

STREET & SMITH'S  
**WILD WEST** ★

15¢

WEEKLY

CONTENTS COPYRIGHTED 1935

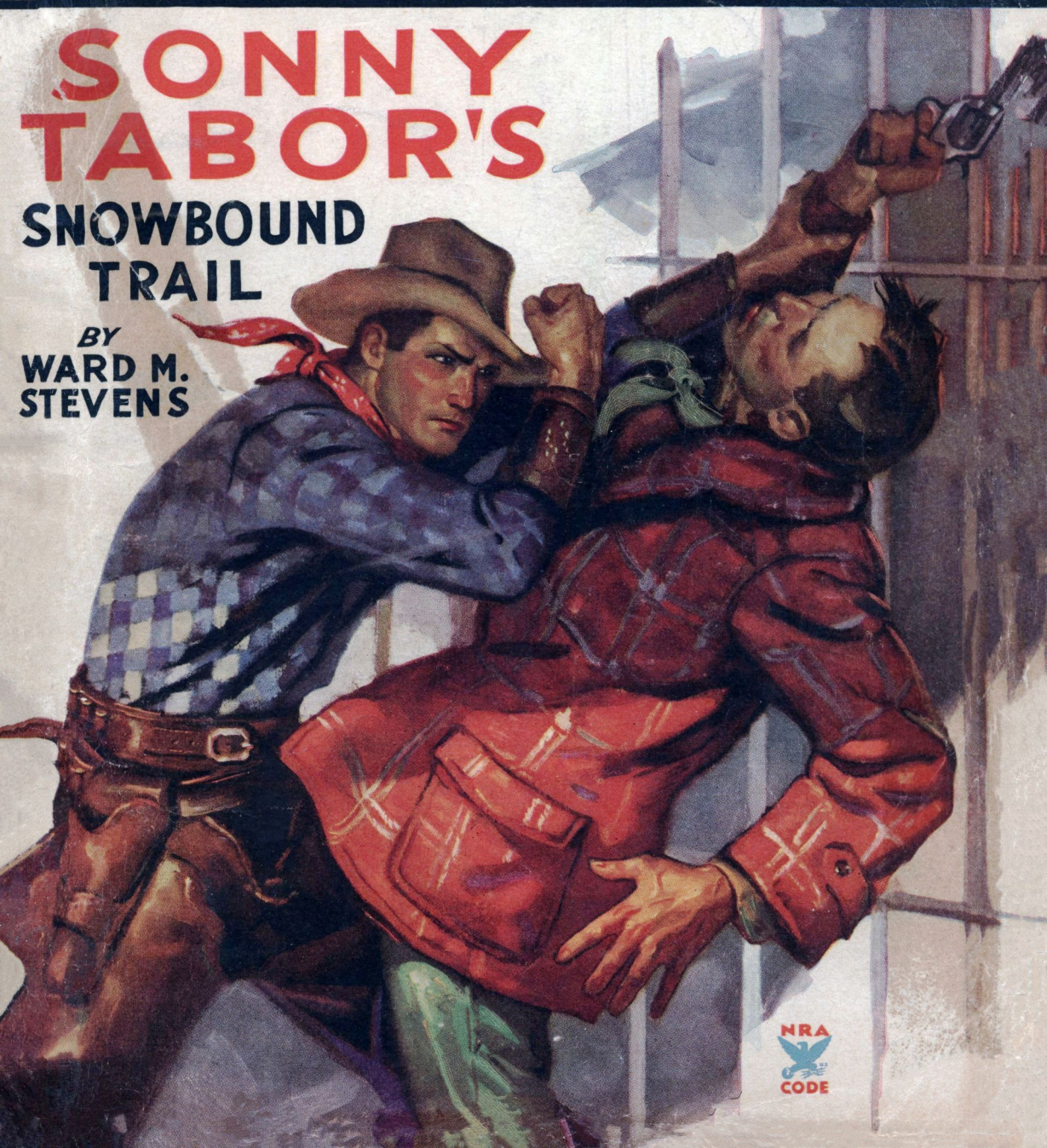
FEB. 2<sup>ND</sup>

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

**SONNY  
TABOR'S**

**SNOWBOUND  
TRAIL**

BY  
WARD M.  
STEVENS



NRA  
CODE



## NOAH WEBSTER thought that COLDS were caused by COMETS

Master scholar, compiler of the great dictionary, Webster was among the first to inquire into the baffling causes of that private and public menace—the common cold.

His conclusion that colds were due to the fearful plunge of meteors through the sky was far from the truth, but no less distant than that of other savants who assigned colds to the bite of bedbugs, and to “sitting in cold, damp churches.” (Dr. Thomas Haynes, 1789.)

For centuries, hundreds of absurd theories as to the cause of colds were advanced only to be sharply exploded. But now one has been presented that Science has generally accepted. This is the reliable virus theory.

Research men say the bacteria of this virus are so small the microscope cannot see them, so tiny they cannot be trapped by the most selective filters. Only by their harmful effect on the human body can their existence be established. With such a virus, scientists have repeatedly inoculated others with one person's cold.

*At the first sign of a cold*

Granting that colds are due to a virus that enters the mouth, nose and throat, is it not a wise precautionary measure to use a good antiseptic to fight such bacteria? Is it not wisdom to keep the oral cavity clean and healthy? Noted physicians tell us that it is. Millions of people find that it is.

Numerous tests have shown that regular users of Listerine did not catch as many colds as non-users, nor were their colds so severe. Moreover, countless letters this company has received testify to Listerine's remarkable ability to check colds, and to the almost immediate relief it gives in cases of ordinary sore throat.

The moment Listerine enters the mouth, it dislodges germ-bearing debris and kills literally millions of germs on mouth and throat surfaces.

Yet it is absolutely safe—does not irritate delicate membranes. That is a point of utmost importance in an antiseptic. Excessive strength in a mouthwash may prove to be a danger instead of a protection. Lambert Pharmacal Co., St. Louis, Mo.

**LISTERINE fights Colds and Sore Throat**



The only man  
who could talk  
to the  
Superintendent

For several years, he was just like a score of other men in the plant—a good, honest, fairly capable worker, but only that. There was nothing distinctive about him or his ability—nothing to make him stand out from the crowd—no reason, as a matter of fact, why he should ever receive a raise.

Then one fortunate day he decided that the reason he wasn't getting anywhere was because he lacked special training. He searched around a bit—asked a great many questions—and then enrolled for a home-study course with the International Correspondence Schools.

"Soon after I began studying," he wrote to us the other day, "we had a change in management at our plant. The new superintendent said that only

men who had really studied their work were in line for positions as foremen.

"I certainly was glad then that I had decided to study in my spare time. For, thanks to my I. C. S. course, I was the only man in the organization who could talk to the superintendent in his own language. As a result, I was promoted over men who had been here from ten to twenty years."

What are you doing with the hours after supper? Can you afford to let them slip by unimproved when you can easily make them mean so much?

One hour a day, spent with the I. C. S. in the quiet of your own home, will prepare you for success in the work you like best. *Yes, it will!* Put it up to us to prove it. Mail this coupon today.

## INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

"The Universal University"

BOX 4908-F, SCRANTON, PENNA.



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



### TECHNICAL AND INDUSTRIAL COURSES

- |  |  |  |  |  |   |
|--|--|--|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Architect                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Telegraph Engineer          | <input type="checkbox"/> Plumbing                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Steam Fitting | <input type="checkbox"/> Air Brakes                | <input type="checkbox"/> R. R. Signalman  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Architectural Draftsman   | <input type="checkbox"/> Telephone Work              | <input type="checkbox"/> Heating                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Ventilation   | <input type="checkbox"/> Highway Engineering       |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Building Estimating       | <input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Engineer         | <input type="checkbox"/> Sheet Metal Worker                |  | <input type="checkbox"/> Chemistry                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Pharmacy         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wood Millworking          | <input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Draftsman        | <input type="checkbox"/> Steam Engineer                    |  | <input type="checkbox"/> Coal Mining Engineer      |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Contractor and Builder    | <input type="checkbox"/> Machinist                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Steam Electric Engineer           |  | <input type="checkbox"/> Navigation                | <input type="checkbox"/> Air Conditioning |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Structural Draftsman      | <input type="checkbox"/> Patternmaker                | <input type="checkbox"/> Civil Engineer                    |  | <input type="checkbox"/> Boilermaker               |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Structural Engineer       | <input type="checkbox"/> Heat Treatment of Metals    | <input type="checkbox"/> Surveying and Mapping             |  | <input type="checkbox"/> Textile Overseer or Supt. |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Inventing and Patenting   | <input type="checkbox"/> Bridge Engineer             | <input type="checkbox"/> Refrigeration                     |  | <input type="checkbox"/> Cotton Manufacturing      |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Engineer       | <input type="checkbox"/> Bridge and Building Foreman | <input type="checkbox"/> R. R. Locomotives                 |  | <input type="checkbox"/> Woolen Manufacturing      |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Electric Lighting         | <input type="checkbox"/> Gas Engines                 | <input type="checkbox"/> R. R. Section Foreman             |  | <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture               | <input type="checkbox"/> Fruit Growing    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Welding, Electric and Gas | <input type="checkbox"/> Aviation Engines            | <input type="checkbox"/> R. R. Bridge and Building Foreman |  | <input type="checkbox"/> Poultry Farming           | <input type="checkbox"/> Radio            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reading Shop Blueprints   | <input type="checkbox"/> Automobile Mechanic         |  |  | <input type="checkbox"/> Marine Engineer           |   |

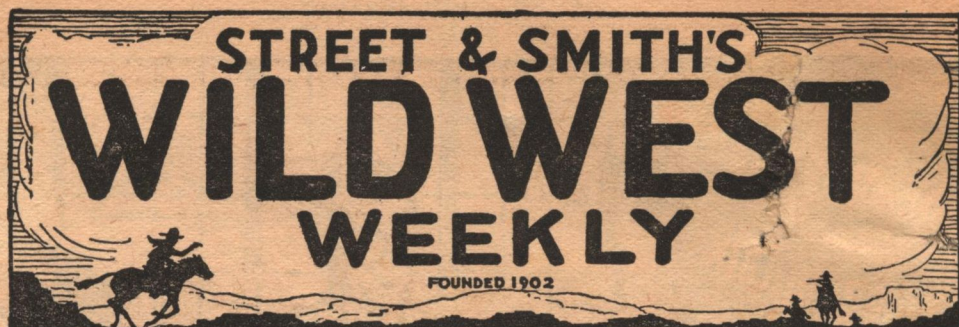
### BUSINESS TRAINING COURSES

- |  |   |   |  |
|--|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Business Management   | <input type="checkbox"/> C. P. Accountant | <input type="checkbox"/> Service Station Salesmanship | <input type="checkbox"/> Railway Mail Clerk    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Office Management     | <input type="checkbox"/> Bookkeeping      | <input type="checkbox"/> First Year College           | <input type="checkbox"/> Grade School Subjects |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Secretarial Work | <input type="checkbox"/> Business Correspondence      | <input type="checkbox"/> High School Subjects  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Traffic Management    | <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish          | <input type="checkbox"/> Lettering Show Cards         | <input type="checkbox"/> College Preparatory   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Accountancy           | <input type="checkbox"/> French           | <input type="checkbox"/> Stenography and Typing       | <input type="checkbox"/> Illustrating          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cost Accountant       | <input type="checkbox"/> Salesmanship     | <input type="checkbox"/> Civil Service                | <input type="checkbox"/> Cartooning            |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> Advertising      | <input type="checkbox"/> Mail Carrier                 |  |

Name..... Age..... Address.....

City..... State..... Occupation.....

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



Yearly Subscription, \$6.00

Six Months, \$3.00

Single Copies, 15 Cents

The entire contents of this magazine are protected by copyright, and must not be reprinted without the publishers' permission.

