milling, if you can. I want to keep my eyes open for another sight of Mr. Spook."

Deeply chagrined to think they had allowed such a trick to be played on them, for they realized that when the story got out, the Double Cross outfit would be the laughing stock of all the other cowmen in the region, the cowboys set about their work with a will.

But the job was too big for them!

Even before they had ridden fifty yards along the barbed wire fence, they learned that their efforts would prove fruitless.

With crashing of horns, snorting and bellowing, a bunch of the cattle dashed out onto the plains, the outlines of their bodies just visible as they plunged along.

As though this breaking away from the herd had been prearranged, other bunches raced away into the darkness.

"The fence has been cut! The fence has been cut!" roared Sandy, at the top of his lungs.

"There's no use trying to hold the critturs. Come on back to Sam and we'll find out what he wants us to do," returned Deadshot.

Aware that with the cattle dashing away in all points of the compass, it was an impossible task for them to hope to round them up or even to try to hold the ones that had not already gone, Pinky and Deadshot rode back with their foreman until they came to the ranch owner.

"What's to do?" asked Pinky, after the fact that the barbed wire fence had been cut in several places had been reported to Bowser.

"Lay for Mr. Spook!" snapped the owner of the Double Cross. "I'll give any one of you a thousand dollars for his dead body! We'll each of us take one side of the corral and patrol it."

"But we haven't got our rifles, only our six shooters," interrupted Deadshot.

"Then ride for all your worth to the bunkhouse and

get them! While you're there, just tell the missus what's up. Then hurry back. And say, bring some torches." he shouted, as the thought that lights might prove useful came to him, for his man was already racing for the guns.

"That's some trick," muttered Sandy, while they waited. "Wonder was there more than one of 'em?"

"Sure," asserted Pinky. "There was probably three or four of 'em working on the fence, cutting the wires, while the other played ghostie!"

This opinion of the numerical strength of the Midnight Raiders, which found ready acceptance from Bowser and Sandy, was later to be proved false, however!

They were destined to learn that the daredevil cattle thief was a lone man!

"That being the case, aren't we wasting time trying for a shot at them?" demanded the foreman. "They probably made their getaway along with that first bunch of cattle."

"Maybe you're right, Sandy," assented the ranchman. "But I've got a sort of hunch that spook will show himself once more."

And the owner of the Double Cross was right—though the method chosen by the spectral raider to disclose his whereabouts was different from that which Bowser expected!

Lingering at the houses only long enough to make a hurried report to the ranchman's wife and then to get the rifles and torches, Deadshot was soon back with his companions.

"Here, everybody take a torch and hurry to your posts," ordered Bowser, as his man rode up. "Sandy, you go to the West side; Pinky to the North; Deadshot to the East, and I'll take the South. Keep your eyes peeled—and remember the thousand dollars!"

Even as he spoke, the ranchman touched a match to his torch and when the flame flared up, it threw the four men into bold relief.

"How long shall we patrol?" asked Deadshot.

"Till I wave my torch in the air. Then ride to the house. We'll get some grub and pick up the trail as soon as it gets daylight."

Before any of the quartet could take up the task of patrolling the cut fence, however, the cattle thief made himself known.

Bang! boomed a gun from the North.

In amazement, the cowboys wheeled.

And even as they did, a bullet whistled through the air, carrying the sombrero from Bowser's head.

"Douse the torches! It gives 'em a line on us!" cried Deadshot in alarm, lest a second shell might find its man.

No urging did the ranch owner or any of his men need to make them obey. The shot had been too well aimed and had come too close to its mark for them to care to make targets of themselves for gunmen who could show such skill at night.

But, as they hurled the torches to the ground, the ranchman rose in his stirrups.

"You may have the drop on me now!" he roared, shaking his fist in wrathful impotence in the direction whence the shot had come. "But just wait! *Nobody can steal Sam Bowser's cattle, scare his men, shoot at him and get away with it!*

"*So long as there is a breath of life in my body, I'll trail you—and I'll run you to your lair, mark my word!*"

The tone in which the owner of the Double Cross spoke, the dim outline of his tall figure as he swayed in his saddle, his arm beating the air in his fury, as he vowed revenge against the miscreants who had stampeded his cattle and tried to murder him, afforded an effect dramatic in the extreme.

Yet, scarcely had the last words left his lips than again a gun barked and a bullet "pinged" viciously as it sailed over his head!

"Man, dear, but this is *too much!*" hissed the ranchman. "After them, boys!"

"*We'll hit their trail and stay on it till the last skulking coyote of 'em is furnishing food for the vultures!*"

CHAPTER IV.

PREPARATIONS FOR PURSUIT.

As the cowboys, who knew him so well, heard the grim words uttered by the doughty ranchman, they realized that he would keep his vow of trailing the cattle thieves until he had, indeed, run them to their lair.

"We're with you, Sam," declared the foreman.

"That's what!" chorused the other cowpunchers, while Deadshot added: "There can't no bunch of cowlifters say they fooled Deadshot Pete—and got away with it!"

"But as I was, a going to say," continued Sandy, "it strikes me we ought to round up the cattle and get 'em back before we start out."

"**And let those sneaks get away while we're doing it?**" snapped the owner of the Double Cross. "I'd rather get *them* than all the cattle on my ranch!"

"That's all right, Sam. I know how you feel; that is, I know how I'd feel in your place. But they can't get away. We'll trail 'em from Old Mex to Canada—if we have to. A few hours' start won't do 'em any good, consequently. So I say, what's the use of letting the cattle run wild?"

Already the animals which still remained inside the raided corral were beginning to quiet down, the cause of their disturbance having been removed, and the reasoning of the foreman, therefore, was sound.

"Reckon Sandy's right," opined Pinky. "The critturs won't run very far on such a night, and unless there are enough of the devils to follow each bunch, daylight won't find 'em more'n a mile or so from home."

Several minutes the ranchman sat pondering, vouchsafing no reply, while his men anxiously awaited any

word or movement that would indicate their boss's intentions.

"That's horse sense, I suppose," he exclaimed, at last. "But I hate to let the skulks think I care more for my cattle than for getting the first opportunity to pump them full of lead."

"But ain't it more businesslike to get both the cattle and them?" inquired Sandy.

"It ain't only the business end of it—it's the effect it will have on any other thieves who might take a flier at cutting out your critturs, that you've got to think of, Sam," declared Deadshot.

"If you hit the trail without rounding up the cattle, so many cowlifters would strike for the Double Cross there wouldn't be room for 'em on the home ranch. They'd argue as how you couldn't chase 'em all and so some of 'em would be able to drive off a bunch of critturs—and for the value of the cattle they'd be willing to risk pursuit. On the other hand, if you *first* round up the cattle and *then* the cowlifters, getting both of them, there won't a dirty greaser nor a renegade buck dare to lift a finger against the Double Cross outfit."

Though this argument was crude and expressed in a roundabout way, its meaning was perfectly clear.

"There's no getting away from the fact that your reasoning is sound, Deadshot," responded Bowser. "So we'll wait till daylight and then round up the cattle." Though his reluctance to abandon immediate pursuit was evidenced by his next words, as he added: "But I do hate to let a man take a shot at me—let alone two—without sending at least one shell in return."

"If that's all what's worrying you, cheer up," rejoined Pinky. "You seem to be forgetting it was you who started the game by taking a pot at the spook, when it was floating around."

"That's so. I didn't think of that," returned the owner of the Double Cross. And from the tone of his voice, his men understood that the memory had appreciably tempered his regret at being obliged to await the coming of day before picking up the trail.

Quieter and quieter were the cattle in the raided corral becoming, a sign the cowpunchers interpreted to mean that the thieves had taken their departure after the last shot. Consequently when the end of an hour brought no fresh outbreak, the ranchman ordered his men to return to the horse corral and gather together the things they would require when they took up the pursuit.

To their amazement, when they rode into the yard, there was not a light to be seen in either the home or bunkhouse.

"You don't suppose they've run off with the missus, too?" suggested Pinky, in alarm.

But their anxiety as to the safety of Mrs. Bowser was allayed even as the cowboy spoke.

"Who goes there?" demanded a voice, meant to be

stern, but in which there was an unmistakable tremor, from the direction of the home front door.

"It's all right, Sarah. It's the boys and I," hastily replied her husband.

"Glory be! I've been scared almost out of my wits," exclaimed the woman.

"Scared?" repeated the men, in surprise.

"Yes. Just after Deadshot had left, I heard some one ride into the yard. Thinking it was either him or one of you, I rushed to the door. 'Get inside if you don't want a bullet in your head!' shouted a voice."

"The fiend!" ejaculated the ranchman. "Did he shoot at you?" he asked, anxiously.

"No. I didn't give him the chance. When I found it wasn't any of you, I ducked down, slamming the door and then I put the lights out."

"But what became of the lights in the bunkhouse?" inquired Sandy.

"I put them out, too," returned Mrs. Bowser. "You see, after I got over the first surprise and scare, my nerve came back. I grabbed one of Sam's guns, crept across the yard, extinguished the lamps and then took up my stand in the doorway, determined to take a shot at any one else who came along."

"Thank goodness, you had the foresight to speak before shooting," exclaimed her husband. "It was the last thing I ever thought of, your being on guard."

"Oh, I may be a 'fraid cat,' but I'm no fool," asserted the woman.

"That's what you're not, Sarah."

"And there ain't many other women with the nerve to stand watch in the dark after they've been threatened," chimed in Sandy, in evident admiration of the bravery displayed by the wife of the ranch owner.

During the conversation, the men had dismounted and Pinky had relighted the lamps in the bunkhouse, which they all entered, leaving their ponies standing, ready saddled in case of emergency, by the door.

In the light of the lamps, Mrs. Bowser was able to notice for the first time that her husband was hatless, while the others all had their sombreros on.

"How'd you lose your hat, Sam?" she queried.

"Shot off," replied the ranch owner, laconically. And then, in response to her eager inquiries, he told her all that had transpired in the cattle corral.

"Land sakes! How many of them do you suppose there were?" she asked, as the narration of the exciting incidents of the stampede, the disappearance of the mysterious spectre and the shooting was concluded.

"There must have been four or five, at least, judging from the number of openings there were in the fence," answered Pinky, eager to take part in the conversation.

But his remark was ignored in the attention given to Deadshot.

"How many did you see riding through the yard, Mrs. Bowser?" he asked.

"Only one."

"Which means the gang has split up," declared Sandy.

"Oh, you can't tell anything by that," asserted the ranchman. "The fellow may have been cutting through to join the rest of his bunch. Just stow your saddlebags with grub, shells and cartridges, then look to your guns. We must be off with the first break of day."

In obedience, the cowpunchers set about making their preparations for the pursuit, while the ranchman and his wife crossed the yard to their home.

With the first flush of light in the East, the Double Cross outfit rode forth to gather the strayed cattle, the majority of which they found, as Pinky had prophesied, within a few miles of the home-ranch.

Driving them back to the corral as quickly as possible, the men took stock and found they had recovered all but about fifty.

"That's probably all the 'lifters' thought they could handle and make their getaway," exclaimed Sandy.

"More likely it means there weren't so many of the raiders as we think," rejoined his boss. "Come on, now. We'll pick up the trail of this bunch of fifty and see where that brings us."

And with the promise to his wife that he would have a couple of the cowboys from Henry Hawks' ranch come over to protect her and the cattle, the owner of the Double Cross dashed away to pick up the trail of the Midnight Raider, followed by his cowpunchers.

CHAPTER V.

ON THE TRAIL.

Having learned, when they rounded up the stampeded cattle, that the openings in the corral fence were on the Southern side, Bowser and his men rode in that direction, spreading out into a wide semicircle in order that they might cover as much territory as possible, thereby locating the more quickly the trail followed by the fifty head which had not been found.

Back and forth they dashed, peering through the lessening darkness for some sight of the missing animals and straining their ears for a distant bellow or sound that would give an idea to their whereabouts. And as the light grew stronger and stronger, they were finally able to scan the grass for the wide course where the cattle had trampled it in their flight.

Several times, one or another of the searchers thought they had found the trail, only to learn, after following it for a few minutes, that it had been made by one of the bunches of steers they had driven back.

Such was the position of the men that Deadshot was on the extreme right, or Western, end of the line, while Pinky, Sandy and the owner of the raided ranch stretched away toward the East, in the order named.

As an hour of daylight went by without the discovery of the track, the cowmen began to realize that the pursuit of the cattlelifers would be no easy task, judging from

the manner in which they had managed to conceal the trail of fifty odd steers.

The realization, however, only made them the more determined to pick up their track, and they settled down to the work grimly.

At first they had ridden to and fro, rising now and again in their stirrups to survey the plains about them.

Finding this method of no avail, the ranchman rode over to Sandy and ordered him to begin and systematically ride back and forth, advancing about three hundred yards at each turn, telling him to pass the word to Pinky, who would, in turn, inform the cowboy on the extreme West.

"If we can't pick up the trail within five miles, we'll try the same tactics to the West and then to the North and East. A man can't put fifty steers in his pocket and carry 'em off. The trail's round here somewhere—and it's up to us to get busy and find it!" snapped Bowser, as he whirled his pony and started back.

Before the new order could be communicated by Sandy to Deadshot, however, the latter suddenly rose in his stirrups and waved his arms wildly. But, failing to attract the attention of his companions, he whipped out his six-shooters and fired three times.

The barking of the guns produced the desired effect.

Wheeling their ponies, the others beheld their comrade waving his hands to them in signal to ride to him.

"Have you found 'em?"

"Can you see 'em?"

"Did you shoot at any one?"

These questions were shouted at the cowboy who had resorted to such startling methods to attract the attention of his fellows.

"Do you think I'd be sitting here, waiting for you all to come up if I'd sighted the cattle or fired at any one?" demanded the cowpuncher, with fine scorn.

"Then what have you brought us over here for?" demanded the owner of the Double Cross, his anger rising as he began to suspect some trick on the part of his cowman.

"Now, don't get het up, Sam," chuckled Deadshot, with a calmness that exasperated his bunkmates. "I ain't seen the cattle, as I said, but I've found their trail."

"Where, man?" asked Pinky.

Ere the cowpuncher, who was enjoying to the full the whetting of the other's curiosity, could reply, however, the men rode up to him.

There, stretching away as far as their eyes could see, was a lane, some twenty feet wide, where the fleeing cattle had trampled the grass down as cleanly as though the path through the waving mesquite had been cut.

"Say, they certainly was going some," exclaimed Sandy, surveying the trail intently. "There must have been at least four or five lifters at their heels to make them steers hit it up like that."

"Well, don't sit there on your pony, arguing," cut in the ranchman. "Get down and search the ground for

horse-hoof tracks. Deadshot, you've always been bragging how all-fired clever you were at picking out trails, now show us if you can produce."

This calling upon their comrade to "make good" in the matter which formed his favorite topic for bragging, brought smiles to the faces of the other cowboys, and they sat back in their saddles preparatory to awaiting the result of Deadshot's scouting.

But their delight in the situation was rudely banished.

"Don't sit there like a bunch of tenderfeet waiting for a guide to drum up some game," snapped Bowser. "Get down and see if you can't beat Deadshot to it. You want to remember there's such critturs as the Injuns call 'heap talk' men."

The owner of the raided ranch was not the one, however, to leave all the work to his men, and even as he spoke, he slipped from his saddle and was soon crawling about on his hands and knees, peering at the trampled grass, now and then pushing it aside as he scanned the ground intently.

Spurred to action by the stinging words of their boss, the three cowpunchers were doing the same thing, and for several minutes the only sound audible was the panting of the ponies as they strove to recover their wind after their hard run.

"Must have been a shoeless broncho," grumbled Pinky, as no imprints of a horse's hoof rewarded his search.

"What did you expect, cavalry horses?" grunted Deadshot, contemptuously. "You mark my word, before we round up this gang of cowlifters, we'll know we've been on the trail!"

"For once, you're talking sense," grinned Sandy.

And chafing one another good-naturedly, the cowboys continued their careful examination.