Vol. 91, No. 1 CONTENTS FOR FEBRUARY 2, 1935 Whole No. 1685

Cover Picture—Scene from

"Sonny Tabor's Snowbound Trail" . Painted by Tom Lovell

### THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

Sonny Tabor's Snowbound Trail . . . Ward M. Stevens . . . 8

It leads the young outlaw ter another red-hot scrap with the law.

Montana Gun Music . . . . . Cleve Endicott . . . . 56

It's a dirge fer the gents thet try jumpin' Circle J.

Señor Red Mask On Bandit Butte . . . Guy L. Maynard . . . 97

The young justice rider comes plumb close ter never gittin' down ag'in.

### FOUR COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

Quick-trigger Law . . . . . Philip F. Deere . . . . 32

It's the only kind o' law thet some ornery skunks will obey.

That Bronc Named Buttons . . . . . Stephen Payne . . . . 44

He's shore a hoss worth fightin' fer.

Calamity Buys Trouble . . . . . Lee Bond . . . . . 86

But the gloomy cuss hands out a hull lot more of it than he buys.

Kid Roper Tames A Grizzly . . . . . Charles M. Martin . . . 122

Said Grizzly bein' a side-windin', double-gunned killer—pizen mean.

### BRIEF WESTERN FACT STORIES

Roy Bean—Wood Merchant . . . 43 Texas Is Famous For Meteors . . . 96

For Murdering The Sheriff . . . 85 A Frontier Woman's Courage . . . 121

### DEPARTMENTS

Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral . . . . . 132

Western Pen Pals . . . . . Conducted by Sam Wills . 135

The Wranglers Corner . . . . . 141

Publication issued every week by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. George C. Smith, Jr., President; Ormond V. Gould, Vice President and Treasurer; Artemas Holmes, Vice President and Secretary; Clarence C. Vernam, Vice President. Copyright, 1935, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., New York. Copyright, 1935, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter, December 8, 1911, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions to Cuba, Dom. Republic, Haiti, Spain, Central and South American Countries, except The Guianas and British Honduras, \$7.00 per year. To all other Foreign Countries, including The Guianas and British Honduras, \$9.00 per year.

We do not accept responsibility for the return of unsolicited manuscripts.

To facilitate handling, the author should inclose a self-addressed envelope with the requisite postage attached.

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

# ARE YOU DISAPPOINTED in the laxative you're taking?

*IS IT so bitter that you shudder  
at the thought of taking it?*

*Does it upset you—give you  
stomach pains—leave you weak?*

*Do you have to keep on increas-  
ing the dose because it loses its  
effectiveness after a while?*

## IF SO, HERE'S SOMETHING YOU OUGHT TO KNOW!

It's entirely unnecessary to take violent, painful laxatives! There is a pleasant, painless and effective way of relieving constipation. That's the Ex-Lax way!

Ex-Lax works gently and surely—without pain or discomfort. It

doesn't upset you. It doesn't leave you weak!

Ex-Lax will not form a habit—you take it just when you need a laxative. You don't have to keep on increasing the dose to get results.

And Ex-Lax is a real pleasure to take—it tastes just like delicious chocolate!

Don't be disappointed any more. Try Ex-Lax just once. Then you'll know you've found *the right laxative for you.*

At any drug store—in 10c and 25c boxes.

Be sure to look for the exact spelling—E-X-L-A-X. Don't experiment with imitations!

**When Nature forgets — remember**

# EX-LAX

**THE CHOCOLATED LAXATIVE**

# Train for ELECTRICITY IN 12 WEEKS AT COYNE

The great Coyne Shops in Chicago have a world-wide reputation for training men here in Chicago in this big-pay field in only 12 weeks. Then they get behind you to assure success by giving you lifetime employment service. By my new plan YOU can take advantage of their wonderful method of learning-by-doing NOW—no need to lose time and money while you strive and save to raise the necessary tuition.



## I WILL FINANCE YOUR TRAINING

Come to Coyne at once. Get your training. Then start paying me for your training a full two months after you graduate, and take a full ten months to complete your payments. If you will write to me at once I will send you complete details of this sensational new plan, together with the BIG FREE illustrated Book telling all about COYNE and how many earn while learning and the training you can get there without book study or useless theory.

*H. C. Lewis*  
President

## SEND NOW FOR FULL DETAILS!

Mr. H. C. Lewis, President,  
Dept. 25-85, 500 S. Paulina St., Chicago, Ill.

Tell me how you will finance my training at COYNE and send me the BIG FREE illustrated book on ELECTRICITY.

NAME.....  
ADDRESS.....  
CITY..... STATE.....

# BECOME AN EXPERT ACCOUNTANT

Executive Accountants and C. P. A.'s earn \$3,000 to \$15,000 a year. Thousands more are needed. We train you thoroughly at home in spare time for C. P. A. examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous bookkeeping knowledge or experience unnecessary. Training given by C. P. A.'s. Write for free book, 'Accountancy, the Profession That Pays,' and learn about opportunities in this growing, profitable field.

**LaSalle Extension University, Dept. 276-H Chicago**  
The School That Has Trained Over 1,200 C. P. A.'s



## TEST the WEIL BELT at our Expense!

YOU will appear many inches slimmer at once and in 10 short days your waist line will be 3 inches smaller. Remember 3 inches of cumbersome fat gone or no cost! "I reduced my waist 3 inches," writes Geo. Bailey. "Lost 50 lbs.," writes W. T. Anderson... Hundreds of similar letters. THE MESSAGE-LIKE ACTION DOES IT!

You will be completely comfortable as its message-like action gently but persistently eliminates fat with every move! Gives an erect, athletic carriage. Restores abdominal walls and stomach to proper position, aiding digestion and elimination without drugs, diets or exercises! Simply write name and address on postcard and we will send you illustrated folder and full details of our 10 DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER!

**THE WEIL COMPANY**  
511 Hill St., New Haven, Conn.

**REDUCE YOUR WAIST  
3 INCHES 10 DAYS  
IN  
... it won't cost you one cent!**

# NEW LOW PRICES GOODRICH-Firestone GOOD YEAR U.S., FISK and OTHERS

29 x 4.40 - 21

And YOU  
we defy anyone  
to excel our quality. Every  
standard brand tire recon-  
structed by our modern meth-  
od is positively guaranteed to give full 12 months  
service under the severest road conditions. Guar-  
antee is backed by our entire financial resources.  
**BUY NOW BEFORE PRICES ADVANCE!**

### BALLOON TIRES

Size	Rim	Tires	Tubes
28x4	40-21	\$2.15	\$0.85
28x4	50-20	2.35	.85
30x4	50-21	2.40	.85
28x4	75-19	2.45	.95
28x4	75-20	2.50	.95
28x5	00-19	2.85	1.05
30x5	00-20	2.85	1.05
28x5	25-18	2.90	1.15
28x5	25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5	25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5	25-21	3.25	1.15
28x5	50-18	3.35	1.15
28x5	50-19	3.35	1.15
30x5	00-18	3.40	1.15
31x5	00-19	3.40	1.15
32x5	00-20	3.45	1.25
33x5	00-21	3.65	1.25
31x6	50-19	3.60	1.35
32x6	50-20	3.75	1.35

### TRUCK BALLOONS

Size	Tires	Tubes
7.00-20	\$5.95	\$2.95
7.50-20	6.95	3.75
8.25-20	8.95	4.95
9.00-20	10.95	5.65

### Regular CORD Tires

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3	\$2.25	\$0.65
30x3 1/2	2.35	.75
31x4	2.35	.85
32x4	2.95	.85
33x4	2.95	.85
34x4	3.25	.85
32x4 1/2	3.35	1.15
33x4 1/2	3.45	1.15
34x4 1/2	3.45	1.15
30x5	3.65	1.35
33x5	3.75	1.45
35x5	3.95	1.55

### Heavy Duty TRUCK

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	\$4.25	\$1.95
32x6	7.95	2.75
34x7	10.95	2.95
36x8	9.95	3.95
36x8	12.45	4.25
40x8	15.95	4.95

**ALL TUBES  
GUARANTEED  
BRAND NEW**

Remember  
12 MONTHS  
WRITTEN  
GUARANTEE  
BOND  
WITH TIRE

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

**GOODWIN TIRE & RUBBER CO.**  
1840 S. MICHIGAN AVE., DEPT. 358, CHICAGO, ILL.

**WE WANT DEALERS**



## High School Course in 2 Years

You can complete your High School education at home—in 2 years or less. Course meets all requirements for entrance to college and leading professions. Standard 5 per cent discount for Diploma awarded. Full credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Send for Free Bulletin TODAY. No obligation.

**American School, Dept. H-21, Drexel at 58th, Chicago**

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

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

## You Can Own This POTATO CHIP BUSINESS



Install this machine at home. Make money right away! Sensational new kind of "Greaseless" Chip has excess oil "wrung" out by new invention. Paralyzes competition, sweeps market. New taste. New looks. New health because they are also "mineralized". Stores sell for you. Anyone can start at home. Make as much as \$29.00 a day on capacity of one machine selling at wholesale only. COSTS NOTHING to get full facts on this new and different chip, big market, big profits, easy operation. Write for free book 2 pages illustrated. No obligation to buy, but send name for facts on this big opportunity now.

**EVERYTHING SENT.**  
Electrical machine and all supplies furnished at one cost, no extras. Full instructions.

**A. H. ADAMS, Dept. 321, 500 N. Dearborn St., Chicago, Illinois**

**Planned**

# MEALS Please!

Your table can be the  
envy of your guests!

## The MARVEL COOK BOOK

*Tells You How*

PRICE  
POSTAGE  
PAID **60c** ORDER  
BY MAIL

**Chelsea House**

79 Seventh Ave., New York, N. Y.



**CREAM of KENTUCKY**  
is a 100 proof straight  
whiskey with a flavor  
so ripe and rich that  
folks describe it as  
*"double rich"*! . . . .  
Kentuckians, always  
noted as splendid  
judges of liquor, choose  
it above all others . . .



A  
*Schenley*  
PRODUCT

WITH THE MARK  
OF MERIT

Cream of Kentucky is a popular - priced straight whiskey. Made in Kentucky by Kentucky distillers.

FOR A REALLY FINE GIN,  
TRY SILVER WEDDING GIN

This advertisement is not intended to offer alcoholic beverages for sale or delivery in any state or community where the advertising, sale or use thereof is unlawful.

Please mention this magazine when answering advertisements

# Kidneys Cause Much Trouble Says Doctor

**Successful Prescription Helps Remove Acids—Works in 15 Minutes.**

Dr. T. J. Rastelli, famous English scientist, Doctor of Medicine and Surgeon, says: "You can't feel well if your Kidneys do not function right, because your Kidneys affect your entire body."

Your blood circulates 4 times a minute through 9 million tiny, delicate tubes in your Kidneys which are endangered by drastic, irritating drugs, modern foods and drinks, worry, and exposure. Beware of Kidney dysfunction if you suffer from Night Rising, Leg Pains, Nervousness, Dizziness, Circles Under Eyes, Acidity, or Loss of Pep.



Dr. W. R. George

Dr. Walter R. George, for many years Health Director of Indianapolis, says: "Insufficient Kidney excretions are the cause of much needless suffering with Aching Back, Frequent Night Rising, Itching, Smarting, Burning, Painful Joints, Rheumatic Pains, Headaches, and a generally run-down body. I am of the opinion that the prescription Cystex corrects such functional conditions. It aids in flushing poisons from the urinary tract, and in freeing the blood of retained toxins. Cystex deserves the indorsement of all doctors." If you suffer from Kidney and Bladder dysfunction, delay endangers your vitality, and you should not lose a single minute in starting to take the doctor's special prescription called Cystex (pronounced Siss-tex) which helps Kidney functions in a few hours. It starts work in 15 minutes. Gently tones, soothes, and cleans raw, sore membranes. Brings new energy and vitality in 48 hours. It is helping millions of sufferers and is guaranteed to fix you up and make you feel like new in 8 days, or money back on return of empty package. Get guaranteed Cystex from your druggist today.



## Like Taking LIGHTED Cigarettes from Your Pocket

**MAGIC CASE AMAZES EVERYBODY**

Gaze in wonder while I show you a new way to smoke. LOOK! I take a beautifully enameled case from my vest pocket. I touch a magic button! There is a Spark... a Flame! Just one motion... the pressure of one finger delivers a LIGHTED cigarette to my lips. I PUFF and SMOKE! No matches or separate lighters necessary.

**15-DAY TRIAL OFFER**

Get a Magic Case on 15 days' trial at our risk. Get amazing facts how this great invention can make you big money without selling.

**MAGIC CASE MFRS., Dept. B-4759**  
4234 Cozens Ave., St. Louis, Mo.



**AGENTS**

Get facts that fairly scream big profits.

# Classified Advertising

## Detectives—Instructions

**DETECTIVES EARN BIG MONEY.** Work home or travel. DETECTIVE particulars free. Experience unnecessary. Write, GEORGE WAGONER, 2640-A Broadway, New York.

**BE A DETECTIVE.** Make secret investigations. Experience unnecessary. Write, United Detective System, 1623 West Grand, Chicago.

**BECOME A SUCCESSFUL DETECTIVE.** Experience unnecessary. Detective Paper and Particulars FREE. National System, 340-K Electric Building, Omaha, Nebraska.

## Patents Secured

**PATENTS**—Reasonable terms. Book and advice free. L. F. Randolph, Dept. 513, Washington, D. C.

## Old Money Wanted

**OLD MONEY WANTED.** \$5.00 to \$2500.00 each paid for old coins. Buying catalogue 10c. Bob Cohen, Muskogee, Okla.

## Personal

**UP TO \$25.00 PAID FOR SNAPSHOTS,** Photos, Amateur Drawings. We help you market your pictures. Publications alone buy more than seven million pictures yearly. Advertisers buy other millions. Send 20c for list of subjects wanted. Artistographers, 401-BL Bedford Bldg., Chicago.

**SELL US YOUR OLD COINS:** Up to \$53.00 paid for Indian head pennies. To \$2.00 for Lincoln pennies. Certain nickels \$100.00. Other coins to \$2500.00. Send 10c for buying catalog. Coin Collectors Club, 401-BL Bedford Bldg., Chicago.

## Agents

**AGENTS:** Smash go prices. Santos Coffee 12c lb. 4-oz Vanilla 8½c. \$1.00 size Tonic 14c. Razor Blades 10 for 8½c. 100 sticks Chewing Gum 12c. 150 other bargains. Experience unnecessary. Write Carnation Company, SR, St. Louis, Missouri.

# LAW!

## LEARN AT HOME

Are you adult, alert, ambitious, willing to study? Investigate LAW! We guide you step by step—furnish all texts, including 14-volume Law Library. Training prepared by leading law professors and given by members of bar. Degree of LL. B. conferred. Low cost, easy terms. Send NOW for Free, 64-page "Law Training for Leadership."

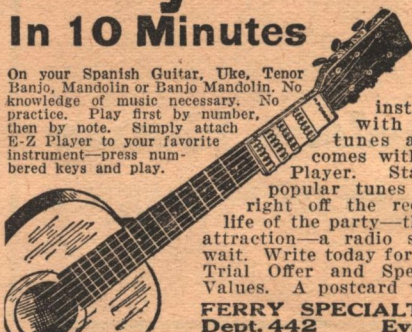
LaSalle Extension University, Dept. 276-L, Chicago

# Play A Tune In 10 Minutes

On your Spanish Guitar, Uke, Tenor Banjo, Mandolin or Banjo Mandolin. No knowledge of music necessary. No practice. Play first by number, then by note. Simply attach E-Z Player to your favorite instrument—press numbered keys and play.

**FREE**

instruction book with numbered tunes and chords comes with every E-Z Player. Start playing popular tunes by number right off the reel. Be the life of the party—the center of attraction—a radio star. Don't wait. Write today for 3-Day Free Trial Offer and Special Guitar Values. A postcard will do.



**FERRY SPECIALTIES, INC.**  
Dept. 442 Evanston, Ill.

## NEW LOWEST PRICES ON TIRES

**2<sup>15</sup>**  
\$29x4.40-21  
\$2<sup>40</sup>  
\$30x4.50-21

**GOOD YEAR**  
**Firestone**  
**Goodrich**  
**U.S. AND OTHERS**

THESE TIRES SURE DO LOOK GOOD

YES AND THE YORK GUARANTY BOND PROTECTS YOU

**LOWEST PRICES ON EARTH**

**12 MONTH WRITTEN-GUARANTY BOND WITH EACH TIRE**

Over the U. S. A. vouch for the LONG HARD SERVICE, under severest road conditions of our standard brand Tires reconstructed by the ORIGINAL SECRET YORK PROCESS. OUR 18 YEARS IN BUSINESS makes it possible to offer tires at LOWEST PRICES in history with 12 month guarantee.

**Don't Delay—Order Today**

BALLOON TIRES			CORD TIRES		
Size	Rim	Tubes	Size	Rim	Tubes
20x4.40-21	\$2.15	\$0.85	30x3	\$2.25	\$0.60
20x4.50-20	2.35	0.85	30x3 1/2	2.35	0.70
20x4.50-21	2.40	0.85	31x4	2.55	0.85
20x4.75-19	4.45	0.85	32x4	2.95	0.85
20x4.75-20	2.50	0.90	32x4 1/2	2.95	0.85
20x5.00-19	2.85	1.05	34x4	3.25	0.85
20x5.00-20	2.85	1.05	34x4 1/2	3.25	0.85
20x5.25-18	2.90	1.15	36x4	3.45	1.15
20x5.25-19	2.95	1.15	36x4 1/2	3.45	1.15
20x5.25-20	3.05	1.15	38x4	3.65	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15	38x4 1/2	3.65	1.35
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15	40x8	15.95	4.95
28x5.50-19	3.35	1.15			
30x6.00-19	3.40	1.15			
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.15			
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.25			
32x6.00-21	3.65	1.25			
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.35			

**HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES**

Size	Rim	Tubes	Size	Rim	Tubes
30x6	\$4.25	\$1.05	36x6	9.95	3.95
34x5	4.25	1.00	34x7	10.95	3.95
32x6	7.95	2.75	36x8	12.45	4.25
			40x8	15.95	4.95

**ALL OTHER SIZES**

**SEND ONLY \$1.00 DEPOSIT** with each tire ordered. (\$4.00 deposit on each Truck Tire.) We ship balance C.O.D. Deduct 5 per cent if cash is sent in full with order. **ALL TUBES BRAND NEW—GUARANTEED.** Tires failing to give 12 months' service replaced at half price. **ORDER NOW!**

**YORK TIRE & RUBBER CO.,** Dept. 390-A  
3855-59 Cottage Grove Ave. Chicago, Ill.

## BIG HUSKY MUSCLES ONLY

America's Greatest Value

**AMAZING NEW 25 FEATURE**  
**Home Gym Outfit and Training Course**

You save over half on this big home gym outfit and amazing course of physical culture. **Big Husky "Hercules"** 16 Cable Muscle Builder Exerciser, 200 Lbs. Resistance (Adjustable). Two Heavy Duty Hand Grips for husky wrists and forearms. Wall Apparatus Exerciser for back and shoulder development. Head Harness (adjustable). Rowing Machine Attachments. Foot Gear (adjustable). Regulation Heavy Skip Rope. The Great Shadow Boxer. Completely Illustrated Course "HOW TO GET STRONG". Hand Balancing Tricks. Food Facts for Vitality and Power. Illustrated Secrets of Jiu-Jitsu. 20 Famous Wrestling Holds. Beginner Course "How To Box". 10 Feats of Strength. Special Ways to Get Big Biceps. How to Strengthen Your Back, Muscle Gauge, Test Your Own Strength. Secrets of Chest Expansion. How to Strengthen Stomach Muscles. New Power for Your Legs and Thighs. "For Men Only", facts you should know. Stump Exercises for Husky Legs. Special "30 Day Training Schedule" that tells you what to do each day. All this—For Only \$2.99. Act quickly before offer expires. Send your name and address. We'll ship everything out by return mail. Pay postman only \$2.99 plus postal charges. Outside U. S. cash with order.

**HERCULES EXERCISES**  
49 East 21st St. Dept. B-90  
New York, N. Y. © I. P. D. Inc.

**\$2.99**  
Complete  
Send No Money

**WALL EXERCISER**

**SHADOW BOXER**

**ROWING MACHINE**

**BOXING**

**FOR MEN ONLY**

**HOW TO GET STRONG**

**STRENGTH**

**STRENGTH**

## LINCOLN AND INDIAN HEAD PENNIES WANTED

WE PAY \$2 IF MORE THAN UP TO \$2 EACH IF YEARS OLD and up to \$500 for certain U. S. Cents

Send 10c. today for 16 page fully illustrated catalog

**NATIONAL COIN CO.**  
BOX 731A MILWAUKEE, WIS.

## 8 INCHES OFF WAISTLINE

"Director Belt reduced my waistline from 42 to 34 inches. I feel 10 years younger. Constipation gone—no tired, bloated feeling after meals."—G. NEWTON, Troy, N. Y.

Director Belt instantly improves your appearance, puts snap in your step, relieves "shortness of breath," restores **YOUR VIGOR as fat vanishes.**

Loose, fallen abdominal muscles go back where they belong. Gentle massage-like action increases elimination and regularity in a normal way without use of harsh, irritating cathartics. You look and feel years younger.

**SENT ON TRIAL**

Let us prove our claim. No obligation. Write to day for trial offer.

**LONDON & WARNER**

**NEW**

**EASY WAY**

**NO DRUGS**

**NO DIET**

360 N. Michigan Ave. Dept. S-65, Chicago, Ill.

## Diesel

**Diesel Engineering** is the great opportunity of today. The field is opening so rapidly on land, water, and in the air that there is already a great scarcity of trained men. New Diesel Engineering Course just released for home study by one of America's leading educational institutions. Send for Free Bulletin. No obligation.

American School, Dept. D 21, Drexel at 58th, Chicago

## Learn Radio in 10 WEEKS

**I WILL FINANCE YOUR TRAINING IF YOU ARE SHORT OF MONEY**

Prepare for jobs in Radio Broadcast, Talking Pictures, Television, by ten weeks of practical shop work in the great Coyne Radio Shops, on real machinery and equipment. You don't need advanced education or experience. Free Employment Service for life. Many earn while learning. Electric Refrigeration—Air Conditioning included. Mail coupon today for free book which tells you how hundreds have become successful Radio Men after taking my training.

**H. C. Lewis, Pres., Coyne Electrical & Radio School**  
500 S. Paulina St., Dept. 25-1A, Chicago, Illinois

Send Free Radio Book and facts. Tell how I can pay for my course on easy payment plan after I graduate.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_  
ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_  
CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_



# Sonny Tabor's Snowbound Trail

By Ward M. Stevens

Author of "Kid Wolf's Christmas Gold," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### SUPPER FOR THE SHERIFF.

**S**NUG in his comfortable shelter of pine branches, "Sonny" Tabor skinned and cleaned the two rabbits he had snared that afternoon and contentedly listened to the chant of the rising wind outside.

The first hard snow of the winter was about to strike the highlands of northern Arizona. It was below freezing now and becoming colder with each passing minute. A few

flakes were already flying like white bees in the bleak gray sky and before nightfall, the storm would be at its full fury.

Sonny added a little fuel to his tiny fire and tried to realize that the bright, sunlit desert country was only a few days' journey to the south—a land where the songbirds sang and the flowers bloomed. Just a hundred and fifty miles or so away!