The task, however, of discovering any tracks of ponies in the trampled and cloven-hoof cut ground proved too great for the powers of the plainsmen and at last they abandoned the attempt.

"It's no use wasting any more time," declared the ranchman, straightening up. "After all, it doesn't make any difference how many of the sneaks there were. *Whether their band numbers two or a dozen, we're going to get them!* We've found their trail, that's the main thing."

Chagrined to think he had not been able to "make good" on his oft-repeated assertions of his ability to track anything that went on legs, Deadshot was finally obliged to mount his pinto and ride after the others, who had mounted as soon as their boss had called the search off, and were following the well-defined trail through the grass.

"Where do you reckon the cowlifters are headed, Deadshot?" asked Bowser, as the man overtook them.

Determined not to venture another opinion not founded on good grounds, the cowpuncher stood up in his saddle

and scanned the horizon ahead and to the right and left.

"Course, there ain't no way of saying *for certain*," he began, "but, from what I know of cowlifters' little ways and the lay of these here plains——"

"Oh, cut it short! We ain't no pleasure party being tcted round on a 'rubberneck' expedition," growled Pinky. "If you've *got* any idea, out with it."

"As I was saying, from my knowledge of the tricks of cattle raiders and these plains," repeated Deadshot, ignoring the interruption of his bunkmate, "I should say the lifters were headed for the Sangammon bottoms. They ain't more than forty mile away, and there's swamps in there with grass high enough to hide an elephant."

With various comments, the others received this suggestion of the destination of the Midnight Raider, but no one ventured an open contradiction.

"I reckon you've hit the mark this time, Deadshot," finally declared the ranch owner. "Though I'd hoped the devils might have headed for the old Indian catacombs, over in the Haunted Valley. It would be an all-fired sight easier to rout them out from the tombs than from the Sangammon swamps—and not so dangerous to us. A man's liable to strike a mud-hole and be sucked under before his pals could find him."

"Perhaps Deadshot ain't right," suggested Pinky, to whom his boss' words brought up unexpected dangers.

But none of the others offered any comment, and in silence, each man absorbed in his own thoughts, the quartet, bound on their mission of revenge, swept along over the trampled trail.

CHAPTER VI.

THE AVENGERS ARE DELAYED.

After an hour's hard riding, the avengers came upon the body of a steer lying in the trail.

The sight of the beast's carcass seemed to madden the owner of the Double Cross ranch.

"Look at that steer!" he yelled. "Never was a better beef grazed the plains! And here it lies, dead from being driven to death! Curse the fiends! *I'll make them suffer for raiding my cattle and then running them to death!* After them, boys, don't dally to examine the steer!"

"Easy, Sam, easy," returned Sandy. "We'll get 'em, don't worry. But it won't do any harm to look at the crittur. A few minutes won't make any difference, and we can tell from the heat of the body about how far the lifters are ahead of us."

Scarce a moment after the foreman had voiced this suggestion was it before Deadshot was on the ground.

Still smarting under the sarcasm of his boss over his failure to pick out the horse tracks when they struck the trail, the cowboy had no sooner gained the side of the prostrate steer than he was upon the mesquite. And, even as Sandy spoke, with skilled hands, he was running over the hide.

Eagerly the others awaited his verdict as to the time the animal had been lying there.

But Deadshot spoke never a word.

"Well?" snapped his master, unable to restrain his impatience when several minutes had passed and the cowboy had not voiced his opinion.

"The body's cold, Sam. But it ain't stone cold."

"Which means we've got some tall riding to do if we expect to overhaul the ornery cusses before they lose themselves in the swamp," commented Pinky.

"That shows how much *you* know," retorted the ranchman. "We're a good twenty mile from the home corral, which is about half way to the bottoms, according to Deadshot, and the steel is cold. Consequently, the rest of the bunch must have passed here a good six hours ago. No man, unless he had wings, could overtake the cowlifters before they reached Sangammon, eh, Sandy?"

"Reckon you've got it about right, Sam," returned his foreman. "The raiders had all of six hours start, and judging from the condition of this steer, here, they're running the critturs to the limit. If that animal ain't thirty pound poorer than when he left the corral, I don't know anything about cattle."

"Then you think we haven't gained on them?" demanded Bowser, anxiously.

"None to speak of."

"And, what's more, we won't be able to cut down enough of their lead to make it worth while to kill our ponies trying to," interposed Deadshot. "Sandy's telling it straight when he says the devils are running the steers for all they can. If we don't come across more than half of them before we get to the swamps, I'll miss my guess."

A moment the ranchman pondered over these opinions.

"That being the case, then, there's no use of keeping to the trail," he finally exclaimed.

"Why not?" demanded the others, surprised at the words as they remembered their boss's vow.

"Because we've got to go over to Henry Hawks' and get him to send some of his men to guard Sarah and what's left of my cattle in the corral."

"And if you'll take my advice, you'll get old Hen to join us with a couple or so of his boys," asserted Deadshot. "Rounding up these lifters ain't going to be any child's play—especially when they're hiding in the swamps!"

"Righto," rejoined Bowser. "The more of us, the better. Come on, every jump we take along this trail now is leading us farther from the Star and Moon. By striking for it now, we ought to reach Hen's in time for dinner."

Accordingly, the avengers abandoned for the time being the trail made by the cattle thieves, and, turning their ponies straight for the South, set out to obtain protection for the lone woman left on the Double Cross home ranch and reinforcements to their own numbers,

that they might the more quickly run the miscreants to cover.

The tax upon their ponies incurred by galloping through the tall grass and sagebrush was greater than in following the cattle track and, in consequence, their speed was less. Notwithstanding that handicap, however, they made fairly good time, and the sun was directly overhead when they cantered into the yard of the Star and Moon home ranch.

At the sound of the rapid hoofbeats, Mrs. Hawks came to the door.

"Well, Sam Bowser, if I'm not glad to see you," she exclaimed, cordially, as soon as she made out the identity of the riders. "Put your ponies in the corral and come right in. You're just in time for dinner. I guess I've got enough, if I haven't, I can mighty soon get it. I'm——"

Believing that the woman's volubility would soon wear itself out, Bowser had waited for her to pause of her own accord. But when, after extending her hearty invitation for the riders to come in and eat, she started on a fresh tack, the ranchman decided to interrupt.

"Isn't Hen home?" he asked, the failure of the man to appear suggesting the far from welcome idea.

"No. He and the boys have been gone three days driving in the cattle for shipping. I expect him back this afternoon, though. He said it wouldn't be more than three days at the longest." Then, noting the look of disappointment that her words brought to her neighbor's face, she asked hastily: "There isn't anything wrong, is there? Nothing's happened to Sarah?"

"Sarah's all right; at least, she was when we left at daybreak. But some ornery cowlifters got into my home corral last night and made off with fifty head." And briefly he told Mrs. Hawks the uncanny circumstances of the raid.

With eyes growing bigger at each word, the good woman listened to the account of the mysterious spectre.

"Sakes alive! and you've left Sarah alone with that thing liable to drop in on her any minute?" she exclaimed, in consternation. "If I were she, I wouldn't stay there by myself a minute. No, sir, not a single minute. It isn't fair of you to make her, Sam. I'd just like to see Henry Hawks leave me alone under such conditions."

This vigorous scolding for failure to afford protection to his wife shamed the owner of the Double Cross, and hot flushes glowed beneath his weather-tanned face as he strove to excuse himself.

"That's just what I came over here for," he stammered. "I wanted Hen to let me have a couple of his boys so's I could use mine to trail the raiders."

"It makes no difference what you intended to do," declared Mrs. Hawks. "You men are all alike. You seem to think that we women can take care of ourselves, no matter what happens. And, as though it weren't enough to make us live way out in the plains, you go and leave

us whenever you feel like it. If I were Sarah, I'd let you know what I thought of such treatment, especially with a spook hanging about."

"Well, thank goodness, you're not Sarah," muttered Bowser under his breath, though aloud he said: "To tell the truth, Amy, I was so riled up over being tricked the way I was that the only thing I thought of was getting on the lifters' trail. But, after what you've said, I see it wasn't just right toward Sarah."

"Pinky, cut out one of Hen's ponies from the corral and ride back to the ranch just as fast as you can travel. Remember, I shall ask how long it took you when I get home," he added, noting the look of disappointment and anger that spread over his cowboy's face at the instructions.

But Pinky knew that orders were orders, especially when delivered by the owner of the Double Cross ranch, and, without any ado, wheeled his pony, rode over to the corral, picked out one of the Star and Moon bronchos and without as much as a glance toward his grinning bunk-mates, dashed from the yard.

Yet, to himself, the cowboy was telling in no uncertain words or polite language what he thought of "meddling old women." And, so many were his ideas upon the subject, that he was still intent upon expressing his opinion when he reined into the yard of the Double Cross, some three hours later.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MYSTERIOUS SPECTRE REAPPEARS.

Even the delicious dinner Mrs. Hawks set before her neighbor did not reconcile him to the unexpected delay caused in his plans by the absence of the owner of the Star and Moon. Moreover, he realized that there was reason for the sharp reprimand he had received on account of his lack of thought for the safety of his wife—and this realization did not tend to mollify his ill-humor.

Noting this and fearing that she had, perhaps, said too much, Mrs. Hawks sought to make amends.

"You mustn't take what I said about leaving Sarah too hard, Sam," she exclaimed, contritely. "But, being left alone on the ranch is my sore point, and I'm so accustomed to taking Hen to task for it, that I don't always stop to think what I'm saying. Of course, I know you were all cut up about your cattle—which is no more than natural—and I reckon Sarah has been alone so often she won't mind, especially as it's the daytime. If it was night, now, it would be different."

"It certainly would be," returned Bowser, with emphasis. "I had no idea of leaving Sarah alone. I told you that. It's Hen's being away that upset my calculations. What time did you say you expected him back?"

"During the afternoon. That is, to-day is the third day he's been gone and he said it wouldn't take longer than three days to round up the cattle, they're on the near range, you know, and drive them in." And then,

woman like, she began to borrow trouble, adding: "You don't suppose that spook could have made any trouble for him, do you?"

"It certainly could have if it tried the same tricks on Hen's herd it did on mine," responded the owner of the Double Cross. "But, don't start in imagining things, Amy. A man gets trouble enough on a ranch without worrying and fretting about what may or might happen."

"That's just what Hen says," rejoined Mrs. Hawks. "It's easy enough for you men folks to live up to that. You have so many things to keep you busy, you don't have the time to think. But with us women, it's different. Having nobody but you to take up our minds, we just can't help being afraid something may happen to you. I know it's that way with me about Hen, and I guess it is with Sarah about you."

"Yes, I suppose it is," assented her neighbor. "But just remember, worry doesn't do anybody any good—and generally makes you nervous and cross." And with this parting shot, the owner of the Double Cross, having finished his dinner, arose and went out doors, followed by his cowboys.

"Man, dear! but ain't she the old spitfire!" chuckled Deadshot, as they gained the yard, taking care, however, to make sure that the woman was not within earshot when he spoke. "I never did have any use for Hen Hawks; but after seeing—and listening to—his running mate, I certainly am sorry for him."

"Well, he probably wouldn't thank you for telling him so," smiled Bowser, his ill-humor disappearing under the combined effect of the good dinner, his pipe and the cowboy's comment upon the garrulity of Mrs. Hawks.

Further pursuit of the topic was prevented, however, by Sandy.

"Don't it beat all how everything seems to go against us in trailing them cattlegifters?" he asked. "First, we couldn't pick up their track. Then we couldn't overhaul 'em, and now we've got to lose more time waiting for reinforcements before starting out again. It sure does look, as though we were in for trouble all along the line."

"So you're beginning to wake up, are you?" chuckled Deadshot. "Didn't I say last night, when we came near going loco over that ghostie, that whenever one of 'em appeared, it meant trouble? And didn't I tell you, after we found it was a raid, that we'd have no easy time running 'em down, as Sam said he was agoing to do?"

The scornful tone in which the cowboy reminded his bunkmate of his prophecies aroused Sandy's ire.

"Sure you did. But you say so many things that ain't no account, a feller sort of has to see for himself before he can agree with you."

"That's a hot one, Deadshot," grinned his boss. "It's a good thing for you Pinky isn't here, or between Sandy and him, they'd have your goat before sundown."

In a silence that was portentous in its intensity, the cowboy took out his corn husk cigarette papers and

makings, deftly rolled one, lighted it, and, taking a long draw, blew out the smoke deliberately, while his companions wondered along what lines his retort would be.

"Did you ever notice, Sam?" he finally drawled, "that there's some folks has to be hit with a thing before they can see it? That's the case with Sandy, here, though, as a member of the Double Cross outfit, I hate to be obliged to admit it. Instead of realizing when a feller is clever enough to pull off that ghostie stunt to cover a raid there'd be trouble in getting close enough to 'em to pump 'em full of lead, he don't tumble to it till about eighteen hours afterwards."

Fortunately, the foreman of the Double Cross had a highly developed sense of humor, and he laughed at the pat rejoinder as heartily as either Bowser or the man who uttered it—with the result that what might have turned into a serious quarrel between the two cow-punchers and endangered the harmony of the avengers, and the united action necessary to catch the raiders was avoided.

When Mrs. Hawks had finished her housework, she appeared on the veranda with a basket of sewing and called to the men to join her. But, upon the pretext that they were obliged to keep close watch of one of their ponies in the fear it had strained a tendon, they managed to avoid the tiresome company of the well-intentioned but garrulous woman.

Now perched on the top rail of the corral, now stretched upon the ground, the three men who were so eager to be on their way in pursuit of the raiders whiled away the time, ever and again searching the horizon to the East for a glimpse of the Star and Moon outfit, with what patience they could muster.

But as the afternoon wore away without either sight or sound of them, Bowser began to grow restless.

"If those devils find we haven't reached the swamps by sundown, they are just as likely as not to drive my cattle to some other place—and then we surely will have a merry time locating them. It'll be hard enough if we know they are in the bottoms. But when we can't be certain even of that, we'll have the very old Nick of a time," he complained.

"What do you want to do, start out and leave word for Hen and his men to follow?" asked Sandy. "It does seem too bad to give the ornery cusses a chance to get away on us."

"That's the idea I was figuring on," returned the ranchman. "What do you say, Deadshot?"

"Just what you told Mrs. Hawks—don't borrow trouble," rejoined the cowboy, a twinkle in his eye.

"Meaning?"

"That it's a fool idea to worry about the lifters hiking out right away when once they've hit the safety of the swamps. Let me tell you, they will be only too thankful to find we're not on their trail so they can get a good night's rest. You two know, as well as I do, it ain't any

cinch job shoving fifty head of cattle along as fast as they can leg it in the dark."

"There's good sense in that reasoning," declared the owner of the stolen steers, after several moments' reflection.

"And the beauty of it is, it's the facts," exclaimed Deadshot. "I never knew a cowlifter who wasn't lazy and, once in the bottoms, they'll feel so safe, I'm willing to bet they won't think of breaking cover for a week, at least, unless we jump 'em. So if Hen don't show up for forty-eight hours more, there won't be any great harm done."

The avengers were not obliged to wait so long for the appearance of the men they hoped to get to take up the trail with them, however.

Just as twilight tinted the waving grasses with glorious reds and purples, the halloo of the cowboys rang out, and in due course the owner of the Star and Moon ranch rode into the yard.

At the sight of his neighbor, he was glad, greeting him with hearty cordiality and chiding him for the length of time it had been since he had paid him a visit. But when he learned the purpose of Bowser's presence, he became grave.

"You're sure right, I'll help you trail the skulks, Sam!" he declared. "Just as soon as the boys have had their chuck, we'll start. We drove down by easy stages, that's what took us so long, so they aren't tired."

While the two ranchmen had been exchanging greetings and talking, the rest of the outfit had come up with the cattle, and, as he observed this, Hawks called out:

"Hey, Dude, tell Ki Yi to come right up to the house."