It didn't seem possible that summer could change to bitter winter in



so short a distance. In climbing up from the valley of the Salt River, he had passed from one world into another.

He hadn't left south Arizona of his own free will exactly. A posse of officers had made it just a bit too warm for him, and he had given them the slip by only the narrowest of margins.

For Sonny Tabor—although he didn't look like a dangerous man—was an outlaw and a fugitive. Dead or alive, he was "wanted" by every sheriff in the Territory.

There was a reward of six thousand dollars on his head, and the hanging rope awaited him at Trail's End. He was trying to postpone Trail's End for as long as possible!

The outlaw didn't seem to be much worried. He even whistled cheerily as he set about preparing his supper. This was no new thing for him. Sonny Tabor wasn't much

more than twenty, but he'd been on the dodge since his earliest teens, keeping always just one jump ahead of his pursuers.

Here in the wilderness, with the storm coming up, he felt as safe and free as he'd ever felt in his life. His only enemies now were the cold and snow, and in the shelter of his wickiup he felt like laughing at Old Man Winter.

Soon the rabbits were beginning to sizzle in the tin lid that served him as a cooking pan. Then he placed a can of water on two stones and when it had begun to simmer, he brought out a sack of tea leaves mixed with sugar. The sack was hardly bigger than a tobacco pouch.

He would have preferred coffee, but he was traveling light, and even this was a luxury. The fragrance of the tea mingled with the crisp odor of the pines and added to his already sharp appetite.

"I reckon we can stick it out, can't we, Paint, ol' boy? It shore could be a lot worse, anyhow."

He could see Paint, his faithful little pinto horse, through the chinks between the pine boughs. The bronc was standing close to the warmest side of the shelter and its sleek black-and-white-spotted hide was powdered with snow.

Paint, too, seemed pretty much contented with things as they were. The animal gave a little nicker at the sound of Sonny's voice.

There was nothing suspicious or out of the way about the outlaw's outfit, except perhaps that he wore two guns and wore them low. They were single-action, blued-steel Colts, nestling in holsters of the quick-draw type, and were .45 caliber. He carried the cartridges for them in two wide, crisscrossed belts.

He coaxed his little camp fire along and turned over the frying meat from time to time, listening to the creaking and groaning of the tall pines overhead.

"It's goin' to get mighty cold to-night," he muttered.

Suddenly the outlaw stood as nearly erect as he could in the little shelter. A sound had come to him over the moaning of the wind, and he remained tense, eyes and ears alert. His keen-nosed pinto, too, had stirred uneasily and had lifted its head.

From somewhere out of the deepening gloom a rider was approaching. More distinctly, now, Sonny heard the muffled beat of a horse's hoofs.

Sonny hadn't been expecting company. Nor did he want it. As far as he knew, he was a good twenty miles from any human habitation, and it seemed strange that any one should be out on such a night.

Still, there was nothing he could

do about it now. Already he saw the horseman looming up close, heard his shout:

"Howdy, thar!"

The outlaw flashed a quick once-over at the stranger who was nearing the shelter. Through the swirl of falling flakes, Sonny had a glimpse of a tall, spare hombre of about forty, seated on a big black horse. He wore a sheepskin coat with a Colt belted over it, and a Winchester carbine was booted at his saddle.

Sonny returned the salutation, conscious of the fact that the newcomer was just as interested in him as he was in the newcomer.

The man had a long, thin face, the lower half of which was almost hidden by a thick brown mustache. Sonny never remembered seeing a sharper or more penetrating pair of eyes. They were the color of polished steel.

"Lost, are yuh, younker?" he said finally, in a friendly voice.

After taking a good look at the outlaw he had relaxed. There was something disarming, almost boyish, about Sonny Tabor. He looked even younger than his years, and in the flickering glow of the camp fire his face seemed very innocent and mild.

Sonny's blue eyes were frank and earnest, and when he smiled—and he was smiling a little now—the old bullet scar in his cheek looked like a dimple.

"Not lost—just travelin', and stoppin' over for the night," Sonny replied.

"Kind of a cold bed-ground, ain't it, son?"

"Well, I'd rather be squatted where I am than where you are," Sonny said smilingly.

The rider struck his thickly gloved hands together, hunched his shoulders and chuckled in agreement.

"I'm a-lookin' fer four men," he

said, and went on to describe their horses and outfits. "Have yuh seen 'em to-day? They might have split up, but it's my hunch they're ridin' together."

The outlaw shook his head. "Yo're the first hombre I've seen all day," he said truthfully enough.

"When I seen the shine of yore fire, I thought I'd found 'em—got plumb excited," said the stranger. "Yuh see, these jaspers I'm tellin' yuh about held up the bank at Flagstaff yesterday. I'm Sheriff Pat Timlin, o' Coconino County."

Sonny Tabor's smile didn't change, but the rate of his heartbeat certainly did! With a seemingly careless motion, his right hand dropped downward, the tips of his fingers just grazing the leathern leg of his batwing chaps and coming to rest near the curved butt of his .45.

But he didn't make an attempt to draw. The sheriff seemed unsuspecting and ready to go on again. In fact, Timlin did start away, lifting his hand in farewell. He stopped, however, turning his horse.

"Say, younker, thet stuff yo're cookin', whatever it is, smells mighty good," he said.

"It's rabbit," said the outlaw. "Will yuh have some?" he invited politely.

"Well, now, I don't keer if I do, thank yuh!" said the officer heartily. "I haven't had a bite since breakfast, and my stomach is shore doin' some tall complainin'."

Timlin tied his horse, stamped his feet a few times to restore the circulation, then wriggled through the low opening into Sonny's improvised shelter.

"Purty cosy in yere, kid," he grunted.

Sonny had pulled the brim of his cream-colored Stetson a bit lower over his eyes and had turned up the

collar of his blue-and-white checkered shirt, so that much of his face was hid. There was plenty of excuse for this, for the snow was whistling in through the spaces between the pine branches.

The sheriff was long-legged, and he filled the little wickiup to overflowing. It was all he could do to keep out of the fire, and both occupants were cramped for room. Sonny hadn't counted on a guest when he'd built his refuge—certainly not one like this!

If the outlaw was nervous, however, he gave no outward sign of it, but went ahead with the supper. It was nearly done now, and the odor of the smoking meat was tantalizing. He crouched over the fire and gave it a final turn-over.

"Lookin' fer work around yere, son?" asked the sheriff.

"Yes, sir. What chances?"

"Not so good, this time o' year," Timlin said. "Not up this a way—not much until springtime. Yuh'd have done better to have stayed down in the south country."

The outlaw didn't bat an eyelash.

"What makes yuh think I came from there?" he drawled.

"Yo're dressed mighty light fer the high country, boy," replied the officer. "Yo're a long ways from anywhar—know thet? It's more than forty miles to Flagstaff. How come yuh left Tucson? Or was it Phoenix?"

"Wickenburg," said Sonny.

He could tell nothing from Timlin's face. The heavy mustache hid the expression of his mouth, and the gray eyes seemed always the same.

"Been workin' down thet a way?" he asked the outlaw.

"I work whenever I can," said Sonny quietly. "I reckon the rabbit's done now, sheriff. Help yoreself."

The tender meat was delicious, and the sheriff fell to with a ravenous appetite. Sonny was just as hungry, and he didn't intend to allow anything to spoil his meal. This was a rather peculiar situation—serving up supper for an officer of the law.

Timlin had removed his gloves, had opened his heavy coat, and Sonny caught a glimpse of a six-pointed sheriff's star on his shirt beneath. While he ate, the officer talked between bites of rabbit.

"Them jaspers that robbed the bank in Flag," he said, "are shore four of the lowest-down killers that ever struck this country. They done their work masked. Shot the teller and cashier to death and rode away with eight thousand dollars in paper money. I organized a posse right away and got on the chase, but I haven't seen my men since noon. They couldn't keep up with me," he added grimly.

Sonny Tabor had his opinion—a mighty respectful one—of an officer who would trail four gunmen single-handed.

"I hope yuh get yore men, sheriff," he said.

"I'm not sayin' I will, but it won't be fer lack of tryin'," said Timlin. "This storm will favor 'em a whole lot. Jist listen to thet wind, will yuh!"

He lifted his head, blinking as a cloud of snow, as fine as flour, came spurting into the wickiup. All was roaring darkness outside. The wind, with great shouts, was wrestling furiously with the pines, trying to twist them from their roots.

"We're a mile an' a half above sea level yere, and it'll shore get plenty cold afore mornin'," the sheriff grunted. "Hm-m-m, thet tea was mighty good-tastin', son. If yuh've

any more to spar', I wouldn't mind havin'——"

"If we run out I can easy make more," said Sonny.

As he was crouched closest to the fire, he gingerly lifted the steaming can from the hot coals with his two hands, extending it toward Sheriff Timlin. The officer reached out, and then——

The outlaw's heart gave a great leap. He dropped the can, splashing hot tea over the ground and into the fire.

There had been a sharp click as something hard and cold had encircled both his wrists—handcuffs!

"Steady," drawled the sheriff. "It was no use spillin' all thet good tea. Yo're my prisoner, Tabor, so take it easy. Yo're under arrest."

## CHAPTER II.

### STRONGER THAN THE LAW.

FOR a full half minute, the outlaw stared down at his manacled hands, dazed and bewildered. In underestimating the sheriff's shrewdness, he'd lost everything. And it had all been so absurdly easy!

"Well, yo're the winner," he said at last. "Yuh shore outguessed me."

"I'm a fair poker player," admitted Timlin with a laugh. "Yuh thought I didn't know yuh, eh? Why, I reco'nized yuh almost from the very first. When I took office, two years ago, yore full description was tacked up over the last sheriff's desk. It's thar yet. I know it by heart, feller. I never thought, though, thet I'd be the one to bring yuh to the hangman's halter. Yuh've been overdue a long time, Tabor."

"I could have killed yuh pretty easy when yuh rode up and said who yuh was," Sonny told him quietly. "Yore heavy gloves——"

"Could yuh now? I'm not so shore," returned the sheriff grimly, "gloves or no gloves. I was watchin' yuh, and if yuh'd made one move I'd be takin' yuh down to Flagstaff dead instead o' the way I intend takin' yuh now. Turn around, Tabor—yuh won't need those guns no more."

As the outlaw obeyed, the sheriff drew both .45s from his holsters, examining them curiously. He had his own gun in his lap.

"Pretty good smoke-wagons," he chuckled behind his thick mustache. "They'd make nice souvyneers, I reckon, but—out they go."

He whirled them both outside into the darkness.

"Now I want yuh to tell me whar yore pards are, Tabor," he said.

"I don't quite savvy—"

"Yo're right good at lyin', but it ain't goin' to do yuh much good now," Timlin advised. "Yuh were one of the four thet pulled the robbery and murder in Flag yesterday. I'm not stump-headed, exactly. Who were the other three?"

"I'm tellin' yuh the truth," said the outlaw patiently. "I haven't been near Flagstaff, and I've never been with a gang in my life."

"Well, if yuh won't talk, it will be *bueno* by me," Timlin shrugged. "I could make it a lot easier fer yuh, but have it yore own way."

He searched Sonny, but found nothing except a few small silver coins.

"So one of the other hombres has got it, eh?" he muttered. "I reckon yuh all agreed to meet somewhar later and make a divvy of the eight thousand. Well, I've got *you*, anyhow, and I'd rather have yuh than any outlaw in the Southwest. Thar's a right sizable reward fer yuh, too, I believe. Not changin' the subject, which of them two bankers did yuh

drop? Or was it you thet killed 'em both?"

Sonny Tabor turned white under his tan, and then the color rushed to his cheeks. His blue eyes flashed hotly.

"I don't know anything about the robbery!" he snapped. "I may be outside the law, sheriff, but I'm not a bandit, and as far as murderin' anybody—"

"Yuh've killed plenty in yore time, Tabor."

"Yes, I've had to kill—to save my own life, and sometimes to protect others," said Sonny quietly. "But if I was a murderer, Timlin, I would shore have added you to my collection a while ago."

"And yuh'd have done it, too, if yuh'd had the nerve," said the sheriff dryly. "Well, we've sashayed around yere about long enough. Let's get started. Me and yuh are startin' right pronto fer Flagstaff."

Sonny looked at him in astonishment. "What? To-night—in this snowstorm?"

"Yeah, we're on our way."

"We'll never make it. We'd be lucky to get ten miles." The outlaw shrugged. "But yo're the boss, I reckon."

"Yuh kin bet I am!"

The sheriff piled the rest of the firewood on the flames, and the fire grew so fierce that the wickiup caught and began to burn. Then Timlin herded Sonny outside.

"This will give me plenty of light to see what I'm doin'," he grunted. "Stand right yere until I get yore cayuse saddled."

If Sonny hadn't been on the spot, the sheriff would have had a job on his hands in doing the latter, for if ever there were a one-man horse Paint was that animal. Snorting uneasily, the pinto permitted Timlin

to slap on the saddle and finally they were ready to go.

The flaming wickiup lighted up a nightmare scene of writhing trees and flying snow. The wind was from the north and blowing great guns. The night's ride wouldn't be pleasant, that was sure, but Sonny was too numbed and disheartened by his misfortune to care much about that. He hadn't long to live, anyway.

In Flagstaff, he'd be hung, no matter if he cleared himself of the robbery charge or not. That death sentence, it seemed, would soon be carried out.

"If yuh don't mind, sheriff," he said, "my gloves are in my hip pocket."

Timlin put them on for him. Then he took his lariat and tied it around the outlaw's waist so that the knots came behind him.

"It will be plenty dark," he said grimly, "and I don't want to lose yuh, younker."

Timlin was taking no chances. In spite of himself, Sonny found himself admiring the sheriff's dogged determination and thoroughness.

He wondered, though, if the officer wasn't foolhardy in burning the shelter behind them. He could easily have kept his prisoner there until daylight or until the storm was over.

Holding his cuffed hands awkwardly, Sonny climbed into the saddle as Timlin untied his big black bronc and mounted. He shortened the lariat until there were only a couple of yards between the two horses, then with his prisoner in tow, headed forward into the fury of the storm.

After they left the blaze of the fire they could see nothing. Or at least Sonny had no idea where they were going. Icy pellets, frozen as hard as

grains of sand, stung his face and eyes, blinding him.

The wind seemed to take the breath from his lungs, in spite of the protection the pine trees gave. It screamed in his ears with demon voices. With his manacled hands he pulled his bandanna over the lower part of his face, and after that he managed a little better.

He wondered how the sheriff, no matter how well he knew the country, knew which way to go. No landmarks could be made out in that raging blackness, and one direction seemed like another.

"Reckon that's his problem, not mine," Sonny muttered, thinking regretfully of the snug little camp where he'd planned to weather the storm. "And what difference does it make to *me* whether we get to Flagstaff or not?"

It seemed impossible that the wind could blow any harder, but it did. The snow ceased falling, but it was being swept into deep and treacherous drifts.

It became colder, too—piercingly cold to Sonny, who was used to the sunny deserts of the border country. The cold steel of the handcuffs chilled his wrists like bands of ice.

"Glad I got to eat supper, anyhow," the outlaw thought. "Wonder what the sheriff thought of my cookin'."

Fate had certainly played a cruel trick on him, but it was no use now to brood over ill-luck. Things looked tough, but there might be a break, after all, before the lynching rope dropped over his head.

When the break came, he wanted to be ready to take advantage of it. For this reason he kept the circulation going in his arms as much as his handcuffs would allow.

There was just enough light for him to make out the blurred forms

of the sheriff and his horse. Timlin apparently knew where he was going, for he forged steadily onward through the forest, keeping the rope tight between him and his prisoner as a precaution.

Then they left the timber and came out on a high mesa, barren of trees except for occasional clumps of flattened cedars. The blizzard was raging even more furiously here, sending the snow hissing over the frozen ground like bitter ashes.

The wind tossed the snow from the high places, raked it from the peaks, and whirled it in clouds across the flats. It was the worst storm the outlaw had ever experienced. He was awed—amazed.

Then Sonny nearly fell from his saddle. The sheriff *did* fall. His big cayuse had floundered down into a snow-filled crevice. Paint, warned by instinct, probably, stopped dead still, the rope tightened with a jerk, and the pinto went nearly to its knees. The outlaw grabbed the saddle-horn with his manacled hands to keep from going over his bronc's head.

Waist deep in snow, the sheriff staggered to his feet, his six-gun gripped in his gloved hand. Sonny heard his shout half drowned by gusts of wind:

"Don't try anything, Tabor. I've still got the drop, and I——"

Sonny had no thought of attempting an escape. The situation could hardly have been more unfavorable. And even if he succeeded in getting away from Timlin, where could he go? He was lost, and the cold was frightful. Death was lurking on that mesa to-night, and he knew it.

"My hoss—he's busted his leg," cried the officer after a long pause.

A red flash split the blackness, and a booming report told Sonny that Timlin had shot his crippled cayuse.

Then he saw the sheriff pulling himself out of the deep drift by means of the rope. He came alongside Sonny, yelling.

"Yore bronc has got to carry double, Tabor! I'm comin' up behind yuh. Hold steady."

Panting, he heaved himself up on Paint's back, then cut the rope that had been keeping the two horses together.

"I'm afraid we're done fer, kid," the sheriff gasped. "Until jist now, I was shore I knowed where we was. We should've been at Downhill Pass, long ago. The wind must've changed, and fooled me. I dunno whar we are now. We're lost."

There was something stronger still than the law, and that was Nature herself. They were in the hands of destiny. There was no longer any distinction between them. Outlaw and sheriff alike were facing almost certain death.

### CHAPTER III.

#### FIGHTIN' THROUGH.

ACCORDING to the sheriff, there was no human habitation—at least that he knew of—within twenty miles. Their best chance, it seemed, was to try and get back into the timbered country where they might make a shelter, or perhaps build a fire. But which way to go? They did try it, but for an hour or more they traveled over the same, unbroken mesa. No landmarks could be seen.

Finally, Sonny let Paint pick a direction of its own, hoping that somehow the faithful animal would come through. The sheriff had evidently been hurt in his fall, for he seemed dazed and bewildered.

"If the worst comes to the worst," he muttered, "we might try diggin' into a drift, Tabor."

But the outlaw knew that it was too cold for that. And besides, there were no more drifts now. The vast, bleak table-land had been swept almost clean by the raging wind. Most of the time Paint's shod hoofs rang against barren stone.

Sonny's ears were frostbitten, his hands and face numb.

"It begins to look like yuh won't have the pleasure of hangin' me, after all, sheriff," he said grimly.

Sonny Tabor would never forget the misery of that endless night. Only the jolting of his cayuse kept him awake and fighting. A strange sleepiness, not unpleasant, at last almost overcame him. He seemed to be drifting into a dream, with the wind chanting a deadly lullaby. Almost gone now——

Suddenly he came to himself, shaking off his fatal lethargy. He no longer felt the weight of the sheriff's body against his back. Timlin had fallen to the ground.

"Whoa up, Paint!"

He opened his eyes with difficulty, for his lashes were frozen together. Dimly he made out a dark blot against the snowy ground. It was Timlin, stretched out at full length.

"Climb up, sheriff," Sonny called through stiffened lips. "It's too soon to give up yet."

"Leave me alone—I'm tired," said Timlin faintly. "Go away."

The sheriff had probably overestimated his strength to begin with. He had lacked Sonny Tabor's stamina. The outlaw was used to hardship of every kind. He had lived cleanly, and his youth and endurance stood him in good stead now.

Here was Sonny's chance to rid himself of the sheriff forever. All he had to do was jab Paint with the spurs, leave Timlin to die, and take his chances alone of pulling through.

In a way, too, he would be justi-

fied in doing that. Timlin represented his bitter enemy—the law. It was a question of self-preservation. Paint might carry one rider to safety, but the courageous animal could hardly be expected to fight through carrying two.

The situation was no fault of Sonny Tabor's. The sheriff had brought this misfortune on himself by his rashness.

Sonny dismounted stiffly and bent over Timlin.

"I want the key—the key to these cuffs, hombre," he shouted above the bellowing of the wind.

"No—key," muttered the sheriff.

The words seemed to rouse him, for with difficulty he pulled his gun and tried to lift it.

"We both die, Tabor! Yuh cain't get away with——"

The outlaw twisted the Colt out of his hand and slid the weapon into one of his own holsters.

"I'm not goin' to leave yuh—I'm tryin' to help yuh, can't yuh savvy?" Sonny cried. "I can do more for yuh if yuh unlock these cuffs. Which pocket is the key in?"

"I haven't got the key," Timlin groaned.

"What do yuh mean?"

"Key—is in my office at Flag," the sheriff said defiantly. "When I put handcuffs on an hombre, they *stay* on until he reaches jail."

That complicated things! It made the outlaw's work doubly harder. He executed a little war dance to take the stiffness out of his body, thumped his numbed and manacled hands a few times against his thighs, then bent over Timlin to lift him up.

"I'm goin' to save yuh in spite of yoreself, sheriff," he said cheerfully.

"Yuh killer! Yuh blasted cut-throat!" babbled Timlin, out of his head and rolling his head from side

to side in his delirium. "Let me—sleep."

Getting the long-legged body of the half conscious sheriff onto the pinto's back was no easy job, and it wouldn't have been, even if Sonny had the free use of his hands. Finally, though, he accomplished it and roped Timlin to the saddle so that he couldn't fall off again. Then he mounted and urged Paint onward into the storm.

The temptation to leave the sheriff to die had never entered Sonny's mind.

"Let's go, Paint," he muttered. "Let's see if we can't get somewhere."

Any ordinary bronc would have been done for, hours before. But like its master, the wiry little pinto had been toughened by many a hard and dangerous trail, and its muscles were like hardened steel. Taking the bit in its teeth, the cayuse plunged on again, tireless as a machine.

Another bitter hour went by. Timlin was quite senseless now, and his head hung over one shoulder, bobbing grotesquely. The cold had him—he couldn't last much longer.

And Sonny knew that he himself would be in no better shape if they didn't find a refuge from the storm within the next thirty minutes. The wind was stabbing him like knives, and he struggled with himself to keep from falling into the sleep from which there would be no waking.

"Even if we got into the timber," he thought, "I wouldn't be able to make a——"

Then Paint swerved toward the left, increasing its pace in a final spurt. Sonny strained his eyes, but at first could make out nothing.

A cedar limb slapped at him out of the dark. He ducked, and other branches crashed as the pinto plunged through a dense thicket.

WW—2A

Suddenly Paint came to a dead halt—right up against the side of a log shanty! They were saved.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### THIEVES' HIDE-OUT.

WHEN Sonny dismounted, his numbed legs went out from under him, and he went down on his knees on the snowy ground. It was several minutes before he could make his muscles obey. They hadn't reached shelter a minute too soon.

He couldn't tell much about the shack as yet, except that it was dark and seemed deserted. He finally managed to find the door, and with much difficulty he lifted the unconscious body of Timlin from Paint's back.

"Anybody there?" the outlaw shouted over the sobbing of the freezing wind.

There was no reply, even after he kicked the door a few times. It was locked, and resisted his efforts at first, but after ramming it with his shoulder a few times it gave way with a melancholy bang, and swung inward.

Sonny dragged the sheriff in, then closed the door. There was a plank floor underfoot—that was all he could tell about the cabin just then.

The room was quite cold—it was evident that no fire had been made there that day—but compared with the biting wind outside it was a paradise.