But, before he entered the presence of his boss, the man whose name had been bestowed upon him by his bunkmates because of the yell he always emitted when excited, as well as the other members of the Star and Moon outfit, had been made aware of the reason for the presence of the men from the Double Cross.

"I suppose Deadshot has told you about the raid?" smiled Hawks, as his cowboy came up to the veranda.

"Sure."

"What do you make of it? Ever hear of that ghost stunt being pulled off before?"

"That's a new one on me, for certain, Hen. It strikes me, they're a mighty smart lot of lifters, and it's dollars to a coyote flea the whole bunch are in the swamps this very minute."

"Think they'll shift to another hiding place?" asked Bowser.

"Not till they've got some of the beef back on the steers they run off of 'em—unless we jump 'em," declared the cowpuncher.

"Then I reckon with Ki Yi and Deadshot agreed on that, we needn't break our necks riding across the plains to-night, Sam," exclaimed the owner of the Star and Moon.

"Daybreak will be time enough to start," assented Bowser, and instructions to that effect were accordingly sent to the men he proposed to take from the ranch by Hawks.

But in their assertion that the Midnight Raider would not leave the swamps for many a day unless forced out, both Deadshot and Ki Yi were mistaken!

Had the avengers been on guard at the bottoms just at dusk, they would have seen a lone horseman emerge from the tall grass, scan the surrounding plains searchingly and then set out at an easy lope toward the very spot where the scenes of the night before were being described for the twentieth time.

And had they been on watch at the sheds of the Star and Moon horse corral at midnight, they would have discovered that same horseman dismount in its shadow!

But, instead, the cowboys and their bosses were sleeping soundly.

After listening intently for several minutes, the skulking figure hastily gathered a bunch of dried grass, thrust a lighted match into the waving ends and then placed the flaming mass under an edge of the corral shed.

Twice he repeated the action, then rushed toward the home house and applied the torch in five places.

Pausing only long enough by the ranch house to make sure the fire had caught, the miscreant ran back to his horse, vaulted lightly onto its back, rode a short distance into the cover afforded by the shadows from the bunkhouse and then drew rein to gloat in his fiendish handiwork.

Inflammable as tinder because of their dryness, the boards blazed fiercely, and soon both the horse shed and the house were roaring cauldrons of seething flames.

As the conflagration gained headway, its crackling and onrush roused Bowser.

Springing to window, he caught sight of the leaping flames.

"Fire! Fire!" he yelled at the top of his lungs.

Awakened by the startling cry, Mr. and Mrs. Hawks jumped from their bed, while the cowboys tumbled out of their bunks.

With such awful rapidity did the flames devour the wooden buildings that little beyond the clothes by their bedsides were the inmates of the house able to save.

In a momentary lull, as they watched the flames, there rang out shrill and piercing:

"O-u-e-e!"

For a moment, Bowser gazed at his men, astounded.

"Get your guns! It's the Midnight Raiders!" he yelled.

Instantly the boys from the Double Cross and those of the Star and Moon dashed into the bunkhouse, returning immediately with rifles and six shooters.

"Shoot and shoot to kill!" thundered Bowser.

But, ignorant of which direction to rake with their

shells, the cowpunchers stood in a bunch, straining their ears for a repetition of the cry.

As they waited, the roof tree of the corral fell in, sending a shower of sparks high into the air.

And, while the lurid flare lighted the surrounding country, of a sudden, a white spectre dashed out onto the plains.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RUNNING NIGHT FIGHT.

An instant, the ranchmen and cowboys stood, too dumbfounded to move.

Then the shriek of a mocking jeer galvanized them into action.

Bang! Bang! Bang! went their guns, the deeper explosions of the rifles and the staccato barks of the six shooters sounding above the roar of the flames.

But, as though shielded by a magic armour, the spectre raced on, unscathed by the rain of bullets.

"To the corral!"

"They're after the cattle!"

"Get horses and after 'em!"

In shrill confusion, the shouts of advice and command were uttered by cowboys and foremen.

But loud above them all rang Bowser's roar:

"Deadshot, get your man!"

Striving with might and main to live up to his nickname, the cowboy from the Double Cross ranch rushed on foot after the fleeing spectre, pumping lead at it as fast as he could throw shells into his repeating rifle.

The combination of effort to "make good" and the uneven footing, however, proved too much for the cowboy, and when his magazine was empty, the lone horseman was still riding away.

Realizing that were they to overtake the man, they must take up the pursuit without delay, the ranch owners shouted at the rest of their men to mount and give chase.

"Remember, a thousand dollars to the fellow who drops the fiend!" shouted Bowser.

"And I'll give the same!" yelled the owner of the burned ranch houses.

The thought of being burned out of house and home by the very miscreant of whom they were planning to go in pursuit was sufficient incentive to make the cowpunchers eager to inflict vengeance of the men who had so defied them.

But the announcement of the two thousand dollars reward turned this eagerness into frantic endeavor.

Yelling and shouting to one another, the cowboys raced hither and thither, trying to catch their ponies which had dashed terror-stricken from the burning corral.

"Hadn't we better send some of the men to the cattle yard, to prevent the raiders lifting any of the critturs?" asked Sandy, coming close to his master.

The corral into which Hawks' boys had driven the

steers was so situated, however, that the light from the flames enabled the men to see three sides of the barbed-wire fence, while back of the fourth, the flare lighted the plains.

And as they strained their eyes, no human form could they see except the white spectre.

"Man, dear! he's stopped and is watching his work!" cried Deadshot.

Instantly the eyes of the ranchmen and several of the cowboys, who were near enough to hear the words, followed the direction of their companion's pointing finger.

There, as calm as though he were watching some cowpuncher frolic, sat the white figure upon his horse.

"Skulls and crossbones! don't you suppose there are any more of the raiders?" queried Sandy, suddenly.

"Reckon that's all," grunted Ki Yi. "If there had been more of 'em, we would have been told by a few bullets."

"Nonsense!" retorted Bowser. "You don't mean to tell me that one lone horseman could bedevil my men and me, cut my fences, stampede my cattle and get away with fifty of 'em, do you? Man, you're crazy!"

"I ain't saying there warn't more than one in the raid on the Double Cross," returned Ki Yi. "What I said was there's only one mixed up in this here night's business."

"Then, by thunder! get busy, you dubs, and corral him!" roared the owner of the Star and Moon. "The idea of one man being able to burn my buildings and get away when I've four men of my own and Bowser has two right on the spot!"

Stung by the scorn and disgust in the ranchman's tones, Ki Yi, Dude and Deadshot were moving away to take some of the ponies the other members of the Star and Moon outfit had managed to catch when they were halted by Sandy's words.

"I wouldn't be too quick to break away, Hen," he cautioned. "Your steers may be quiet enough now—the only fussing they're doing is what is naturally to be expected with the fire flaring in their eyes—but I don't doubt for a minute, there are five or six raiders in amongst 'em, ready to cut loose and stampede the critturs the minute they see us riding away. That's probably part of their scheme—they're counting on our giving chase to that ghostie. That's probably why he's sitting out there, so all-fired cool. It don't stand to reason that a lone man would take such chances against eight when he could be hiking across the plains, putting distance between us and him while we're making up our minds what to do."

The obvious soundness of the foreman's argument gave it instant attention from the ranch owners.

In the first place, it tended to lessen the odium of their having been thrown into a panic—in addition to being made to suffer very appreciable losses—by one man. And though their eyes showed them only a single raider, they were only too willing to believe that more of them were

hidden among the cattle, merely awaiting a propitious moment to make their presence known.

Accordingly, they accepted more readily the suggestion of Sandy than was warranted in view of the fact that both Deadshot and Ki Yi believed the Midnight Raider was the lone horseman, spectral in appearance, that mocked them so tauntingly by remaining in plain sight of the destruction he had wrought.

"That's more like the truth, Hen," asserted the owner of the Double Cross, after he had deliberated over his foreman's words a few moments. "Ki Yi and Deadshot always were excitable boys. It's a good thing Sandy has a little common sense and the courage to express it, or we'd have been stampeded by the two of 'em into chasing that howling devil—and giving the rest of the gang the chance to carry off your cattle at their pleasure."

"Righto!" returned Hawks. "There's nothing pays more than making haste slowly.

"Hey, you fellows, bring horses for Sam and me and then we'll ride over to the corral and inspect the fences."

"Then you don't care about getting that spook?" inquired Deadshot. "Last night, you remember, Sam, you was all for chasing the lifters, notwithstanding the fact you didn't have the slightest idea in which direction they had ridden, and letting the cattle go. *Now*, when you have the biggest sort of a chance to run down the cuss, you are all for patrolling the corral.

"If I was running this business, and a man had driven off a bunch of my steers, and then set the buildings, belonging to the man I was getting to join the trail with me, afire, and I saw the man who turned the tricks a-watching what I was going to do, I'd want to pump his good-for-nothing carcass so full of lead it wouldn't stay on his horse. That would make sure of at least *one* of 'em—and I'm inclined to agree with Ki Yi that when we get that one, we've got the gang."

"You're the great little talker, Deadshot; the only trouble is you talk too much. A person can't tell when you're saying things just for the sake of hearing yourself saying them, or whether you're talking facts," retorted the owner of the Double Cross.

"It's my judgment there are more of the devils in amongst the cattle, and for that reason, I'm for inspecting the corral fence. By being on the spot, we'll be able to get the whole crowd instead of only one—like we would if we set sail after that fiend out yonder."

"To the corral it is," exclaimed Hawks. "So let's get over there and not stand arguing here. First thing we know, they'll rush out and we'll lose the whole kit and boodle, as Sam says."

"Which we'll do anyhow!" growled Ki Yi to Deadshot.

But the cowboys were too wise to press the argument any harder and, declaring one to another that the blame would not be on their shoulders, they cantered over to the corral.

Bitterly, indeed, were the ranch owners to rue their decision!

"How long do you intend to patrol the fences?" asked Dude, as the eight men drew close to the corral.

"If we find the barbed wire is cut, till the devils show themselves," returned the owner of the Star and Moon, "even if we have to stay here all night."

"According to that, if the fences aren't cut, do you mean you will believe the raiders aren't inside?" sneered Deadshot.

The tone of the cowboy angered Bowser and Hawks, and the former was not slow in letting him know it.

"Don't try to get smart, Deadshot," he snapped. "You know as well as I do—or you ought to know—that the reason we aren't accepting your advice is because we can't trust you.

"Of course, if we find the fences haven't been tampered with, we'll turn our attention to the spectral rider. So be lively and inspect the cor—"

"Well, you'll be too late to round up *that* chap to-night" retorted Deadshot, grimly.

"Why?" demanded both the ranchmen.

"Because he's disappeared!"

In amazement, the men turned in the direction in which they had seen the lone horseman calmly sitting his pony. Not a sign of him was visible!

"But he was there a few minutes ago!" gasped several of the cowpunchers.

"So was Hen's house," grunted Deadshot.

"Watch out for the fences!" cried Sandy. "His going is probably the signal for the dash from the corral!"

With spur and quirt, the cowboys raced around the enclosure which, fortunately for them, was still illumined by the flares from the ruins of the ranch house, while Bowser and Hawks waited near the gate in silence.

"Nothing wrong with the wires on the East," reported Sandy, the first of the cowpunchers to complete his tour of inspection.

Comment by the ranchmen was prevented by the quick succession in which the rest of their boys rode in, announcing that on the other sides of the big yard the fences were intact.

"Tricked!" grunted Ki Yi. "That Midnight Raider is sure one nervy crittur!"

"That's the ticket—but he hasn't got anything on me!" retorted Deadshot. "Sam, I suppose you don't mind if I hit his trail *now*, do you?"

"Go as far as you like—only get the devil!" returned his master.

"Then come on, Ki Yi! We've no time to lose!" shouted the man from the Double Cross.

And, without giving either of the ranch owners the chance to proffer any advice, even had they been so inclined, which they were not on account of the fiasco of the inspection, the two cowpunchers dashed out onto the

plains in the direction where they had last seen the lone horseman.

"He's worked the same vanishing act he did at the Double Cross!" declared Deadshot, as he raced along beside his companion. "So don't expect to see something white suddenly bob up."

Quickly the two men, whose opinions had been disregarded, got beyond the line where the reflection of the fire illumined the plains for them.

But, though they could not distinguish objects ahead of them readily, their bodies were distinctly outlined against the background of flames—as they were soon to learn to their sorrow!

Scarce another hundred yards had they ridden, than Bang! went a rifle to the West of them and an instant later, Ki Yi's horse gave a snort of pain and plunged forward, all but throwing his rider over his head.

With a string of shocking oaths, the cowboy disentangled himself from his stirrups and began to pump his rifle in the direction whence the shell had come.

"Get to him, man! Get to him!" he shouted at Deadshot. "Your pony is fresh and you can soon overhaul him. I'll let you get his direction by drawing his fire. It's a cinch he can't blaze away at both of us at the same time—when we are in different places."

The last words of the dismounted member of the Star and Moon outfit were lost upon Deadshot, however.

No sooner had he seen the fate that had overtaken his comrade than he had dashed away.

"You may have given me the slip once, you ornery crittur, but you can't get away from Deadshot Pete twice running!" he hissed.

Yet the bragging cowpuncher was almost forced to eat his words!

True to his promise, Ki Yi was doing his best to hold the attention of the lone horseman by sending bullet after bullet in his direction.

But the Midnight Raider was clever, and, safe in the cover of the darkness, he stopped firing to discover what had become of his other pursuer.

As he beheld him leaping his horse over the waving grass, he grinned.

"The surest way to stop him is to drop his horse, too," he muttered to himself. And, taking careful aim, he waited until Deadshot was within less than two hundred yards of him, then fired.

But his second shot was not so lucky as his first.

Instead of tumbling the pony over, the shell sailed harmlessly over the cowpuncher's head.

"So that's where you are, eh?" snapped Deadshot, as he gauged the direction of the raider. "That's all I wanted to know."

And, as he uttered the words, he threw his rifle to his shoulder and pulled the trigger.

Realizing that he had failed of his purpose, the lone horseman was too shrewd to linger, and, whirling his

pony, headed for his hiding place, with the Double Cross cowboy in hot pursuit.

CHAPTER IX.

BOWSER DISCIPLINES HIS FOREMAN.

At the first crack of the rifles, Bowser and Hawks had dashed after their two cowpunchers with the other members of their outfits at their heels.

"Get him! Get him!" shouted the former.

"Don't go too far!" cautioned Sandy. "This may be the very trick to get us out of the way, so the raiders can dash from the corral."

"But there are no raiders in there, you fool!" retorted Hawks. "Keep your mouth shut, and see if you can't *do* something!"

Sweet, indeed, were these words to the other cowpunchers, who had been prevented from adopting the ideas of Deadshot and Ki Yi and running down the raider, when they could see him by the foreman's overdeveloped sense of caution. But, beyond chuckling to themselves, they gave no outward sign of their pleasure.

Leaning far over their ponies' necks, the men rode, searching out the plains in their effort to locate either their pals or the lone horseman. For they realized that unless they exerted the greatest care, they might, in their excitement, mistake their friends for the raider.

Mindful of this danger, and determined not to allow any more untoward incidents to mark the pursuit of the man who had tricked him and lifted his cattle, Bowser shouted:

"Nobody fire till after we've picked up Deadshot and Ki Yi. It would be just our luck to hit one of them instead of the cow thief."

And this warning was uttered just in time!

Riding a little to the right and in advance of the others, Sandy suddenly caught sight of his bunkmate, as he stood over the prostrate form of his pony, emptying his rifle in the direction whence the shot from the lone horseman had come.

"This way! This way! I've found him!" yelled the excited foreman of the Double Cross, turning in his saddle and beckoning to his fellows.

"Then drop him!"

"Don't give him the chance to make another getaway!"

Loud and clear, these commands rang out, while Bowser and Hawks raced their ponies toward where Sandy was pointing.

Luckily for the cowpuncher, however, he had been close enough to the foreman when the latter discovered him to hear his hail to his fellows and also their answers.