He finally managed to get his cuffed hands into his pocket and found a match. He struck it carefully, cupping it as best he could in his fingers, and held it aloft.

The shanty had only one room, furnished with built-in bunks along one wall. Although the place smelled of stale tobacco, it appar-

ently hadn't been occupied for several days, at least.

The floor was littered with old playing cards, cigarette stubs, and empty whisky flasks. Torn and soiled blankets were on the bunks; there were a few broken chairs and a table spotted with candle grease.

One of the first things the outlaw saw was a lantern with a cracked chimney. He picked this up, shook it and found that it contained a little oil. Fumblingly he lighted the wick. They had light now, at least.

But what caused Sonny to rejoice was the sight of a pot-bellied sheet-iron stove and a big stack of cut wood along one wall. He set immediately to work and soon had a fire roaring.

Then he turned his attention to Timlin. The sheriff was senseless and breathing faintly. His face was livid. Sonny finally managed to get him onto the bunk farthest from the stove. He knew that it would not do to get the half-frozen man warm too quickly.

He set to work rubbing Timlin's limbs as briskly as he could. The law hombre stirred a little, groaned, but his eyes remained closed.

"He'll come out of it pretty soon. I'm goin' to see what I can do for Paint."

If he couldn't find other shelter for the faithful pinto bronc he'd bring him into the cabin, no matter what the owners of the shack would think of it. Right against the cabin, though, was a warm shed.

He investigated it with the lantern, then led Paint in. He was glad to see three or four sacks of grain stored there.

"Here's where yuh eat, Paint boy," the outlaw chuckled, as he poured a generous amount into an old box. "Believe me, yuh deserve it. I hate to think where I'd be now

if it wasn't for that hoss sense and hoss nerve of yores. *Buenas noches, caballo!*"

Leaving Paint to eat his well-earned supper—or breakfast—Sonny returned to the shanty. There wasn't much change in Timlin's condition, but a fairly strong pulse had returned to his wrists, and it would be only a question of time before the Coconino sheriff snapped out of it.

"Now if I can only get these handcuffs off——" Sonny muttered.

The stove was growing red-hot and when the outlaw shut off the draft the room began to get fairly comfortable. After he had thawed out, he gave the shanty a careful once-over, his eye out for something he might use to remove his manacles.

He didn't have to look very long before deciding that he had stumbled on the headquarters of a gang of bandits, rustlers, and probably worse.

A great deal of stuff was jammed under the bunks—loot, evidently, from robberies. He saw seven brand-new Winchester rifles with the tags still on them. There were a great many boxes of ammunition and other supplies, and stacked in a corner were many hides, all with the brands cut out of them—a circumstance that spoke volumes.

After rummaging around a bit, he even found a cigar box nearly full of Mexican silver coins—pesos and half pesos—about sixty dollars' worth. He pushed this back where he had found it.

More valuable than anything else—to him—was a file. He jammed the sharp-pointed end solidly between two logs of the wall, put the other end against his chest and went to work on his bracelets.

Fortunately, they were old-style cuffs, a kind with which he was

familiar, and he concentrated on the lock. It took a long time, though, and his arms were aching and it was getting daylight outside, before the steel manacles finally jingled to the floor.

"That's better," he murmured, stretching his tired muscles. "But what next?" He looked quizzically at Timlin. "Things shore work out funny," he smiled. "Here I am with a sheriff on my hands!"

He peered out through the one small window, watching the skies turn pale and gray. It was light enough now for him to make out near-by objects, to see that the shanty was surrounded by a dense thicket. It was so well hidden that it was a miracle they had blundered into it, at all.

With the coming of the morning the wind died down. The storm was over and it was clearing up. One of the coldest nights that northern Arizona had ever known was over.

Suddenly the outlaw stiffened, jumping away from the window. Four riders had popped into view. They were coming right for the shanty, swinging along at a confident canter, like men on their way home.

Sonny gave the sheriff's gun a quick examination, then holstered it and bent over Timlin. The officer was still unconscious. The outlaw hurriedly unpinned his badge and dropped it into his own shirt pocket. If the newcomers were the kind of hombres he thought they were, that silver star should be kept out of sight.

Saddle leather squeaked just outside. Sonny hardly had time to turn, before the door swung inward.

"Well, I'll be——" wheezed a heavy voice.

"Who in blazes——" came a chorus of others, and gun hammers clicked sharply.

## CHAPTER V.

### FIREWORKS!

THE hombres who shouldered their way into the cabin were four of the evilest-looking men Sonny ever remembered seeing. The one in the lead, who seemed to be the king-pin of the quartet, seemed to radiate a ferocious ugliness.

He was a big desperado with a broken nose, small red eyes, and a square, bull-dog jaw. Buckled over his snow-sprinkled mackinaw were two ivory-handled .45s.

The three others weren't much more pleasant to look at. One had a tangled black beard that hid his face from the cheek bones downward. Another had buckteeth and a pointed face like a weasel. The fourth man walked with a limp and carried a carbine in his mittened hand.

"Mornin', caballeros!" greeted Sonny Tabor pleasantly.

Some of the newcomers had their guns in their hands, but at sight of the smiling young hombre in the checkered shirt they stood still in amazement. The weasel-faced hombre shut the door.

"What are yuh doin' yere, kid?" demanded the leader harshly.

"Got lost in the storm, my friend and me," Sonny drawled. "Is this yore house?"

"Yeah—and it ain't a hotel," said the broken-nosed desperado in a rasping voice.

His red eyes seemed to probe Sonny through and through. His breath rose around his head in a cloud of vapor as he stood near the door, watching the youthful outlaw warily.

"It's jist a *muchacho*, Van," said the whiskered man, advancing toward the stove and clawing the ice from his unkempt beard.

"Yeah, but who's this other jasper?" growled the chief, staring at the sheriff who was still senseless on one of the bunks. "These two hombres might be part of a posse fer all we know! Who are yuh, kid?" he demanded of Sonny.

"Just a cowboy, out of work at present," the outlaw drawled.

"And this other jasper?"

"He's out of work, too—at present," Sonny murmured.

The leader seemed satisfied, though irritated to find strangers at his headquarters. He joined the others at the stove, stamping his booted feet and warming his hands.

The four began to talk together in low voices. The looks they passed in Sonny's direction were far from friendly.

"When are yuh goin' to make the divvy, Van?" the outlaw heard one of them say, but the broken-nosed hombre shook his head and motioned for silence.

The weasel-faced desperado whispered for a few minutes in his ear, and he looked at Sonny and Timlin again and nodded grimly.

"Yuh and the sick hombre will have to clear-out o' yere," he rasped.

"I can't move him just yet," Sonny said, "but as soon as he's able to—"

The leader's lip curled back, disclosing a line of pointed, tobacco-stained teeth.

"I'm doin' yuh a big favor tuh let yuh go at all, kid," he sneered. "Yuh'd better vamose afore I change my mind an'—"

"Hey!" interrupted the hombre with the limp. "What's this?" He stooped and picked up something from the floor.

Sonny's heart gave a jump. He'd forgotten to hide the broken handcuffs!

The gang leader's beetling brows

went close together at the sight of the manacles. He turned to stare at Sonny with his inflamed little eyes.

"Either yuh or yore pard is a law man," he snarled, his huge hands dropping to the butts of his six-guns. "Which one of yuh—"

"It's easy to figure out," put in the buck-toothed hombre. "These cuffs have been busted off, and it's a cinch thet the old jasper on the bunk wasn't wearin' 'em. If thar's a law-man yere, it ain't this kid."

"Kid, was yuh wearin' these cuffs?" the bandit leader demanded.

"I was." Sonny nodded quietly, thinking fast.

"And this other hombre is an officer, eh?"

"Would I be takin' care of him if he was?" Sonny countered, his voice steady.

The broken-nosed hombre rolled a cigarette without taking his eyes from the outlaw's face.

"Not unless yo're a plumb fool, yuh wouldn't," he admitted. "Are you on the dodge, *muchacho*?"

"Plenty."

"Well, so are we," said the leader with a shrug. "Thet's why we aim to be keerful. Yo're new to this game, I reckon, but we're not. Mebbe yuh've heard o' me—I'm Van Aldean, and I'm purty well known up in Utah. These is my men," he grunted, giving the names of each in turn.

The rat-face desperado with the protruding teeth was named "Flash" Curtland; the hombre with the limp was Jake Thaddus; and the bearded one was "Whiskers" McGaul.

"If yuh want to stick with us, kid, mebbe we kin put some nice dinero yore way," said Van Aldean. "We ain't pikers. We jist got through with a deal thet netted us a good piece o' money."

Sonny could easily imagine what

the "deal" was. There was no doubt in his mind about these hard-faced gunmen; they were the bandits who'd committed robbery and murder at Flagstaff.

"Mebbe yuh'd better tell us yore story, kid," growled Curtland. "How did yuh and yore *companero* happen to be driftin' in the storm last night?"

"Lost our way, that's all," Sonny drawled.

"Humph!" snorted Whiskers McGaul. "How do we know he's tellin' the truth, Van? I don't like the looks o' this. I ain't never seen the sheriff o' Coconino, but thet jasper on the bunk shore answers to his description. I'm goin' to go through his pockets to see if I cain't find some letters or papers thet'll tell us who——"

He took a step toward Timlin, but Sonny Tabor's voice rang out sharply:

"Keep back from him!"

Van Aldean's evil face darkened. "Oh, so he is the law, eh, kid?"

"If he is, he's in no condition to do any of yuh any harm," said Sonny. "Leave him alone!"

They stared at Sonny for a long moment, looking in amazement at the young *muchacho* who had dared give them orders. Then Van Aldean sneered mockingly. His beefy right paw was hovering over the butt of his Colt.

"I dunno whether thet lawman is fakin' to be asleep or not, but one thing I *do* know," he leered, "he ain't goin' to ever wake up! I've got a bullet right now with his name on it! I'll——"

Sonny Tabor put his back against the wall. He was smiling a little, but with his lips only. His blue eyes were like bits of ice, and the bullet mark in his cheek looked nothing like a dimple now.

"I'll kill the first hombre that makes a wrong move!" his voice whipcracked.

"Yuh'll—*what?*" gasped Van Aldean, and then he threw back his head and burst into a roar of laughter, which the others joined.

What Sonny said must have sounded extremely funny to them. It was mighty big talk—so they thought—for an inexperienced youngster.

Sonny's smile, too, fooled them. He had made no move toward the .45 that was tucked into the holster on his right thigh.

"Well, *muchacho*," said Whiskers, with a humorless grin. "I reckon we'll humor yuh, and let yuh have yore way."

"Yeah?" Sonny drawled.

"Yeah! We're goin' to let yuh die with yore lawman pard!"

And the hand of Whiskers McGaul darted toward his holstered Colt!

## CHAPTER VI.

### WHEN THE SHERIFF WOKE.

THE bearded desperado was fast, but not fast enough—to live! With a motion too fast for the eye to follow, Sonny drew and fired! The flash of fire and smoke came before McGaul's gun was free of the leather.

The would-be murderer was killed almost instantly. The roar of Sonny's .45 drowned out his shriek of agony as the slug tore through his thick body and buried itself in the log wall behind him.

For the space of half a breath, the three others hesitated in bewilderment, amazed that one split second of Eternity could change this smiling, boyish *muchacho* into a death-dealing fighting machine. But as McGaul's body thudded to the floor the others went into action!

"Drop thet younker!" yelled Van Aldean, whipping out his Colts.

Even yet, they didn't realize that they were up against the deadliest gunman in the whole Southwest. Confident of bringing Sonny down at once, they opened up, shouting profanely.

*Br-r-r-annng! Bang! Br-r-r-rong!* Instantly the shanty was full of pale-blue powder smoke—smoke that was lashed through and through by winking streamers of flame.

The explosions made a continuous roar, a deafening thunderstorm that shook the place from floor to ceiling.