And he realized if he were to save his life, there was no time to be lost!

"Don't shoot! It's I, Ki Yi! My horse was shot from under me!" he shouted at the top of his lungs, at the same time, however, taking the extra precaution

to drop flat behind the body of his pony that it might protect him from the shell of some excited pursuer who had pulled the trigger of his rifle before clearly understanding the warning.

His words had been in time to prevent such a misfortune, however, and quickly his comrades were beside him.

"Are you hurt?" inquired his master.

"Only my pride. To think a measly cowlifter could knock the horse from under me and me not even able to see him to hit him!"

Sharing the humiliation which the Midnight Raider was bringing upon the outfits of the Double Cross and the Star and Moon ranches, the boys strained their eyes to penetrate the darkness enveloping the plains.

"Oh, you needn't try to locate him. He's miles away by this time," sneered Ki Yi. "He don't sit round sucking his thumbs when it's time for action. Somebody give me a pony, will you?"

But none of the cowpunchers were willing to surrender their mounts to their unhorsed companion.

Suddenly, Bowser noted the absence of his man.

"Where's Deadshot?" he queried, anxiously.

"Chasing the raider," returned Ki Yi.

"Did you see him?" demanded Dude, breathlessly.

"Sure. He came right up and said 'Pardon, gentlemen, I believe you are looking for me. I'm going to ride to the right,'" mocked his outfit mate.

"Now, don't get sore," returned the other. "I only wanted to know if you were sure Deadshot was on the real trail or whether we'd have to take chances on finding it."

"That's about what it is, kiddo," rejoined Ki Yi. "All Deadshot or I could get was the general direction. But Deadshot's no fool and he won't travel many miles without learning if he's on the proper course. It's so I can be on hand to help him, I want another pony without going back to the ranch house. Besides, since the fire scattered them, it may take a couple of hours to get one that's worth riding."

It had been his master's intention to order his man curtly to return and cut out his own mount. But the last words changed his mind. Well was he aware that Ki Yi was far and away the nerviest rider and best trail-finder in his outfit. As there was a natural rivalry between the boys of the Star and Moon and those of the Double Cross, Hawks did not wish to handicap his success by depriving himself of the assistance of his best man.

Ere he could make up his mind which boy to send back, however, the difficulty was solved for him.

"You can't leave Amy alone," exclaimed Bowser, mindful of the upbraiding he had received at dinner for not providing protection for his own wife. "Now there's no one more fitted to care for women and cattle that I know of than Sandy. He's what you might call overcau-

tious. If you like, I'll send him back to help Amy and to quiet her, and Ki Yi can take his pony."

It was with amazement that the other cowboys listened to these words from the owner of the Double Cross, and so bitter was the tone in which they were uttered that none of them had the inclination, even, to laugh at their luckless comrade to whom they were addressed.

Partially because he was afraid his neighbor would repent his generosity and partially for the reason he was sorry for the berated foreman—knowing as he and all the others did that Sandy's advice had been given only for the purpose of avoiding a repetition of the raider's tactics of the night before—Hawks quickly accepted the offer.

In silence the transfer was made, the foreman feeling too crestfallen to utter any protest.

But his spirits were revived somewhat by the very man to whom he was surrendering his pony.

"When it comes daylight, catch a couple of ponies and make the missus ride over to the Double Cross with you. She's dead set against being left alone, and, after what's happened to-night, she'll be all the more ready to go. Tell her the cattle will get along all right. If she bucks at that, ask her if she isn't of more importance than a bunch of steers—and she'll go fast enough. Then, when you've put the two women together, get Pinky and ride for all you are worth for the swamps."

"But the women won't let us go, perhaps," objected Sandy.

"Tell 'em it's orders from the old man."

"That won't be the truth."

"Never mind. I'll guarantee he won't offer any complaint when you two ride up to where we're camping."

"Then you think we won't be too late if we don't join you till to-morrow afternoon?"

"No—nor if you didn't get to us for a couple of days. If we drive that slick cuss out of the bottoms inside of a week, we'll be all-fired lucky."

A moment the foreman hesitated, then reached out his hand and shook Ki Yi's gratefully.

"All right, I'll do it. Much obliged. I won't forget this night."

And, without saying another word or asking for any instructions from the ranch owners, Sandy set out to return to the ruins and Mrs. Hawks at a rapid lope.

CHAPTER X.

A THRILLING RESCUE.

No sooner had he given his suggestion to Sandy than Ki Yi buried the rowels of his spurs in the pony's flanks and darted after Deadshot.

"Hey, you numbskull, where you going?" shouted the owner of the Double Cross ranch, angrily. "I didn't give you a mount just to have you go off by yourself. Wait for the rest of us. We've got to decide which is the direction to take."

"Haven't got time," retorted the cowboy, exasperatingly. "There's been too much talk already. I know which way Deadshot went, and he's on the raider's trail."

"Then we'll follow you," called the owner of the Star and Moon. And quickly the troop of horsemen leaped their ponies in the wake of Ki Yi.

In the meantime, Deadshot and the lone horseman he was pursuing were dashing over the plains.

Whether he was following his quarry or not, the cowboy from the Double Cross ranch did not know. He had hoped that the raider would continue the running fight with which the chase had opened, thereby enabling him to gauge correctly the exact course the man he was pursuing was taking.

But the fiend who had stolen Bowser's cattle and burned Hawks' buildings was far too clever to give his whereabouts away in any such manner.

From the fact that the cowboys had exchanged shots with him—and had come off second best—he realized that the search for him would be unrelenting. In consequence, he was determined they should not know exactly in what direction he was headed. That they would trail the Double Cross steers to the Sangammon swamps, he did not doubt. Yet he believed that, could he enter the bottoms without being seen in the act, he would be able to elude his pursuers and eventually drive out the cattle and sell them.

He forgot, however, that the cause of wrongdoers never enjoys ultimate success.

Consequently, he thought only of his purpose to throw the cowboy off his track.

With that end in view, he rode low over his horse, dropping to one side or the other, Indian fashion, when a rise in the plains might expose his form to the eyes he knew were strained for a glimpse of him, at the same time swerving his course to the North that he might cross the trail made by the steers he had lifted and swing into the swamp from a direction almost opposite that where his pursuers would expect.

Thus deprived of any guidance as to the position of his quarry, Deadshot was forced to rely on his powers of deduction.

That the stolen cattle had been driven to the swamp he knew. And he was also convinced that the man who had burned Hawks' buildings was the lifter who had deceived the entire Double Cross outfit with his spectral trick. With these two premises, it was not difficult for him to reach the conclusion that the fugitive would seek the shelter of the bottom lands. And accordingly he decided to strike the shortest route to the Sangammon swamps in the hope that he might outride the man he was pursuing, because of the greater freshness of his own mount, and arrive in time to intercept the raider.

Having evolved his method of procedure, therefore, Deadshot settled down grimly to his long night ride.

But that his plan was to come to naught, the reader already knows.

As they trailed in his wake, however, Ki Yi and the other avengers were mystified by the lack of shooting. To them, the silence seemed to indicate that some mishap had overtaken the cowboy, and great was their anxiety on that account.

Once or twice, Bowser suggested the advisability of making a search for him, but each time he was overruled.

"If Deadshot did lose his pony, like Ki Yi, he would know enough to go back to what's left of my home ranch," finally declared Hawks. "And if he'd been wounded, he would either have ridden for us or to the ranch. So it's all the same. It's my opinion, though, that he has set out to follow the fiend alone. You know you gave him a pretty severe call down for not hitting the man when he dashed from the shadow of the bunkhouse out onto the plains."

This mention of the spectral appearance presented by the Midnight Raider turned their minds to the manner in which he worked his trick.

Many were the suggestions advanced, but none were correct.

That he was first white and then seemed to vanish from sight, they all knew. Yet had they been close enough to see how the trickster produced the uncanny effect, they would have been surprised—and humiliated—by its simplicity.

The ghostly appearance was obtained from a peaked hood which fitted over the fellow's head and a long, flowing robe, white on one side and black on the other.

By seizing the ends of the robe, with the white side out, as he always wore it when starting on a raid, and waving his arms, he could produce the eerie, floating effect. And as his horse was a dark brown, by either riding slowly or leaping and plunging, he could give suggestion of traveling through the air, at will.

And his disappearing act was equally easy.

Whenever pursuit grew too close or he desired to inspire additional terror vanishing and then appearing again, he simply pulled the robe over his head, keeping the black side out.

But in their ignorance of the truth, the cowboys taxed their imaginations to the utmost, without any other satisfaction than the whiling away of the weary hours they swept through the waving grass until dawn enabled them to scan the plains for a sight of either friend or foe.

Having ridden at a terrific pace, considering the handicap afforded by the darkness and the tall grass, Deadshot reached the edge of the swamps before daylight, and, to his satisfaction, was able to conceal his pony in some sapplings and then climb into them, from which point of vantage he hoped to discover the cowliifter sneaking toward his hiding place.

With the gradual lightening of the plains, he was sud-

denly thrown into great excitement by the sight of a lone horseman approaching the bottoms cautiously.

Clutching his rifle tightly, he drew a bead on the man. But, fortunately for both, he did not pull the trigger.

What the reason was, Deadshot said later he could not tell. But his failure so to do spared the life of Ki Yi—for the approaching horseman was none other than the man from the Star and Moon outfit who had made a desperate attempt to catch up with his pal from the Double Cross.

Trembling as he thought how near he can come to shooting down his friend, Deadshot waited to see what Ki Yi would do.

But the cowboy was a scout of no mean ability.

Rising in his stirrups from time to time as he drew nearer and nearer to the edge of the swamp, he soon discovered the trail through the dew-laden grass which his pal had made.

And, as he did so, he, too, threw his rifle to his shoulder. Then, realizing that any one hiding in the underbrush surrounding the bottom lands would be able to see him when he could not detect the person concealed, he suddenly slid from his pony, hobbled it, and, crouching so low that his back was not visible above the waving tops of the grass, resumed his following of the trail.

Arrived at the sapplings, however, it did not take him long to discover and recognize Deadshot's horse. But where the cowboy was, he was unable to make out until a chuckle caused him to look up into the branches directly over his head.

"That's one on me," he exclaimed, in a low voice, shaking his fist at his pal.

"No doubt of that. And it's a mighty good thing it was I in the tree instead of Mr. Cowlifter. I came mighty near putting a bullet into you as it was when I first caught sight of you," he added, shuddering at the closeness of the call.

"But you ought to have known it was I," returned Ki Yi.

"Don't see why. I knew your pony had been shot under you and I didn't have any idea how soon you'd get another."

"That's true enough. But you were chasing the raider, not he you."

"Which shows how little you know about it. Having a fresher mount than he, after he stopped firing so that I couldn't get a line on him, I decided to outride him and be here to greet him."

"Well, did you?"

"More than I know. He hasn't come yet—and he won't if you leave your broncho out there where any one can see it."

"I'll bring him in, but I don't believe we'll get a shot at the ornery cuss from this side of the swamp. He's either beaten you to it or he's struck the bottoms from some other direction."

And, as the reader knows, this is just what the Midnight Raider had done.

After making his pony fast close beside Deadshot's, Ki Yi climbed into a neighboring sapling, and together they watched until about nine o'clock, when they agreed their quarry had given them the slip, and they descended to have a bite to eat.

This finished, they discussed whether or not they should do some scouting on their own hook while waiting for the rest of the outfits to come up, finally abandoning the idea in the fear that the horsemen might not find their trails and enter the swamp at some other point.

And well for the ranch owners was it that they did!

Having been unable to keep Ki Yi in sight, they had headed for the Southern end of the swamps, while their two cowboys had struck out for the middle. Consequently, it was only because the latter were keeping a lookout for their pals that they discovered them several miles away, about the middle of the forenoon.

"Man, dear, but I'm glad to see you!" exclaimed Bowser, as Deadshot and Ki Yi joined them. "Every man jack of us has a different idea how we ought to go about trailing the raider, and none of us know enough about the business to track a buffalo. But, now you're here, we'll turn the leadership over to you."

This suggestion met with the approval of Hawks, much to the delight of his men.

"That being the case, I reckon we'd best hit the trail where the cattle was driven in," declared Deadshot. "Ki Yi and I've been watching since daybreak and nary a sight of the crittur have we seen, nor we didn't run across any trail on our way here, and unless you-all did, it's a cinch the man we're after didn't enter the swamp to the South or at the middle."

"We didn't see as much as a coyote track," returned the owner of the Star and Moon, "so the cattle trail it is."

And without more ado, the avengers headed their ponies Northward and entered the Sangammon bottom lands at the precise spot where Bowser's steers had, some twenty-four hours previous.

Aware of the treacherous mudholes, Deadshot and Ki Yi followed the cattle trail as best they could. But the task was no simple one, for the reason that the softness of the footing left no hoof marks and the grass had had time to recover from its brushing aside or down, except in instances where it had been trampled into the mire.

So much noise did the ponies make, plunging and splashing as they struggled to get out of the mud that the two leaders soon realized that their coming would be heard by any one in hiding in sufficient time to make a getaway or establish an ambushade, and accordingly they called a halt to discuss what was best to do.

But, before they could begin the council of war, one of their number came near death!

In his desire to ride alongside Deadshot, Bowser reined

his pony out of the trail. But scarce a yard had he advanced than the animal stepped into one of the dread mudholes and began to sink with incredible rapidity.

"Help! Help! I'm being sucked under!" shouted the terror-stricken man.

Understanding full well the danger that threatened the owner of the Double Cross ranch, Deadshot and Ki Yi ordered the others to halt and hold their ponies where they were while they themselves dismounted and rushed to the rescue.

"We'll take him one on each side," exclaimed Ki Yi, as they drew near the wildly-struggling horse.

To the man sinking to such a horrible death and to the others watching, it seemed as though the two cowboys never would reach him.

Yet they were making haste with all speed possible.

Already Bowser's stirrups had been gripped in the relentless maw of the mudhole, and they realized that it would require all of their strength to draw him from the powerful and mysterious suction. Consequently, it was of the utmost importance that they choose footing that would not give way with them, thereby precipitating them into the mudhole—and sending all three to their death.

But the footing for the rescuers grew worse instead of better.

"We can't make it, this way!" cried Deadshot.

"Man, dear, you're sure not going to desert me?" pleaded the fast-disappearing ranchman.

"Not for a minute!" returned his cowboy. "Hey, Hawks, and the rest of you! throw your lariats over Sam's shoulders."

With a will, the men obeyed and for the next few seconds the air resounded with the whistling of the rawhides as they sped to their goal.

"Great work!" exclaimed Ki Yi. "Now, Sam, place them under your arms."

His fingers almost useless, so did the ranchman's hands tremble with fear, the work was slow.

Seeing that if they were not to be balked in their rescue, quick action must be taken, Deadshot cried:

"Back to your pony, Ki Yi! Sling me your rope! Sam can never get the nooses under his arms by himself. I've got to help him!"

"But your weight added to his will be too much for the pony! It's almost out of sight now!" protested Hawks.

"It's up to you fellows to keep us from going down!" returned the cowboy. "Keep your wits about you and act quick—when I give the word!"

Never stopping to question his orders, Ki Yi had leaped back to his broncho, seized his lasso and cast it deftly over Deadshot's shoulders.

Grasping the rawhide as it settled, the cowpuncher slipped it under his arms and then, summoning all his strength, jumped for the back of Bowser's pony.

In breathless silence, the others watched.

Squarely he landed behind the ranchman's back.

But to the horror of the spectators, the shock sent the pony and Bowser down a foot.

"Turn your horses and ride for all your worth!" yelled Deadshot.

And, as the men obeyed, he completed the work of slipping the lariats beneath the ranchman's arms.

Frantically the cowpunchers spurred their bronchos.

The lassos taunted, then for a nerve-wracking moment there was a silence as the men watched to see whether they would be able to draw the two men from the awful death.

Slowly at first, then rapidly, Bowser's body was dragged from the sucking mudhole, Deadshot clinging to his back.

But, as the men were hauled to safety, there came a terror-stricken shriek from the pony in the mudhole, followed by the gloating swish of the brackish water as it settled over the spot where the animal had disappeared!

CHAPTER XI.

SLIPPERY NIG IDENTIFIES THE MIDNIGHT RAIDER.

As though fearful the same fate from which they had so barely rescued the owner of the Double Cross might overtake them, the horsemen never paused until they were on solid ground.

With careful hands, they loosed the lariats, the cruelly-torn flesh of the ranchman revealing as nothing else could the terrific force of the sucking mudhole, then bound up his wounds in salve and linen which Deadshot took from his saddlebags.

"Reckon we'll have to find some other way of routing out the Midnight Raider than trying to follow him through the swamp," exclaimed Bowser, with a feeble attempt at a smile, after a drink of brandy had revived him.

"No doubt about that!" asserted Hawks. "Even if we could run across him, which we probably couldn't, he would be able to dispose of us very effectually by luring us into one of those hellholes."

"Then how do you propose to trail him to his lair?" demanded Deadshot.

"That's up to you and Ki Yi, as leaders, to figure out," returned the owner of the Star and Moon.

"The only way I can see is to start early in the morning and follow the trail on foot," suggested Dude.

"And run the additional danger of getting bitten by copperhead and such like deadly snakes," exclaimed another of his companions, to whom the name of Grouch had been given. "Not for mine, thank you."

"Isn't there some one who knows these bottom lands?" asked Hawks. "I should think some of those old Piutes, over by the catacombs, ought to know them. They say the Injuns used them, in olden times, as a prison for their captives."

"Man dear, but you've hit the nail on the head!" ejaculated Deadshot, in delight. "There's an ornery crittur, part greaser, part Injun and part coon, whom I ran across last summer, they call him 'Slippery Nig,' who knows every mudhole and hummock of grass in the swamps."

"Then he's the bucko we want," returned Ki Yi. "The quickest way to get at the Midnight Raider is to track him to his lair and surprise him. He probably knows there isn't a living white man who could scout through these bottoms for twenty-four hours, so he wouldn't take any pains to keep a lookout, once he reached his cover."

"But, suppose we can't find Slippery Nig, or he won't come, what then?" inquired Hawks. "Do you think it would do any good to lay for the fellow to pot him when he starts out on another raid?"

"Not unless you had three or four regiments of Uncle Sam's soldiers," returned Deadshot. "The Sangammon bottoms cover about ten square miles—and the farther in you go the ornerier they get—so you can figure it out for yourself how many men it would take to throw a cordon round it."

"Then, as far as I can see, the Nig is our only hope," declared Dude.

"Providing you can get him," added Ki Yi. "How about it, Deadshot, will he come, do you think?"

"He will if he's in this part of the country."

"Don't be too sure," interposed Grouch. "I've heard of Slippery Nig before. They say if there's one thing he hates more than another, that same's a white man."

"That being so, what's the use of wasting time trying to find him?" demanded Bowser.

"Oh, don't worry about his not coming, if he's alive—and I haven't heard of his death," rejoined Deadshot. "Slippery Nig is under a trifling obligation to me—I saved his life last summer when a couple of Injuns had him cornered—so there's no danger of his refusing. If he does, I'll send him where the bucks were going to."

Realizing that the cowboy would, in consequence, be able to obtain the assistance of the guide, could he be located, Hawks asked, eagerly:

"How long will it take to find him? Where does he hang out?"

"Over by the catacombs. I reckon if I take Ki Yi with me, we can have him back here before sundown."

"Then get a move on. We'll wait right where we are," exclaimed the owner of the Double Cross. "What with stealing my cattle and then causing me to get into that death hole, it seems as though I couldn't wait much longer to get a shot at that raider."

No urging, however, did the two cowboys need to make them start on their quest for the old guide, and quickly taking the freshest ponies in the lot, they were soon galloping over the plains.

If ill luck had attended the beginning of the pursuit of the Midnight Raider, it evidently repented of such

actions, for, before the cowboys had traversed more than half the distance to the catacombs, they came upon the object of their ride, squatting beside a fire, frying some bacon on an old piece of tin.

At the sound of hoofbeats, the old guide had risen cautiously from his place and scanned the horsemen, though so craftily had he done the trick that neither of the cowpunchers were aware of it. Deciding, however, that they would not prove hostile, he had resumed his cooking and was still engaged at it when the horsemen rode up to him, after discovering the faint wraith of smoke caused by his fire.

"Man, dear, but the sight of you does my eyes good!" exclaimed Deadshot, slipping from his saddle and extending his hand, which the old man accepted rather suspiciously.

"What brings you over this way?" he asked, without expressing either pleasure or surprise at beholding the man to who he owed his life.

"Looking for you."

"Huh?" And the tone in which he spoke showed that the information was not welcome. "Nig no done nothing. Besides, you told me you was a cowman."

"So I am," laughed the member of the Double Cross outfit. "What have you been up to now, you old rascal, that you're afraid the officers are looking for you?"

But the old guide ignored the question, repeating his own as to the purpose of Deadshot's search for him.

Briefly the cowboy told him about the lone spectre's raids and the vain pursuit.

At the tale, Slippery Nig's eyes sparkled and there came into them a look of vengeance which mystified the cowpunchers.

But only for a minute.

Even before either of them had the chance to ask the cause, the old man spoke.

"You know him raider?" he queried.

"No, do you?" chorused both the cowboys, exchanging significant glances.

"Sure. Only one heap fool alike that."

"Who is it, then?"

"You remember Injun bucks last summer?" he asked, looking at the man who had rescued him from them.

"You bet I do!" returned Deadshot.

"Fool raider, him one—Scalping Louie."

"Not really?" cried the cowmen, in amazement, for the name was that of a renegade redskin whose chief delight was to scalp helpless women and children, and for whom there was a reward offered by the Indian agent on the reservation from which he had escaped only a month or so before.

"That him, Scalping Louie," repeated Nig. "Me just heard day, two day ago, he broke way from reserve again. That why me here."

These words were uttered with such grim significance that the cowboys realized without the necessity of asking

or being told that the old scout was on the trail of the Midnight Raider.

"Then you'll help us run him down?" inquired Ki Yi, with a wink at his companion.

"Uhuh! Me go."

"Good boy! Don't bother to cook that bacon. Get up behind me and we'll go back to the rest of the bunch and then you can eat all you want to," exclaimed Deadshot, scarcely able to restrain his delight that the task he had feared might even necessitate a resort to force had been accomplished without the making of any promise or offer of reward.

"All right, me go. No need ride with you, got own pinto."

This statement that the old scout had a pony with him amazed his hearers, and in surprise they looked about to see where the animal could be.

For a moment, Nig enjoyed the mystification of the cowpunchers, then finally got to his feet.

"Cowmen no know all Injun trick," he chuckled. "Long ago, Injun had be heap smart. Deadshot could fool paleface. Me show."

Eagerly the two men followed Nig, wondering whether or not he was playing a joke on them, or leading them into a trap.

But their suspicions of the old scout were quickly allayed.

Scarce a rod had they gone from the fire than the old scout stopped, bent over, swept aside the grass with his hand and beckoned to his companions.

There, stretched flat on its side where it had been deftly, covered with mesquite, lay a flea-bitten pony.

"Man, dear, but that's some trick!" ejaculated Deadshot, in undisguised admiration of the cleverness with which the animal had been hidden.

"That's what!" acquiesced Ki Yi. "How do you do it, Nig?"

"Train um pinto."

"So I suppose. Sounds easy enough, but how in the world do you manage to make the crittur lie so still he won't even make the grass move unnaturally?"

"Train um pinto. Injun pony no fool."

"So it seems. But, just the same, I don't see how you can rig up the grass, even after you've taught the pony to lie still," declared Deadshot.

"Me show—after get Louie."

Thus recalled to the business in hand, the two cowboys watched Nig as he turned to go back to the campfire, uttering a sharp command in some half-breed lingo which brought the pony to its feet as he did so.

"Say, if you and I knew as much as that old codger, we could get the finest job in Uncle Sam's Mounted Scouts," exclaimed Ki Yi, enthusiastically. "I'll bet he has forgotten more than any other scout on the plains to-day ever knew."

"No chance for an argument there," returned the other

cowboy. "I wouldn't be in Scalping Louie's shoes for all the money in the United States treasury."

Put in an excellent humor by the praise of the cowpunchers, for he realized the praise of these men of the plains was the appreciation of men who knew, Slippery Nig quickly, and with an agility amazing in one of his years, vaulted onto the back of his pinto and headed toward the South.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PLAINSMEN ARE OUTWITTED.

As the queer trio loped along to the camp where the rest of the avengers were eagerly awaiting the return of the two cowboys and hoping against hope that they would be successful, not only in locating the old Indian scout, but in persuading him to lend his skill and assistance in running the Midnight Raider to his lair, Slippery Nig regaled his companions with tales of his past exploits. And many were the pointers he gave his eager listeners as to trailing and woodcraft.

But when they drew near their destination, the old scout grew reticent and by the time they reached their fellows, he was as stolid of feature and as taciturn as the proverbial Indian chieftain.

"What luck?" called Bowser, as the tramp of the ponies reached the ears of the waiting men.

"We've got him," returned Ki Yi.

In delight, all the cowboys, Hawks and even the suffering owner of the Double Cross ranch got to their feet and hastened to greet and get a glimpse of the man upon whose skill they were depending to send the spectral raider to his much-deserved doom.

"Hello, old chap!" exclaimed Bowser, extending his hand cordially to the old scout. "I'm sure glad Deadshot found you. We're in a mighty bad way, as I suppose he's told you."

But Slippery Nig made no more move to shake the hand or return the greeting than if the owner of the Double Cross were not in existence.

"Surly old duffer, ain't he?" grinned Dude.

Yet even this comment upon his manner failed to draw a sign from the aged scout that he was aware of the presence of the cowboys and the ranchmen.

Nonplused by the refusal of their advances, the men gazed at one another in perplexity, deeming that it was necessary for the success of the pursuit that they should win Nig's good graces. Even a word from Deadshot failed to elicit any response, and they were at their wits' ends to know what to do to restore his good humor, when Grouch chanced to solve the mystery of his taciturnity.

"Perhaps he's deaf," the Star and Moon cowpuncher whispered to Dude.

This aspersion upon his faculties unloosed the flood-gates.

"Me no deaf," snorted the aged scout. "Neither is

Scalping Louie. No wonder paleface no get near um. Make noise like squaws. Louie maybe hear um and cum see um. See Nig and vamoose. Paleface heap fool. Louie think Nig in swamp, break for anywhere. Nig have heap trouble trailing him. Paleface either shut um mouth, or Nig no help."

"What's it all about?" asked Hawks, turning to the cowboys who had fetched the old scout for an explanation of the torrent of wrath. "Who's this Louie, anyhow? What's he got to do with us? Doesn't the old duffer know it's the Midnight Raider we're after?"

"Easy, easy," grinned Deadshot. "One question at a time."

"All right. I'll keep quiet," returned the owner of the Star and Moon, "only for pity's sake get busy and explain what we've done to bring down the wrath of this old curmudgeon upon our heads."

"In the first place, your Midnight Raider is no other than Scalping Louie, the renegade chief from the Piute reservation, whose specialty is descending upon lone ranch houses and settlements and scalping all the women, children and old men he can lay his hands on. He's broken from the reservation goodness only knows how many times—it seems he was one of the parties from whom I saved Nig last summer—and he's broken out again within a few weeks."

If the cowboy desired to produce a sensation by this statement, he succeeded beyond his fondest dreams.

In blank amazement, the men stared at one another and then from Deadshot to old Nig.

"Skull and crossbones, as Sandy says!" exclaimed Bowser. "No wonder we have been outwitted by the fiend. Why, he's the most dangerous Indian in the country. Only the other day, when I was at the Centre, I signed a petition asking that the devil be sent to the United States prison at Leavenworth—where he couldn't break out any more."

"And so did I," interposed Hawks.

"Then it's dollars to a coyote flea that's why you two were singled out as the first objects of his wrath," declared Ki Yi. "He probably heard in some way that you'd put your names to the petition, and then later that you'd both gone out on the range to round up and drive in your steers for market. His intentions were, more'n likely, to add Sarah's and Amy's scalps to his collections, but finding you had both returned, he vented his wrath upon Sam by driving off his cattle and leaving a trail big enough for a baby to find leading into the Sangammon bottom lands, so's he could get you into one of those mudholes. And when he found Hen was back, he decided to vary operations by burning the home outfit."

Though this speech was the longest consecutive one the cowboy had ever made in his life and was somewhat involved, the others followed it closely, their thorough concurrence in the views signified by frequent noddings of their heads.

But the final touch of approval came from Slippery Nig.

"Some paleface plenty wise," he declared, his weather-beaten and battle-scarred face breaking into a smile of praise.

"Keep on talking, you two, you'll soon have him really pleasant," chuckled Bowser.

And, in obedience, Deadshot took up the task of interpreting Nig's remarks where he had left off when Ki Yi began his explanation of the arids.

"Nig, knowing Louie's cunning, did not like the way you-all greeted us when we came up. He's out on a little scouting party for Louie himself—on account of that performance in which I played the part of the hero, I suppose.

"That's probably one of the principal reasons why he agreed to join forces with us. And, because he's out on this little trip, he doesn't want us to make so much noise that Louie will come snooping round to find what's doing and get wise to the fact that Nig is with us. For, if there is anybody slicker in trailing and such things than Louie, it's Nig—and Louie knows it.

"Consequently, if Louie should see Nig with us, he would know he was on the war path and light out—which would spoil what seems like a lovely little chance for Nig to save Uncle Sam a lot of expense by putting him where he can't take any more scalps."

Another grin of approval from the aged scout greeted this elucidation of his caustic comment.

"Then, as I understand it, what Nig wants is for us to keep quiet?" inquired Bowser.

"Heap quiet," chuckled the scout.

"All right, we will—especially as it seems to be sound sense," returned the owner of the Double Cross. "Now, suppose you ask him what he intends to do, Deadshot."

Without delay, the cowboy put the question, while his companions awaited eagerly for Nig's response.

And, after several minutes, their curiosity was gratified.

"First, must see trail, learn where goes."

"But we can't follow it, we've tried it once and pretty nearly lost Bowser in the attempt," exclaimed Hawks.

"Me no say follow um," returned the scout, in disgust.

"Me say want to see where um goes."

"What good will that do?" queried Ki Yi.

"Me know where Louie pitch teppee, burn him out."

"By thunder, that's the idea!" ejaculated the owner of the Double Cross, unable to restrain his delight at the suggestion. "Want any help from any of us?"

"Uhuh! Me take Deadshot and Ki Yi. Palefaces stay here till we come back."

"Don't worry about our going away," smiled Hawks, "and we'll keep all-fired quiet, too."

"Good. We no be back till burn Louie out. Palefaces stay on edge of swamp. When see um fire, watch out. This only trail to Louie's teppee. Palefaces stay here and

when Louie come, shoot um. We stay on other side so shoot Louie if run that way."

"But how about the North and South? Won't you need some guards for them?" queried Bowser.

"Naw. No trail to South or North. Mudhole too bad, 'cept near catacombs."

"Then hurry up and be going," exclaimed Hawks. "This scheme looks like a rip-snorter to me. You won't be gone five minutes before I'll have the others in positions from which they can sweep the trail."

"Huh! Palefaces watch out no shoot too soon. Louie hear shot, he dodge."

"Oh, I reckon palefaces aren't such fools they can't tell a man from a shadow," retorted Bowser.

"Mebbe. But animals, um come from swamp 'fore Louie. Animal smell um fire before mans."

"Then we'll be on the lookout. Now hurry—and good luck."

"And don't forget that the success of this whole scheme lies in you-all keeping dead quiet," cautioned Deadshot as he and Ki Yi followed Slippery Nig into the trail.

But, despite this warning, the bunch of avengers, sitting tense and alert for the appearance of the Midnight Raider, again fell prey to him!