And through the smoke Sonny shifted and weaved, crouched low, his spitting .45 held below his hip, the blued barrel tilted upward. He side-stepped, fired, and fired again!

Curtland, the buck-toothed hombre, dropped his gun and went to his knees, his weasel face white and drawn. One of Sonny's slugs had reamed him through the shoulder.

The desperado with the limp—Jake Thaddus—began firing his carbine without putting it to his shoulder. The range was so close that the first shot burned Sonny's neck with powder grains, though the bullet droned by him by inches.

Thaddus never fired again. He jerked the loading lever down and up, and as his finger tightened on the trigger, Sonny drove a slug at his head. The smoking carbine clattered to the floor and Thaddus, with a dark-blue circle over his left eye, followed it.

At the same instant, Van Aldean fired point-blank at Sonny's heart—too close to miss.

The impact whirled Sonny half around and knocked him to one knee. The breath left his body as if he had been struck with a pile driver.

"Got yuh!" snarled Van Aldean.

To his amazement, Sonny's .45 flashed again, the slug just grazing the side of his jaw. The desperado returned the shot, in his haste missing by a yard.

"Who in blazes *are* yuh?" he yelped.

"My name is Tabor," said Sonny, and with a yell Van Aldean leaped for the door, crashed against it and went through. It was enough for him! He'd heard that name before!

Although Sonny could have shot him in the back, he let him go. He got to his feet swaying, trying to get a good breath. The left side of his chest was numb, as if he'd been hit by a hammer.

Gingerly he reached into his shirt pocket and drew out Sheriff Pat Timlin's badge. The star, bent almost out of shape, was hot to the touch. It had deflected Van Aldean's bullet.

"I never knew that one of these things would bring me any luck, but it shore did to-day," Sonny muttered, as he stared at it.

Fearing that the sheriff might have been hit by a stray bullet, he bent over Timlin. The officer was uninjured, and still unconscious. He was moving a little, and groaning, but his eyes were still tightly shut.

Flash Curtland, the wounded desperado, was swearing and writhing on the floor near the stove. Just as a precaution, Sonny kicked his gun out of reach.

Then he went out with a bucket, dipped up some snow and melted it on the fire, thinking to bring Timlin back to consciousness by bathing his face.

Sonny had just returned with the bucket, and had taken a step toward the sheriff's bunk, when a kick sent the door open with a thud. Visitors!

The outlaw whirled—an instant too late.

"Git 'em up quick, feller!" bel-  
lowed a commanding voice.

Sonny hesitated for only a brief instant, then obeyed. There was nothing else for him to do. A half dozen men had slipped up quietly on the shanty, and they had the drop.

He could guess who they were, especially after a couple of them ran toward the sheriff.

"It's Timlin, and he's hurt!" one of them cried.

"Good grief!" cried another. "What's been goin' on yere? It's a slaughterhouse!"

There were ejaculations of astonishment from the others as they took in the sight of the two dead men, and the one wounded, on the shanty floor.

"All accounted fer!" said a big hombre, quickly disarming Sonny Tabor.

"Yeah, we got all four, looks like," nodded a man with a drooping gray mustache. "Thar's been a fight in yere, all right. Is the sheriff wounded?"

"Don't seem to be any mark on him."

A small hombre wearing steel-rimmed spectacles stepped up close to Sonny Tabor.

"Well, what have yuh got to say, young man?" he demanded.

"Are you the posse from Flagstaff?" asked Sonny in return.

Outwardly he was calm, but his heart had sunk mighty low. It was tough to be taken like this, after going through so much.

"We shore are!" snapped the man with the glasses. "Now don't try to deny thet yo're one of the four bandits thet held up my bank, two days ago."

"I do deny it," said the outlaw a bit wearily. "These three hombres

on the floor know somethin' about it, I think, but I——"

"Four men robbed the bank—not three," snapped the Flagstaff banker. "Yo're the fourth."

"The fourth hombre just made his escape from here. Didn't yuh see him, sir?" Sonny cried. "It isn't too late now, if yuh want to take up his trail."

"No goose chases, thank yuh," said the posseman coldly. "Yo're the fourth man. What did yuh do? Get in an argument about the division of yore loot? Anyway——"

"The sheriff's comin' 'round, boys," announced one of the others. "Now we'll soon know what this is all about."

He had been holding a whisky flask to Timlin's lips, and the stimulating liquor had brought the color back into the officer's lean face. He sputtered a few times, coughed, and tried to sit up on the bunk.

"What's happened, sheriff?" they questioned. "How do yuh come to be yere?"

It took Timlin five or ten minutes to recover the use of his voice, and when he did talk, finally, he had nothing to say that could throw any light on things. He looked dazedly at Sonny, at the posse, then back at the outlaw again.

"I—I dunno how I got yere," he muttered weakly. "Last I remember, the storm—I—— How long have I been like this?"

"A couple of hours," Sonny said quietly, "or maybe three." And he went on to tell briefly the things that had happened since Timlin had dropped senseless from Paint's back the night before.

They listened in astonishment, and no one was more amazed than Timlin himself. He shook his head, though, more than once, before Sonny had finished.

"If yuh saved me from the storm, Tabor, I thank yuh, but——"

"Tabor!" chorused the others, their eyes bulging.

"Yes, it's Sonny Tabor, most wanted hombre in the Territory," Timlin said. He stared hard at the outlaw. "This gang of yores—yuh say they wanted to kill me, so you smoked——"

"I'm tellin' yuh it isn't my gang," Sonny repeated. "I'd never seen any of them before."

"Thet's purty thin," growled one of the posse. "How did yuh come to bring the sheriff yere, if this wasn't yore hide-away?"

"I found it by accident, or rather my bronc did."

The spectacled man walked over to the body of Whiskers McGaul and stared down at it.

"I reco'nize him," he said. "This feller with the beard was one of 'em, all right. The wind blew his mask a little just as he left the bank, and I saw his face."

The two dead men and the wounded Curtland were searched, along with Sonny, but no money was found.

"What do you think, Timlin?" the banker asked.

"These are the four men we want—no question about thet," said the officer decisively. "They've probably cached the dinero they stole." He looked not unkindly at Sonny Tabor. "Undoubtedly, younker, yuh saved my life, last night. Last thing I remember was bein' in the snow. Why don't yuh come clean? I'll do all I kin to help yuh."

A lump came to the outlaw's throat. He felt as miserable as he had ever felt in his life. Of course his—an outlaw's—word was no good!

The irony of it all was that Timlin had been through it all, and if he

had only been conscious he would have known that Sonny had told the truth.

The sheriff turned to Curtland who was sitting on the floor with his back to the wall, nursing his wounded shoulder.

"Was Tabor in yore bunch, hombre?" he asked.

Curtland smiled poisonously, showing his ratlike teeth in a sneering grimace.

"Was he? O' course he was," he lied. "He was our leader, and it was him thet plugged them two bankers in Flag. We was arguin' over splittin' up the dinero when he started shootin' an'——"

"Well, that settles it!" the posse chorused.

The sheriff tottered unsteadily to his feet. "Yeah, I reckon it does," he said regretfully. "I feel able to travel now. Tie both the prisoners up, and pay strict attention to the knots when yuh tie Tabor, or he'll plumb ruin yore ropes like he did my handcuffs!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### JAIL.

THE little party reached Flagstaff shortly before noon, striking a fairly good trail a few miles from the bandits' shanty and following it into town. Sonny was astride his own bronc.

It was a beautiful day, with a sky of vivid, crystal-blue, and a golden sun that threatened to melt the heaped-up snow. The Frisco Peaks, highest in all Arizona, stood sharply chiseled against the horizon, two dazzling white summits around which the last of the snow clouds were drifting like whipped cream.

It was a wonderful day—to be free. Sonny wondered if he was taking his last look at the out-of-doors.

Reaching town, Sonny and the weasel-faced desperado were taken at once to the jail—a small brick structure half underground, in the same square occupied by the courthouse.

"Anything I can do fer yuh, Tabor?" the sheriff asked kindly, while the outlaw's ropes were being removed outside the calaboose.

"Only one thing," Sonny requested earnestly. "See that Paint has good care, won't yuh?"

"I'll shore do thet!" cried Timlin heartily. "I ain't forgotten thet I owe my life, practic'ly speakin', to thet spotty cayuse of yores! See the livery stable right across the squar'? I'll put him thar and the best in Flag won't be none too good fer him."

"Thanks, amigo," the outlaw smiled.

Flash Curtland, after his wounded shoulder had been dressed, was herded on down the jail steps along with Sonny.

"Don't put me in the same cell with Tabor," he pleaded whiningly. "I'm hurt, and he'll beat me up."

"Rest easy," Sonny drawled contemptuously, "yo're not worth the trouble."

"Thar's only one cell; so it's the same bull-pen fer yuh both," grunted Timlin, unlocking the solid steel door of the jail and stepping in behind his prisoners.

There was a narrow passageway, along the side of which was a cage made of heavy iron bars reaching from floor to ceiling. Timlin unlocked the door of this, and when Sonny and Curtland were inside, closed and carefully locked it with a key on a large steel hoop.

"I'll bring yuh yore meals reg'lar," he promised as he went out.

When he'd gone, Sonny examined his prison. The cage was fitted out

with four iron bunks, or shelves, rather, and a couple of wooden slop-buckets. The floor was of solid stone, and the only window opened out of the passageway, so that it was impossible to look out, let alone tamper with it. It, too, was barred with iron.

"Ain't goin' nowhar', are yuh?" sneered his evil-faced cell-mate.

Sonny didn't reply. He was having to fight with himself to keep his spirits up. He wasn't the sort to give way to despair, but he had never been in a more hopeless predicament.

His thoughts matched the dreariness of the half-dark jail. This was *one* jail, it seemed, that he'd never get out of—until the time came for him to march to the scaffold.

Dinner was brought; then, after what seemed an age, supper. It began to grow dark, but a moon appeared and threw slanting beams through the barred window in the passageway.

Sonny was weary; he hadn't slept for two nights, and in spite of his troubles he knew that he would have no difficulty in sleeping. He threw himself onto one of the bunks and closed his eyes.

Curtland squatted in one corner, smoking innumerable brown cigarettes and watching Sonny nervously, as if afraid Sonny would revenge himself on him by giving him the thrashing he deserved.

The last Sonny saw of him before drifting off to sleep was the intermittent glow of Curtland's cigarette end. Then he fell into a deep and dreamless slumber.

He awoke with a strange feeling of uneasiness. He didn't know how long he had slept, but the moon had gone and there was just the faintest suggestion of a gray glimmer at the

window, and he knew that daybreak was only a short time off.

What had awakened him? He lay quietly, trying to think. He'd heard somebody speaking in a low tone—he was sure of that, certain that it wasn't a dream.

And it wasn't his cell-mate's voice, either! It sounded like—he raked his brain trying to place it—it sounded like Van Aldean!

"But it *couldn't* be!" he thought.

"Yuh say yuh'll have two brones waitin' on this side of the square?" some one whispered.

That was Curtland, no question about that! Sonny sat up quickly.

"Vamose, Van," he heard Curtland hiss, and Sonny was sure he heard footsteps leaving the window beyond the cage.

"Havin' company?" Sonny Tabor blasted——"

He could just make out Curtland's outlines now. At his question he saw the desperado stiffen. But there was no reply. In the gloom of the cage he could hear the hombre grinding his teeth.

It grew lighter, and Sonny got up, yawned, and peered through the bars of the cage into the narrow corridor. His eyes narrowed at what he saw. On the floor of the passage was a long, thin stick with a cord tied to one end of it.

"Well, have yuh got yore eyes full?" sneered the weasel-faced bandit.

"Yore pard must have brought yuh a present." Sonny smiled.

"A present fer *you*, too, in a way," the desperado jeered. "Yuh'll never hang, Tabor boy."

"That's good news," said Sonny, calmly.