With a cleverness that was uncanny, the old scout led the way through the swamps, seeming to travel all the time over firm ground, with such skill did he avoid the mudholes.

And, as the cowboys were marveling at his ability, he suddenly halted his pinto and raised his hand for them to stop, putting a finger to his lips to enjoin silence, and then, when they had drawn rein, pointing with his other hand toward the tops of the trees some thirty yards ahead.

Quickly following the direction, the cowpunchers beheld a faint wreath of smoke floating lazily off into the air.

And, as they realized that their quarry was in his teppee, their hearts beat like trip-hammers.

But not long were they allowed to enjoy the sight.

Again the old scout raised his hand, this time beckoning to them to ride close to him.

"Must be careful now," he whispered. "Must get on other side of teppee so set fire. Wind from South. We go North. Louie no smell."

Wondering how their aged guide could detect the direction of the wind when they were not even aware there was any stirring, at least, not sufficient to carry their odor to the shrewd old fiend, the cowboys followed his lead. But, though as before, Nig picked out only firm ground for them to ride on, he made frequent halts while he listened and sniffed, once or twice even dismounting and reconnoitring on foot.

After what seemed to them several hours, so slowly did they advance, Nig gave the word to halt.

"Isn't there any more danger of his hearing us?" queried Ki Yi, surprised to hear the aged scout speak.

"No make difference now," he replied.

"Why not?" exclaimed both cowboys, together.

"Because we on South side of teppee."

"But I thought that was the side you wanted especially to avoid?" remarked Deadshot.

"While we getting here, uhuh. Now no difference. Palefaces at head of trail. If Louie smell us now, he no think any there and they shoot um."

During this conversation, the aged scout had been preparing some grass which he braided with amazing rapidity into a long strand and then cut into three pieces, two of which he gave to his companions.

"What are these for?" they asked, in chorus.

"Torches."

"But I never saw any like these," exclaimed Ki Yi, examining his braid sceptically.

"No go out easy, no burn too quick."

And without other explanation, Nig lighted his, and, dismounting, began to kindle a row of fires in such a direction that the increasing wind would sweep them down upon the retreat of the Midnight Raider.

At first, it was necessary to rekindle the fires in several places, especially where the cowpunchers had applied their torches. But, at last, being shown how to avoid the wet undergrass and light only the dry tops and the upper part of the underbrush, they soon had a leaping wall of flame raging through the swamp.

As the wind steadily grew stronger, Nig's face was wreathed in smiles.

"Palefaces watch out, we get Louie, sure," he chuckled. "Came near not, though," he added. "When we coming round by teppee he come nigh smelling us."

"How was that? We weren't anywhere near his teppee, were we?" asked Deadshot, surprised at the thought.

"Uhuh. Mebbe ten feet, mebbe rod."

At this reply, the cowpunchers stared at one another in amazement.

"If we were so near, why didn't you sneak up and put a bullet into him?" queried Ki Yi.

"Louie snooping. Me no know where, but me fool um." And again he chuckled at the realization his cunning had outwitted his mortal enemy.

But their rejoicing was premature. In their calculations, they had forgotten the cattle.

As it happened, the steers were grazing not far from where they had kindled the fires, and quickly the creatures sensed the danger, lowing and groaning.

"That will give the alarm to Louie, won't it?" anxiously inquired Deadshot.

"Uhuh. But steers never get through swamp."

Yet, though Slippery Nig was right in this contention, the animals came near causing the death of the trio.

With that perversity which makes steers so impossible to rely on, and because many animals are prone to rush

into fire instead of away from it, the cattle charged directly at the wall of flame.

Instantly realizing this action, and knowing the danger with which it threatened them, Nig leaped upon his pony and, calling to the others to mount behind him and abandon their own horses, he guided the wiry little pinto to a place of safety just at the edge of the fire. But, even with such a distance between them and the spot where they had been standing, they were only able to save themselves by shooting three steers that thundered down upon them.

Growing impatient as time went by without any action, the rest of the avengers were suddenly roused to attention by the discovery of the glow from the flames.

"Where'll we put the ponies?" asked Dude. "We ought to have them far enough away so they won't be frightened by the fire."

"Take 'em out a couple of hundred yards on the plains," directed the owner of the Double Cross. "They'll be safe there, and we can reach them in time to dash to the South before the flames get us."

Quickly this order was obeyed, and the men spread out to cover as much ground as possible, that their quarry might not escape them.

Eagerly they awaited a sight of Scalping Louie, guns held against their shoulders.

But, though denizens of the swamps, of all sorts and descriptions, swarmed forth, never the sight of a human being did they catch.

Already the heat of the flames was becoming intense.

"Do you think he's got by us?" shouted Bowser to Hawks.

"I don't see how X——"

But his words were never finished.

For, even as he was speaking, there rang out above the roar of the fire, a piercing "O-u-e-e!"

Instantly the avengers whirled toward the plains.

Waving his hand in derision, the lone horseman was racing Southward, driving the ponies of his pursuers ahead of him.

CHAPTER XIII.

A THRILLING RESCUE.

Cursing and howling in fury, to think that they had again been outwitted by the Midnight Raider, the cowboys pumped shell after shell at the fleeing horseman.

As before, he seemed to ride unscathed through the leaden hail—and their inability to hit the horseman only added to their anger.

Dude and Grouch had raced out onto the plains in the futile attempt to overtake the fugitive on foot. But at last they even gave up shooting at him.

"What'll old Slippery Nig say to us *now*, I wonder?" exclaimed the owner of the Star and Moon, as they stood gazing after their fast-disappearing foe.

"He won't have the chance to say anything if we

don't hike out of here mighty quick," returned Bowser. "Come on, men, run to the South for your lives!"

This command recalled the fire to the avengers for the first time since they were made aware that the Midnight Raider had tricked them.

Gazing toward it, they realized they were in greater danger than they had ever been from Scalping Louie.

By leaps and bounds, it seemed to be sweeping down upon them, its billows of smoke already causing them to cough and choke.

"Turn your heads to the open plains and run low!" shouted Hawks. "Two hundred yards will bring us beyond the edge of the wall of flame. The wind is already driving it more to the North!"

Desperately the cowboys put forth every bit of their strength in frantic effort to reach the zone of safety. And each thought only of himself.

As a result, it was not until they had gained a spot behind the death-dealing wall of flame that they gave thought to one another.

But, when they did, they found that one of their number was missing!

"Where's Sam?" demanded Dude, looking from one to another of his fellows, in alarm.

For a moment, the thought that one of their band had fallen prey to the inexorable fire, filled them with horror.

"He must have fallen," murmured Hawks.

"Shall we go back for him?" asked Grouch.

"And lose your life, too? No. One life is enough to give to that raiding devil without sacrificing another in a useless attempt. Some of us should have thought of giving Sam assistance, seeing that he was unable to take care of himself because of the wounds made by the lariats when we dragged him from the mudhole. But it's no use to try to save him now. We don't know where he fell, and the smoke is already upon him. Poor fellow!"

Though they accepted the decision of the ranchman, realizing that it would, indeed, be madness for any one on foot to attempt the rescue, the thought of the man they so revered meeting such a horrible fate was more than they could bear, and, seemingly with one accord, they faced away from the wall of flames and threw themselves into the grass that they might not see the fire sweep up the plains—and devour the owner of the Double Cross ranch.

But, even as they despaired, expecting every instant to hear the agonized shriek that would announce the rush of the flames upon Bowser, help was speeding to him by leaps and bounds!

When Sandy had been advised by Ki Yi to take Mrs. Hawks to the Double Cross and then, getting Pinky, ride to join the rest of the avengers, he lost no time in putting the suggestion into effect.

"Why, man, what brings you back? Why aren't you riding with the others?" exclaimed the woman. "I

should think they were short handed enough, as it was, to capture that villain without leaving you behind."

"That's the way it looked to me, Mrs. Hawks, but Sam got mad at me and told me to give Ki Yi my pony and come back here to stay with you."

And rapidly he narrated the incidents that had brought about the unhorsing of the pursuing cowboy and his own humiliation.

Sympathetically the woman listened.

"Sam always was hot tempered," she declared. "And then he only listens to the last one who has his ear. I've always told Hen so—and this business proves it. Still, I'm mighty glad you came back. I was beginning to feel scared, all alone here. It's no place to leave a woman, with her home in ruins and all those cattle in the corral."

Groaning as he realized from this torrent of words that even the events of the night would not stop the woman's loquacity, the foreman cursed silently to himself.

But he was given little time to indulge in his own thoughts.

"Who knows, it may be an act of Providence that you've come back," rattled on the woman. "Like as not, something will happen before morning that will give you a chance to show your worth and make us all glad you didn't go. Let's go over to the corral and see how the cattle are. I've got to be doing something. There's no house to go into and——"

"That's just what I was agoing to speak to you about," exclaimed Sandy, interrupting. "It's no fit place for a lady to be—here on the plains with her home in ruins and no roof or nothing to protect from storms and no food to eat."

"You never spoke a truer word, Sandy. But what can we do? Now, you're here, I don't propose to let you go and leave me while you ride to the Centre for provisions or anything."

"Why not go over to the Double Cross?" suggested the foreman. "You and Mrs. Bowser could get along together—you'd be company for each other, so you wouldn't feel afraid—and that being so, it would let Pinky and me go to join Sam and the rest of them."

For several minutes the woman considered the proposition, without making any comment.

By watching her face closely, thanks to the light from the still glowing ruins, the foreman could see from its expression that his suggestion had appealed to her, and this was proved by her words.

"Do you think it would be right for me to leave the cattle?" she queried, anxiously. "Something might happen to them—or they might be raided."

"Well, I don't see how you could do very much, either to stop the raid or to help, if trouble broke out," replied Sandy, a smile lighting his face. "If there's one thing more than another that will stir up a restless crittur, it's

a woman. And you sure wouldn't be able to stand off a gang of raiders."

"No-o, I suppose not," returned the woman, hesitatingly. "Still, if anything *should* go wrong, and I wasn't here, Hen would never forgive me."

Only too well did the foreman realize the truth of this statement, thoroughly familiar as he was with the nature and disposition of the owner of the Star and Moon ranch. But he was determined to rejoin his fellow avengers, and, as an idea came into his mind, he exclaimed:

"Hen didn't think anything about *you* when he started after that raider. I don't see why you should put yourself in danger. If it hadn't been for my row with Sam, I wouldn't be here now—and then you would have been in a bad fix, without food, shelter or ponies. It strikes me that, under the circumstances, the thing for you to do is to think only of yourself and come with me to the Double Cross."

"But how would we get there? We haven't any ponies and I surely can't walk thirty miles through the grass."

"I'll fix that all right, if that's all is keeping you. It won't take me more than an hour or so, perhaps not that long, to round up a couple of the bronchos and then we can start."

"Then get busy and catch 'em," exclaimed the woman. "I kind of hate to leave the ranch this way—but Hen Hawks had no business to leave me all alone by myself!"

Waiting never a minute, lest the woman repent of her decision, Sandy set out to round up two of the ponies, smiling to himself as he went out onto the plains at Mrs. Hawks' passionate outburst.

"I wouldn't be in Hen Hawks' place when he *does* get back for all the cattle in that corral," he grinned.

Thanks to his skill, it did not take the foreman long to catch a couple of the bronchos, and, though they were obliged to ride without saddles or even blankets and with bridles improvised from bits of rawhide lariats which Sandy found, in due course they were on their way to the home ranch of the Double Cross, which they reached soon after daybreak.

In horror, Mrs. Bowser listened to her friend's excited recital of the events of the night before.

But, when Sandy announced his intention of taking Pinky and riding to the Sangammon swamps for the purpose of rejoining the band of avengers, she refused to permit him.

"What, leave us two women alone and unprotected?" she exclaimed. "Shame on you for thinking of such a thing, Sandy! Who knows but that terrible white raider, learning that all the men from the Double Cross and the Star and Moon ranches are chasing him, may come back and burn our buildings, too?"

In vain the foreman protested he had received orders from Bowser to follow, if possible, declaring that the greatest safeguard against further raids was to capture the raider.

Mrs. Bowser was adamant, however, and in her position Mrs. Hawks ably backed her up.

Giving up the idea for the moment, Sandy went back to the horse corral, taking Pinky with him.

"What's to be done?" demanded the latter, when they were safe from being overheard.

"I'm going!" declared the foreman, with emphasis. "You sneak into the bunkhouse and pack some grub for our saddlebags. Better put in a good supply because the others will probably be running short. I'll catch a couple of the best ponies and make 'em ready. When you've stowed the grub, come on out here. We'll mount and ride up to the ranchhouse. Seeing that we're determined to go, anyhow, the women will probably give their consent."

"And if they don't?"

"We'll just ride away."

Satisfied with this arrangement, Pinky hurried off to carry out his part of it, rejoining his companion in due course.

Quickly mounting, but not without many misgivings, the two cowboys cantered round to the veranda of the ranchhouse where they knew the women were sitting.

Even before they had come in sight, Mrs. Bowser heard the hoofbeats and went to learn their cause.

"What are you two boys going to do?" she demanded.

"Join Sam and the rest," returned Sandy.

"Oh, no, you're not; not while Amy and I are here all alone!" exclaimed the woman, resolutely.

And with a lightning movement, she turned to the side of the veranda, picked up a rifle and leveled it at the rebellious cowpunchers ere they could realize exactly what was happening.

"Now do you think you'll go?" demanded Mrs. Bowser, grimly. "If you don't turn round and ride back to the corral, dismount and promise not to try any such tricks again, I'll—I'll shoot you!"

Not relishing being in front of the death-dealing weapon pointed at him, especially when it was in the hands of a nervous woman—for he realized it might be discharged accidentally any moment—the foreman pretended to yield.

"All right! You seem to be the doctor," he replied, wheeling his horse, and at the same time winking at Pinky to let him know he had evolved another scheme to carry out his purpose.

"Well, I rather guess I'm the doctor—and you'll find it out!" retorted Mrs. Bowser.

"Put down the rifle, won't you?" pleaded Sandy. "It might go off without you intending it should. Now, we're not going, you don't need it."

"Say, you fellows must think I am easy," smiled the woman. "I won't put it down—and what's more, Amy and I are going to follow you with it to the corral, so you won't have the chance to give us the slip!"

It having been the foreman's purpose, after persuading

Mrs. Bowser to lay aside the rifle, to make a dash for the plains, when he realized from the determined woman's words that his scheme was frustrated, he relieved his feelings by cursing.

But a way out of the difficulty was presented in an unexpected manner!

Ere the cowboys had ridden a rod back toward the horse yard, both they and the two women were amazed to hear hoofbeats.

Wheeling in their saddles, at the same time whipping out their six shooters, that they might not be caught unawares in case the newcomers proved more raiders, the cowpunchers were surprised to see a man and a woman canter over the rise in the plains that led into the yard of the Double Cross home ranch.

At the sight of Mrs. Bowser with the rifle in her hands and the two horsemen with revolvers drawn, the newcomers drew rein, abruptly.

"What's wrong, Sarah?" called the man, at the same time dropping his hand to his own shooting iron.

"Well, Charlie and Mary Harris, if I'm not glad to see you!" cried Mrs. Bowser, running out to meet the couple, whom she had recognized as friends of hers from the Centre.

"Then, for goodness sakes! put down that rifle!" called the woman. "You may be glad to see us, but I don't feel over safe with that thing pointed at me."

Quickly the other woman obeyed.

Explanations of the surprising scene which had greeted the newcomers were quickly asked and given.

"Now that we're here, there's no reason why the boys can't go ahead and join Sam and Hen," exclaimed Harris. "If they've got to search the Sangammon bottoms, two more men will be mighty welcome to them. I wish I could go myself," he added, wistfully.

"Well, you can't, so you might just as well get that notion right out of your head!" retorted his companion, who was his wife. "It'll be bad enough to have only one man."

Fearing that some whim of the women might deprive them of this unexpected opportunity to go to their fellows, Sandy again wheeled his horse and rode up to the group.

"Then, we can go, Mrs. Bowser?" he asked, gathering up his reins and drawing his feet back ready to bury the rowels of his spurs in his pony's flanks the instant permission was given.

"You think it will be all right, Charlie?" she asked, turning to her friend from the Centre.

"Sure thing. Besides, Sam and Hen will certainly need every man they can get!"

"All right, you may go," exclaimed Mrs. Bowser. "And good luck to you!" she called.

For, no sooner had Sandy and Pinky heard the first words of her reply than they leaped their ponies forward

and were racing over the plains before the permission was fairly out of her mouth.

Being mounted on the fleetest horses that the Double Cross boasted, they traveled fast, sparing neither their horses nor themselves in their desire to join the other avengers as soon as possible.

From afar, they caught sight of the fire sweeping over the bottoms.

"They've trailed the fiend and are trying to burn him out!" cried the foreman, in exultation. "Come on, man, ride like the old Nick, so we can be in at the killing!"

All eagerness, the two cowpunchers rode with quirt and spur.

Scarce two miles away were they when they suddenly beheld a figure dart from the underbrush, scan the plains before him hastily and then make a dash for the bunch of ponies standing to the South.

"That's the raider! He's got away from them! Ride him down!" yelled Pinky.

But, even as he spoke, the daredevil renegade, as the reader knows, had leaped upon one of the ponies, and, waving his arms, scattered the others to the four points of the winds.

An instant later, Bowser and the other avengers, who had been outwitted by Scalping Louie, dashed from the swamps and began their frantic but futile firing at the fugitive, which they quickly forsook, as the reader knows, in order to save their own lives.

A moment, Sandy and his companion, never slackening their pace, hesitated whether to go in pursuit of the raider or to ride to the relief of their friends.

And as they tried to decide which to do, they beheld Bowser fall.

"Someone's down! We must save him!" shouted the foreman to his bunkmate. And together they rode with might and main.

But little did they think the fallen man was their master!

Being the heavier man Sandy's pony was tiring rapidly.

"Ride, man, I can't last!" he shouted.

Bending low over his saddle, Pinky rowelled deep furrows in the flanks of his broncho.

Gamely the beast responded.

The blanket of suffocating smoke was almost upon the prostrate form of the owner of the Double Cross.

Less than fifty feet away was Pinky.

Leaning far to one side of his saddle, the cowboy raced up, just as the hot, choking black pall settled over the spot where the ranchman lay.

Having taken keen sight of where the body lay, Pinky made a desperate grab.

To his intense joy, his fingers caught in the man's belt.

Tightening his hold, the cowboy turned his pony's

head, gave a terrific jab with his spurs—and swept from the cloud of smoke, dragging the body with him!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE AGED SCOUT GIVES AN EXHIBITION OF HIS ABILITY.

"Well done, man! Well done, Pinky!" shouted Sandy.

And with all speed possible he rode to the assistance of his bunkmate, as, with Bowser in his clutch, the cowboy emerged from the very grasp of death.

Not a moment too soon did he arrive!

Blinded by the hot smoke, choking and coughing, the cowboy from the Double Cross outfit was reeling in his saddle, his strength having given out after the rescue of his employer, though he still unconsciously clutched Bowser's belt.

But, before he fell, Sandy's strong arm encircled him.

Because of their horror at seeing one of their number give his life to the relentless wall of flames, as they supposed, Hawks and the men with him had not seen the thrilling rescue and it was not till they heard the foreman's shout of congratulation to Pinky that they had any idea there was any one near them.

No sooner had his words rung out, however, than they were upon their feet and quickly they swarmed about the prostrate form of the man they had given up as dead and his rescuers.

Even when they saw him saved, the narrowness of the ranchman's escape from such a horrible fate held them silent as they anxiously poured brandy and other stimulants down his throat.

But it was not many minutes before they were afforded the joyous relief of seeing Bowser open his eyes.

Thus satisfied that their fellow had, indeed, been saved in time, Dude and the others turned their attention to Pinky, who was quickly revived, while Hawks talked with Sandy.

The owner of the Double Cross ranch, however, was aware that he had not been saved by any of the three men who had been hiding in the bushes to intercept the Midnight Raider. Indeed, his last memory was of seeing them dashing for safety, giving no heed to his desperate call for assistance. And as his mind came back to its normal condition, he asked, feebly:

"Who—who saved me?"

"Pinky!" returned several voices.

"Pinky? Why—why—what's he doing here? I thought he was back at the ranch, looking after Sarah?" Then, another idea flashed into his mind, and he asked: "There—hasn't anything *more* happened at home, has there?"

"Not a thing, Sam," exclaimed his foreman, moving to where his master could see him.

"What, you here, too?" ejaculated Bowser.

"Yes, Charlie Harris and his wife came over to see Sarah, and he told us to join you—and from the fix

Pinky found you in, I reckon it was an all-fired good thing we come just when we did!"

"No doubt about that," returned the ranchman. "To say nothing of saving me, we'll need you before we run that cowlifter down. But I thought I left you at the Star and Moon?"

Briefly Sandy told him of his actions, not even omitting a description of the scene when Mrs. Bowser had held them from leaving the ranch at the point of her rifle, knowing full well that the woman would tell about it upon their return and believing it would seem less serious when his master was still in forceful remembrance of the fact that the timely arrival of his two men was all that had saved his life.

As the picture of the angry and determined women was set before their minds, the men laughed heartily.

"There's no doubt but that Sarah's a woman who's bound to have her own way," commented the owner of the Double Cross. "And I don't mind a bit saying I'd much rather it was you standing before her rifle than me. She's some nervous."

"Well, so long's everything is all right back at the ranch and we've got two more men than we thought you'd have, let's have grub," proposed Grouch. "I'm hungry."

"Sure we'll have grub—when you overhaul our ponies," snapped Dude. "You start out and round 'em up, and we'll have a fire ready when you get back."

Thus reminded that the loss of their horses also meant the loss of their food, which was all in the saddle bags, the avengers were thrown into no pleasant frame of mind.

But the two cowboys whose arrival had been so opportune quickly restored their good humor by announcing they had brought all the grub they could lay hands on. And, without more ado, the men who had come so near to a horrible death, set about having a meal.

Meantime, the aged scout and his two companions had heard the fusillade of shots which had been fired at the man they had routed from his retreat.

"Hooray! They've got the cuss!" shouted Ki Yi, gleefully, as the reports reached their ears.

"Got nothin'!" snorted Nig.

"Why not?" demanded Deadshot. "Can't you hear them firing?"

"Uhuh!"

"Then what makes you say they haven't got him?"

"Too many shots! Injun fool paleface! No trick um, no keep firing! Scalping Louie heap smart!"

From this logic there was no getting away and, though they stared at one another in dismay, the two cowboys accepted the aged scout's statement without quibble.

"What's to do?" asked Deadshot, after several minutes had brought no further comment from their guide.

"Find paleface."

"That sounds easy, but how are we going to get out of this hole without our ponies which the cattle drove off?" inquired Ki Yi. "I'm not keen on walking myself, especially when you're liable to sink out of sight if you don't step just so."

"Oh, we can keep hold of Nig's rope," rejoined Deadshot.

"No need walk," grunted the aged scout.

"How are we going, fly?" grinned the man from the Star and Moon. "I'm sorry, but I haven't got my air-

ship with me this trip," he added, jestingly, seeking to restore Nig's good humor—which the escape of his arch-enemy through the hands of the ranchmen and cowboys had sadly upset. "But perhaps you have one hidden in the swamp somewhere back of us, like you did your pony, Nig."

"Paleface heap funny—nit!" snapped the old half-breed. "Maybe no think so if Louie get um scalp."

"That sure wouldn't make a hit with me," rejoined Ki Yi. "But if Deadshot and me haven't got to walk, will you kindly tell us how we are to travel, seeing as how we've only got one pony among three?"

"And that one so short, Ki Yi couldn't sit it without pulling up his knees," added the member of the Double Cross outfit.

"Pinto carry plenty easy—but slow," responded Nig.

"Well, if that flea bitten bunch of hide and bones can stand it, I reckon we can," grinned Ki Yi.

But, despite his mocking words, both he and the other cowboy glanced at the little piece of horseflesh with renewed respect and, only too thankful to be spared the danger from a misstep which would land them in a sucking mudhole or from being bitten by some deadly poisonous snake, the two cowpunchers mounted behind their aged guide.

The task they had undertaken, however, proved even too much for the wily old half-breed, familiar with every foot of the swamps as he had been. For the fire had obliterated all the old landmarks, leaving a cover of charred grass and saplings in its wake which hid the treacherous deathpools, while from all about rose a steam sickening in its stench.

Wondering if they would ever be able to live through it and thanking their stars they were not obliged to walk, the cowboys were busy looking about them when the aged half-breed drew rein.

"No use. No make it," he grunted, scanning the blackened, foul-smelling waste. "Only paleface and fools try go through um."

"Much obliged for the comparison, but what do you propose to do?" asked Deadshot. "We sure can't stay here. I believe I'd rather make a try at getting through on foot, by myself, than dying in this hole!"

"Who say stay here?" demanded Nig.

"What else is there to do, if you say we can't go on?"

"Go back."

"But what good will that do?"

This lack of ability to grasp his purpose, disgusted the aged scout.

"Say, you think Nig fool enuff to get in where only one way get out, like paleface?" he snorted. "We turn roun' and go by the other trail."

Chagrined to think they had both showed such a lamentable lack of ordinary woodcraft, the cowboys looked at one another.

"By thunder! we are a pretty pair!" exclaimed Deadshot. "Here we'd clean forgotten there was any other way to get out of this death hole. Say, Nig, it's a mighty good thing we've got you to help us or, if we didn't show any more common sense than we have so far, Scalping Louie could raid all the ranches within a hundred miles while we sat round somewhere, thinking we'd got him cornered."

"That's no dream," assented the man from the Star and Moon outfit. "If we ever do get the cuss, the credit'll probably belong to Nig."

All the while the cowpunchers were berating themselves

for their forgetting the other trails leading into the bottoms, they were riding toward the West, and it was not long before they found, to their delight, that the going was easier than along the track by which they had entered.

"How much out of our way is this going to take us?" inquired Ki Yi, after they had proceeded for an hour or so.

"By turning to South, 'fore long, no make much more than twenty mile."

"How near will that bring us to where the cattle were driven in?" he asked, continuing his questions.

"Mebbe ten, mebbe twelve mile South."

"Well, I suppose you know what you're talking about. But I can't see how you figure that out," declared Deadshot. "Here you say our having to go back and round will take us twenty miles out of the way and yet we'll bring up in about ten from where we started."

"Uhuh. Go West. Go South. Go North. Swamp not all burned. Nig know trail save um going clear out."

"Say, isn't it easy when you know the answer?" chuckled Ki Yi. "Deadshot, the best thing for you and me to do is to keep our mouths shut before we show Nig any more of our ignorance."

And accordingly, the two cowboys held their peace while the aged scout guided his pony with infinite skill in and out among the death holes, turning so many times that neither of the men at his back were able to keep any idea of direction.

Several times, the member of the Star and Moon outfit had it on his tongue's end to ask toward which point of the compass they were traveling, but his pride prevented and just as it seemed to them that they were going in a great circle, they were amazed to emerge from a clump of saplings and underbrush and behold the plains in front of them.

In delighted surprise, the cowboys gazed at the welcome grass of the rolling prairies.

"I sure do take off my hat to you, Nig," exclaimed Ki Yi. "I've seen some good work in my life, but I never saw anything equal to what you've done. I'm all-fired glad it's on Scalping Louie's trail you are, and not mine!"

Though the cowpuncher had intended his words to be complimentary, even hoping that they might restore the aged scout's good nature, he could not have made a more unfortunate remark.

"Huh! Me on Louie's trail some more, plenty! If Bowser and palefaces no been heap fool, no need trail Louie!" he grunted. "Now mebbe day mebbe week, mebbe never—if fool sojers take um back to reservation. No been for fool paleface, Nig had Louie by now!"

Though the men at his back both believed his words, they were determined not to let him dwell upon the idea that the presence of themselves and the other avengers was a handicap rather than an assistance and Deadshot quickly exclaimed:

"Oh, well, I don't see how you could have got him alone. Besides, you won't have the hard time you think picking up his trail again. All we've got to do is to find the rest of our crowd and they'll be able to tell us in which direction the ornery crittur went."

But the aged scout was not to be propitiated so easily. "Heap good that do!" he snorted. "Paleface see Louie go South, mebbe. Good. But while they eating grub, thinking catch um in the morning, Louie him sneak back and go North."

"There won't be any danger of his doing that, now you're with us," shrewdly interposed Deadshot. "The very fact that they can tell you in which direction Scalping Louie went will save you just so much time in getting

on his trail because you won't be obliged to go searching round for it at random."

Though he gave no indication either by sign or speech that this statement was correct and appealed to him, the aged scout, however, became less taciturn as they rode Northward.

"What makes you go up instead of to the East or South?" asked Ki Yi. "You don't think the rest of our bunch are fools enough to try to flee from a fire by riding in front of it, when they could turn to one side or back and get away, do you?"

"No. We go up because we find paleface waiting near trail for us."

"What, do you think they'll sit quietly down and give Scalping Louie the chance to get away when they can follow him?"

"Paleface no follow Louie," returned the aged scout.

"What makes you think that?"

"Wait for us. Bowser, um want wait for Nig. Nig know. Hawk, um heap talk. No got good think cap. Bowser, um think we come back same trail we went in, so um wait near there."

That this opinion of the clever old half-breed not alone showed his marvelous ability to read human nature, but was in accordance with the facts, the reader already knows—and it was not long before the cowboys were made aware of it also.

By the time the strange trio mounted upon the back of the flea-bitten pinto had reached the plains, dusk was upon them, which steadily increased until it was almost pitch dark.

Of a sudden, as they mounted a rise in the prairies, the aged scout pointed ahead.

In the distance could be seen the fitful flicker of a fire.

"Man, dear, you don't suppose that could be the Midnight Raider, do you?" eagerly inquired Deadshot.

"What, Louie build a fire when um know um being hunted? Injun no such fool," retorted Nig, with infinite scorn in his voice.

"Then who is it?"

"No know. Think Bowser and palefaces."

Unable to dispute this assertion, the cowboys held their peace, for they realized that from the actions not only of their bunkmates, but of themselves, they had no right to resent the contempt for their scouting powers which the old half-breed held.

From time to time, as they steadily approached, they could see the form of some man silhouetted against the flare, as he arose and moved about.

"Howling coyotes! but couldn't we pick him off easy!" exclaimed Ki Yi, after one of these movements which were made without any apparent thought that there might be enemies afoot.

"And he'd never know what hit him!" returned Deadshot.

"Say, let's throw a crimp into the bunch!" ejaculated the member of the Star and Moon outfit, all at once.

"How?" demanded his companion.

"Sneak up on 'em and hold 'em up!"

"Man, dear! But that would be good fun!" returned Deadshot. Then, turning to the old half-breed, he asked: "Do you think we could do it, Nig?"

"Uhuh! Heap easy!"

"Then let's do it!" exclaimed the two cowboys, together.

The thought of giving Bowser and his men a practical illustration of his ability to stalk his game, whether man or beast, appealed to the aged scout, and readily he entered into the joke.

Without delay, the trio dismounted and Nig, by means of a few guttural commands, made his pinto lie down.

"No need cover um. So dark no one see," he declared. "You keep close to me. Do what me do."

Having taken a thorough observation of the exact location of the campfire, the aged scout doubled up, crouching so low that his back could not have been seen above the top of the grass, even if it had not been dark, and advanced, gliding through the mesquite so skillfully that it was nigh impossible for the cowboys to follow him. But out of consideration for them, he paused occasionally, giving them the opportunity to catch up to him.

"We must be pretty close to 'em now," whispered Ki Yi, after they had proceeded for some ten minutes.

"Uhuh. Palefaces no more thirty yards away."

"Then let's rush 'em!" exclaimed Deadshot.

"Get heap full lead," returned Nig.

This response suggested a contingency that had not hitherto occurred to the cowpunchers and the thought filled them with alarm.

"Won't we, anyway?" queried Ki Yi, anxiously.

"Seems to me it would be better to go back to get the pony and then ride up, shouting to them as we came."

"Not much!" returned the aged scout. "We play um joke. Come on. Do just what I do."

It was not without many misgivings, however, that his companions followed him, as, crouching even lower than before, Nig crept upon the unsuspecting ranchmen and cowboys squatting about the fire.

When they were so near that they could not only hear their voices but understand what was being said, the two cowpunchers expected that their guide would play his coup.

But the aged scout was determined to impress the entire outfit with his amazing ability—and it was not until there were scarce a foot of grass between him and his play-victims that he paused.

Then, turning and signing to his companions that he was ready to act, Nig drew his six shooters.

With a leap, he rose from the grass.

"Hands up!" he yelled, at the same time covering the men about the fire with his guns.

In amazement, Bowser and the rest of the avengers whirled in the direction whence the startling command had come—finding to their astonishment that they were gazing into the muzzles of six revolvers.

CHAPTER XV.

TRACKED TO HIS LAIR.

So absolutely by surprise had the ranchers and cowboys been taken that the shock seemed to paralyze their senses and they stared at the three men glowering from behind the death-dealing weapons as though they had never before beheld them.

With difficulty, Deadshot and Ki Yi restrained their desire to break into laughter. But so utterly crestfallen and pitiful did their companions look that they at last took compassion on them.

"Grouch, you old coyote, why didn't you throw up your hands, the way the gentleman told you to?" suddenly demanded the boy from the Double Cross.

At the words and the ring of the voice, the men who believed themselves in the power of the pals of Scalping Louie started violently.

"Well, if it isn't Deadshot and the others!" exclaimed Dude, in disgust.

At this identification, the trio dropped their shooting irons into their holsters and, walking to the fire, squatted down without waiting to be asked.

"What on earth did you throw such a scare into us for?" demanded Hawks, his ire rising, when he saw that all danger was passed, to think he and his companions had been so easily tricked.

"To let Nig show you just how big a bunch of dubs you are!" retorted the member of the Double Cross outfit. "We are sore because you let Scalping Louie get away and so we thought we'd get even with you by proving to you that any one could come right up to where you were and capture you, without you so much as knowing there was anybody round."

"It's sure one on us—and a bad one," admitted Bowser.

"But how did you know Louie had got away?" demanded Dude.

"Nig doped that out when he heard you firing so much," rejoined Ki Yi. "In addition to being the greatest thing in the line of a scout I ever came across, he can get the lay of any situation straighter than any one I know."

"Then, if he's so all-fired clever, let him get out and trail the cuss!" snapped Grouch.

"He will, never fear, as soon as we've had some grub. We're a bit hungry, seeing that our ponies with all our chuck were stampeded by the cattle when we set the fire in the swamp."

"So were ours—only it was Louie who did the stunt," declared Dude.

At this announcement of the further humiliation of the avengers, the aged scout and the two men who had accompanied him roared with laughter.

"I suppose we ought to be thankful he didn't kidnap the bunch of you!" grinned Ki Yi, when he had recovered from his mirth. "But from the hunger that's gnawing my insides, I don't know but I'd have been willing to swap Grouch for some food."

"Don't get too funny," retorted the member of the Star and Moon outfit. "If you'd been any sort of fellows, you'd fixed Louie in the swamp and then the whole thing would have been over, instead of just starting in again."

But no attention did Ki Yi or Deadshot pay to this remark.

For just as it was finished, Pinky came forward with some grub.

The sight of the cowboy they had supposed to be back at the ranch filled them with surprise and his welcome was none the less hearty because he appeared with food.

"Now, if Sandy were only here, we'd be all hunky," asserted Ki Yi.

"Oh, I'm here all right," announced the foreman of the Double Cross, advancing to where the others could see him.

And while the trio were satisfying their appetites, they listened to the story of what had happened to their pals who had been left to watch for the Midnight Raider, their narrow escape from the fire and the thrilling rescue of Bowser.

"Well, now that we're all here, what's to be done?" asked Hawks.

"Better leave that to Nig, it seems to me," returned the owner of the Double Cross.

The others signifying their acquiescence by their silence, all eyes were turned upon the aged scout.

"Which way Louie go?" he inquired, after enjoying his importance for several minutes.

"South," chorused two or three of the cowboys.

"Huh. Palefaces wait here, Nig take look round," returned the half-breed, and without giving them time

to protest, he sprang to his feet and glided off into the grass.

As though Dame fortune had decided to smile upon them, the night turned out to be clear as crystal and in due course a magnificent moon arose, bathing the plains in her silvery light till they were almost as bright as day.

For a while, after the aged scout had left them, Deadshot and Ki Yi regaled their companions with descriptions of the man's marvellous skill in guiding them into and from the swamp. But as the minutes wore on without his return, they grew silent.

Suddenly Deadshot sprang to his feet.

"I say, let's not give the old beggar the chance to get the drop on us again," he exclaimed. "Ki Yi, you Dude and Pinky watch the North, West and East, and I'll take the South. Challenge anything suspicious."

Readily the others agreed and about an hour after taking their posts, they were startled to hear Ki Yi shout:

"Out there in the grass! Who are you? Speak before I count three—or I'll shoot!" One—t—

"It's Nig! No shoot!" quickly returned a voice, and a moment later, the aged scout was among them.

"What did you find?" inquired Bowser.

"Louie gone to catacombs. Um hit. Found trail blood. Paleface pony over to North, half mile."

These responses brought delight to the avengers and quickly they were afoot.

"Nig, you ride with Pinky and show Ki Yi, who'll take Sandy's pony, where our horses are," commanded Bowser. "Bring 'em in as soon as you can. I sure am itching to get on that raiding devil's trail so I can get a shot at him."

With alacrity, the three men mounted and galloped away, returning in a short time with all the ponies save the one Scalping Louie had appropriated for himself.

Not long did it take for the ranchmen and cowboys to mount and, with Slippery Nig riding to where he had left his pinto with Deadshot, they again took up the trail of the Midnight Raider.

Making all speed possible, scarce a word was spoken until they came in sight of the cell-honeycombed cliff looming in the distance.

"We leave um pony here," exclaimed Nig, after taking a careful survey of the plains that he might get his bearings.

"But why? The catacombs must be all of five miles away," protested Hawks.

"Sure. But Louie, him can see man on pony heap more easy than man in grass on foot."

"That's true enough. Yet he won't be looking for us, seeing that he jumped our horses on us," returned the owner of the Star and Moon ranch.

"Louie no take chances. Um know cowmen not only ones on trail."

"See here, Hen, I say we let Nig have his way," exclaimed Bowser. "He sure knows his business—and we haven't made a howling success of our part."

This proposal met the ready response of the cowboys and without more ado, they quickly dismounted, hobbled their ponies and resumed the trail to the Midnight Raider's lair on foot.

Bending low, they advanced cautiously till they were within some two hundred yards of the base of the catacombs.

"My back's lame stooping over," snarled the owner of the Star and Moon. "I think this business of crouching is all rot, anyhow. I'm going to stand up."

But bitterly did the ranchman regret his decision and heartily did his fellows curse him.

With an oath, the aged scout leaped upon the ranchman to drag him down—but he was too late!

No sooner had Hawks' head appeared above the grass than a rifle barked!

"By thunder! He's got me!" cried the owner of the Star and Moon, clapping his hand to his left shoulder.

"Serves you good and plenty right!" retorted Bowser.

"Paleface more fool than coyote!" snarled Nig. "Now we no get to catacombs till night."

"Why not?" asked Sandy.

"Cause Louie stay on watch."

But if the avengers were balked in their advance upon the murdering Indian they had the satisfaction of knowing that he could not escape without running the gauntlet of their fire because the tiers of tombs had been hollowed from a cliff and only extended three rows in.

Cursing the ranchman openly and under their breath, the cowboys made themselves as comfortable as they could and prepared to await the coming of darkness, their guns ever at a ready, however, to pump a shot into their quarry should he show himself.

Once or twice, Nig wormed his way forward, then raised a bunch of grass suddenly, to learn whether or not his arch-enemy was on watch. And each time a bullet ripped it to pieces.

"He's some shot!" exclaimed Dude, after the third repetition of this feat.

"Have to be," grunted the aged scout, immediately lapsing into a silence from which no amount of questioning could rouse him.

To the avengers, it seemed that never did a day have so many hours nor the sun seem so loath to set. But at last twilight came—and with it welcomed activity to the manhunters.

"Me take Ki Yi, Deadshot and Pinky," announced Nig. "You left, all spread out. When we get to catacombs, we give shot, then you set fire to grass and watch so Louie no 'scape. We get Injun to-night—or never!"

But the task was destined to prove no easy one!

The face of the cliff into which the tomb cells had been cut was about three hundred feet long.

After stationing the five men who were again to try to prevent the fiend's getting away in positions some sixty feet apart and instructing them to lie flat on their bellies in front of the fires they were to set, in order that Scalping Louie might not shoot them down, the aged scout, his eyes glistening with anticipated joy at the doom of his enemy, led the three cowboys forward.

Bang! went Deadshot's gun as they reached its base.

Instantly, the fires flared from the plains in answer.

"You um take hold this rope," ordered Nig, rapidly passing out an end of his lariat which he had brought with him. "Ready? Now."

Yet before they could gain the entrance to the tombs, the murdering Indian made his presence known!

With terrific force, a huge rock struck the ground scarce a yard in advance of the aged scout.

"You be sorry! You be sorry!" hissed Nig, shaking his fist toward the top of the cliff. "Nig know where you are, now! You on third row tombs! We got climb stair."

As easily as though it were daylight, the aged scout sped along the face of the cliff, then suddenly darted into one of the openings and thankful, indeed, were his companions that they were tied to him.

"We go up stair," Nig whispered. "Get down on hand and knee. No make noise!"

Obediently, the cowboys dropped to all fours and

began the ascent of the old, seldom used rock steps. But though they did their best, it was impossible for them to restrain an oath or an exclamation of alarm when their hands touched some creeping thing, now and again.

"We must be pretty near the sky!" breathed Pinky after what seemed an endless climbing.

"That's no place look for Louie," returned the aged scout. "We be on same row in jiffy."

Nig's act of speaking amazed his companions. Yet it was done for the purpose of learning whether or not their quarry had surmised they might mount the stairs and be waiting to greet them with a rain of lead.

And the scheme worked to perfection!

Bang! went a gun almost before the words were finished. But because the wily old half-breed had made his men crawl on their hands and knees, the bullet whistled harmlessly over their heads.

Expectantly, the cowboys listened for the answering crack of the aged scout's sixshooter. Instead, however, they felt a quick jerk on the rope and then felt it tighten as Nig crept forward.

The failure to draw fire from his pursuers worried the Midnight Raider. Realizing full well the desperateness of his position, he determined to learn their whereabouts at any cost—and of a sudden he flashed a torch.

Taken by surprise, the wily old half-breed was not prepared to fire and before he could do so, the hard-pressed renegade threw away his light, and dashed down the tier of tombs.

"Up! After him!" hissed Nig.

Quickly the cowboys obeyed, plunging blindly through the darkness, guided only by the rope which bound them to the aged scout.

In the instant that the torch had flared, Scalping Louie had recognized the grizzled features of his arch-enemy—and realized he must outwit him were he to escape.

With this purpose, he suddenly darted into the row of tombs second from the rear wall, unwound his lariat, made one end fast about one of the pillars and then tied it around a pillar of the outside tier, some eighteen inches from the floor.

This done, the scheming fiend glided noiselessly back to the second row, took a position whence he could leap upon the rope and shouted:

"Slippery Nig, nor you nor hundred paleface no catch Louie!"

Whirling in the direction whence the taunt came, the aged scout sped to the outer tier of tombs, then started toward the end—and tripped over the rope!

With a howl of triumph, Scalping Louie was upon the cursing, squirming mass of cowboys.

But he had reckoned without their strength!

"I've got him! Here he is! Quick, strike a light!" yelled Deadshot, winding his arms about the murdering Indian in a grip like steel, rendering the fiend powerless to wield his scalping knife, as he had intended.

Yet the Midnight Raider was resourceful!

Realizing that should a torch be lighted his end was come, he raised his knee with terrific force, catching his captor full in the stomach, at the same time butting him viciously in the chest with his head.

The suddenness of the move broke Deadshot's hold and, with a mocking laugh, the daredevil renegade dashed for the stairway and darted to the second floor of the catacombs.

"You done for now!" gloated Slippery Nig. "Quick, boys, strike match, get torch, pick up dried twigs, grass, anything make fire. We drive Louie out!"

Not understanding exactly how this was to be ac-

complished, the cowpunchers nevertheless obeyed, and when they had gathered piles of inflammable stuff, Nig took it, crept down the stairs, placed it at the head of the tier, thrust a match into it and as it blazed up, bounded back to the floor above.

"Ki Yi, you, Pink watch here. Deadshot come with me. Nig know trap at other end this row. We go down. Get Louie between fire and us—bang!—all over!"

Quickly the cowboys obeyed and while, with guns ready, Pinky and Ki Yi stood guard at the head of the stairs, the other two hastened to the opposite end of the tier and began to work with might and main at the stone which formed the trap door.

The Midnight Raider, however, heard them and, taking his position behind a pillar, waited for a form to appear through the opening.

But the aged scout was more than his match in cunning. Anticipating this very act, as soon as he and Deadshot raised the trap, he took off his vest and lowered it cautiously.

In the darkness, the murdering Indian was only able to distinguish some object descending—and blazed away at it, again and again.

"Howl! Yell!" urged the old half-breed of his companion. "Make believe you hit! Me lower vest some more. You count shot. When get ten tell me. Louie gun empty, then we drop and git um!"

Marveling at the cunning of the aged scout, Deadshot obeyed.

And not until he had emptied both his guns and heard his pursuers as they dropped to the floor did the Indian fiend realize he had been outwitted!

But though unable to use his six shooters, Scalping Louie did not give up!

Dashing to the ground tier, he awaited his chance to dart out onto the plains.

"Paleface watch out! Louie coming! Set um fire up front of tombs! He no got shells in guns!" shouted Nig, going to the front of the catacombs.

Several times was it necessary to repeat the order before Bowser and the others understood. But at last they did and hastily began to start a line of fire along the base of the cliff.

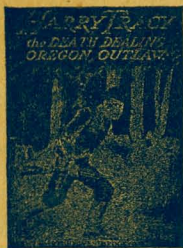
"Ki Yi, you um come down! Help Deadshot make blaze this floor!" then ordered Nig. "Me keep Louie from coming up!"

Hemmed in like a rat in a trap, the murdering Indian faced his doom with the stoicism of his race. The surprise of being driven from his tepee in the swamp had forced him to flee without taking the time to supply himself with ammunition beyond the shells he had in his six shooters and the ones he found in the saddlebags on the pony he stole were of a different caliber. Consequently, though he made his way to the horse, which he had hidden in one of the cells, he had no means to offer resistance.

As the flames leaped up outside the catacombs they made the interior of the cells as light as day.

"I see him! I see him!" suddenly yelled Bowser. "Scalping Louie, you may have come near causing my death twice—but you'll never have another chance!"

Rang out the "crack!" of a rifle, a bloodcurdling shriek—then the band of avengers from the tombs above rushed down to make sure that the Midnight Raider had not escaped his just doom!



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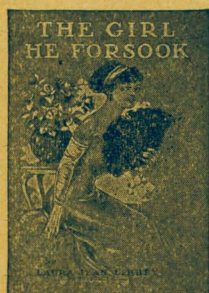
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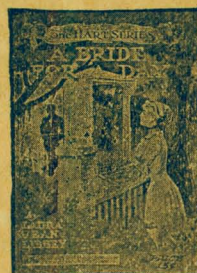
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