"Because *I'm* goin' to have the pleasure o' killin' yuh!" snarled Curtland through his protruding teeth,

and he reached into his unbuttoned shirt and whipped out a Colt .45.

"Van Aldean," said Sonny without flinching, "didn't give yuh that just to kill me with."

"No, I'm goin' to make an escape with it, too," leered Curtland. "I'm goin' to kill two birds with one stone. I'll git even with you, and at the same time git out o' yere. Stand back," he shrilled, backing up to the far end of the cage and lining the sights on Sonny's chest. "Stand back, or yuh'll git it right now!"

"Listen, hombre, I'm not afraid of that gun," said Sonny Tabor softly. "A man that's to be hung soon ain't afraid of anything much, so remember that!"

"Yuh won't have to wait fer the hangman," gloated the rat-faced killer. "Yuh'll be in yore grave afore long. And I'll be free—free, with my share o' thet eight thousand!" He laughed scratchily. "When the sheriff comes to bring our breakfast—when he opens this cage door—I'm goin' to kill him. Van's goin' to have a hoss waitin' fer me out thar, and we'll hit fer Californy! And I'm goin' to kill you, blast yuh, at the same time I kill the sheriff."

"Yuh won't kill the sheriff, hombre," Sonny drawled.

"And why not?" sneered Curtland. "The minute he opens this door with his keys——"

"Yo're not goin' to kill him," repeated Sonny steadily, "because I'm not goin' to let yuh."

Hate flared redly in Curtland's evil eyes. He rolled back the hammer of the .45.

"Why, I'll kill yuh right now, yuh blasted——"

"*Bueno*," the young outlaw said. "Go ahead, but if yuh do there'll be no get-away for you. The sound of that shot will give the alarm—plenty of it."

"Yuh yaller law-lover! Yuh sneakin'——"

"I don't love the law near as much as I hate you and yore kind, Curtland!" Sonny cried, his blue eyes flashing with stormy lights. "Before I see yuh murder the sheriff, I'll raise the roof of this jail yellin' for help, and yuh can shoot and be danged!"

It was broad daylight now, and he could see the desperado's face working and twitching, livid with mingled fear and fury.

"If yuh do thet——" he snarled.

But Sonny had been edging toward him, inch by inch, and now, like a pouncing cougar, he hurled himself on Curtland, taking the intervening space in one swift bound!

## CHAPTER VIII.

### TIMLIN BRINGS BREAKFAST.

**H**IS attack was so sudden that the buck-toothed bandit had no time to dodge, and Sonny managed to seize the wrist of the hand that held the gun. Then a terrific struggle began.

Curtland was badly handicapped by his wounded left shoulder, but he was twenty pounds heavier than Sonny, a head taller, and very strong. Both men fought with a madness born of desperation.

*Smash! Thud!* Sonny had gripped Curtland's wrist with his left hand, and with the right he drove the killer's head back with two hard uppercuts.

In return, Curtland rushed Sonny, by sheer weight and fury, against the bars of the bull-pen, at the same time striking the outlaw in the midriff with the heavy gun, without being able to loosen Sonny's grip on it.

Curtland dared not shoot. His freedom depended on not giving the alarm, and to make sure that the gun wouldn't explode, he had taken his

finger out of the trigger guard, intending to use the weapon as a club.

"Yuh'd stop me, would yuh?" he snarled. "Yuh leetle skunk!"

*Whack!* Sonny's right went hooking in at Curtland's evil face, snapping the desperado's buck teeth inward.

With a drool of red at his mouth, Curtland brought his knee up forcibly. Locked together, they both caromed from the bars and fell to the floor, rolling over and over.

Curtland fought like an animal, and with more than an animal's cunning. He used his feet as well as his hands. He bit and gouged, squeaking like a rat whenever his injured shoulder was hurt, forgetting the pain in his insane rage. His mouth splattered reddened froth at every breath.

Panting, gasping, they pounded furiously at each other, their quivering muscles swelling into great knots and ridges as they struggled. First one was underneath and then the other.

One of Curtland's eyes was closed, and he was wheezing horribly. The heels of his boots beat an agonized tattoo against the floor as Sonny's hard fist rammed him under the heart.

"Turn loose, an' I—I'll let yuh escape with me, Tabor," he choked. "We'll both make a—get-away!"

"I'm not bargainin'—with yuh, hombre," Sonny panted.

Again they whirled over, spinning across the stone floor of the cage. Curtland managed to get his talon-like fingers on Sonny's face, and he buried them crablike in his cheek. His thumb sought Sonny's eye. Sonny struggled, but he couldn't get his head loose. In another moment he could be maimed—blinded.

By a super-effort, he managed to break the ghastly hold, but in doing

so he had to release his grip on the desperado's gun wrist.

"Now, dang yuh!" shrilled Curtland, and he brought the barrel of the big Colt violently across Sonny's temple.

The cage seemed to spin crazily. The outlaw felt his strength leave him. He made one last effort to guard himself, but once again—harder, this time—the gun barrel thudded against his skull.

With a noise like a thousand church bells, blackness rushed upon him. A million colored lights seemed to flare up before his eyes, then they winked out, and all was dark and still.

Sonny recovered his senses only gradually. At least half an hour must have elapsed, for the early sun was shining through the window. He was sprawled out on one of the bunks, with a blanket over him.

Curtland had put him there, evidently, so that the sheriff would think nothing amiss when he came with the breakfast. Sonny could see the desperado leaning against the door of the cage, the gun tucked out of sight beneath his shirt.

Sonny started to jump from the bunk, and found that he couldn't move. It was like being in a nightmare. He seemed neither asleep nor awake.

He opened his mouth to cry out, but no sound came. His head was throbbing frightfully, and he felt sick at the pit of his stomach. His face was dripping with cold sweat.

For the time being, at least, the blows he had received had paralyzed him completely!

Curtland noticed that his eyes were open, and he came up to the bunk, watching his victim warily.

"It won't be long," he gibed. "The sheriff will be yere any minute

now, and I'm goin' to kill him with my first shot. I'll blow yore head off with the second!"

Sonny tried to roll to the floor, but his muscles refused to obey. The cell seemed to be going up and down like a teeter-totter.

He was still trying to recover the use of his legs and arms when he heard a brisk step outside and the rattle of a key in the lock of the outer door.

"Yere he comes!" Curtland chortled, his hand stealing inside his flannel shirt.

From where he lay, Sonny could see everything plainly. A splash of sunlight entered the gloomy prison as the main door swung ajar and the tall, lanky form of Sheriff Pat Timlin appeared.

He had a large tin tray covered with dishes on the flat of one hand, and in the other he held his big key ring. The fragrant odor of coffee drifted through the calaboose.

"Mornin', men," greeted the sheriff cheerily.

His spurs clanged closer along the passageway. He had paused now at the cage door, fumbling with the key.

"Hello, Tabor! Yuh still in the hay?" he chuckled. "Better pile out. I've got some first-rate bait yere fer yuh—even better than the meal yuh cooked fer me. Bacon, eggs, biscuits, and honey from the Chink rest'rant. How's thet fer grub?"

There was a click as he turned the key in the lock. Once again Sonny tried to shout a warning, even though he knew it was now too late.

He made a tremendous effort, something seemed to snap, and with a rush all Sonny's faculties returned to him. He found himself, just as Timlin swung open the door.

"Look out, sheriff," he yelled, and

at the same instant he hurled himself at Curtland's legs.

*Br-r-r-rang!* In the narrow confines of the jail, the roar of Curtland's .45 was like a thunderclap!

It was echoed by the crash of breaking dishes as the tin tray dropped from Timlin's hand and clattered to the stone floor. Coffee splashed ceilingward in a brown geyser.

The officer gave a little cry, his hand flew to his head and he stumbled to his knees, then falling forward on his face, arms outstretched.

The desperado leaped over his prostrate form and was already in the passageway. He whirled and fired twice at Sonny, but the outlaw had dropped low. The first bullet was deflected as it struck one of the bars of the cage, the other howled a foot over Sonny's head.

Time was precious to Curtland, and he sprinted on down the passage. Sonny Tabor jerked the sheriff's .45 from its scabbard, but Curtland had vanished through the outer door before he could shoot.

"Are yuh bad hurt, sheriff?" the outlaw gasped, dropping on his knees beside the groaning officer.

Timlin's eyes flickered open, closed again, then jerked wide and stayed that way. He'd been only creased. The killer's slug had grooved his skull slightly, stunning him for a moment. Sonny Tabor's quick work had spoiled Curtland's aim.

"How—where——" the officer blurted dazedly, fumbling at his empty gun holster.

"I've got yore hogleg, and I'm keepin' it for a while—savvy?" said Sonny grimly. "*I'm goin' to do yore job o' sheriffin' to-day! And if yo're comin' with me, hurry along pronto, before those two rattlers get clear away!*"

## CHAPTER IX.

### PAINT WINS A RACE.

AT that early hour the streets of the town were practically deserted. The sound of the shots in the jail had attracted a few loungers from the near-by saloon, but the courthouse square was empty, when Sonny Tabor and Sheriff Timlin raced across it toward the livery barn on the corner.

On the way they caught a fleeting glimpse of two riders, leaving at a terrific clip. One of them was Curtland, astride a big buckskin horse, and Sonny judged that the other, mounted on a rangy roan, was Van Aldean. They had cut right through the main part of town and were headed southward at top speed.

Sonny jumped through the drifts to the stable door, with the sheriff's long legs thumping just behind him.

"Wrangle out my pinto bronc—quick!" he shouted at the yawning stableman. "And give the *next* fastest cayuse in town to the sheriff!"

"What——"

"Hurry!" the outlaw snapped, and the barn flunky, his eyes bulging at the sight of the big Colt in Sonny's hand, proceeded to hop to it!

He brought out Paint and a slender-legged, powerfully muscled sorrel.

"This is the fastest in town!" gasped the flunky.

"Next to Paint, maybe," said Sonny Tabor, who was already slapping the saddle on his eager little bronc. "Cinch up yore hull, sheriff—we've got to hurry!"

"I ought to get a gun——" began Timlin.

"Yuh won't need any," said the outlaw grimly. "I've got one."

Leaving the alarmed stable flunky

gaping after them, Sonny and the sheriff swung aboard their horses and pounded into the street. Neck and neck, the pinto and the sorrel thundered through town and southward.

It was a rolling country in that direction, dotted with sparse timber. The trail was drifted here and there with the recent snow, there were patches of ice, and the going was none too good. The two broncs, however, galloped madly, hitting a rhythmic, mile-eating pace.

"Yuh'd better pass me thet gun, Tabor," the officer gasped. "Yore pony can't keep up with this sorrel."

They had lost sight of their quarry, but now they saw the two bandits again—moving dots, dark against the snow, far ahead. The hoofs of their speeding horses were kicking up snow clouds like flying spume behind them.

"I believe we're gainin'!" Timlin cried. "Yuh'd better not tackle them alone, younker. They——"

"I've got to clear my name of the bank stick-up charge. I'll do the sheriffin', you trail along," Sonny replied. "The hombre with Curtland is Van Aldean, the fourth bandit—the hombre yuh thought I was. It was him that smuggled the gun into the jail."

In spite of all Timlin could do with his spurs, his sorrel, although going like a house afire, began to lag behind the outlaw's wiry little pinto. First it was ten yards behind, then twenty—fifty.

"Go get 'em, Paint ol' boy!" Sonny muttered.

He was less than a mile from Curtland and Van Aldean now, and in a very little while the distance had shrunk by half. Paint was closing in, taking the snowy trail like a race track. Yard by yard, the pinto pony was closing the gap.

*Br-r-r-ree! Whir-r-r-r!* A bullet, then another, whizzed over Sonny's head.

He was within range, now. The bandit pair, seeing that they couldn't outdistance him, swerved their broncs off the trail. They headed up a slope dotted with pines and stumps, shooting rapidly.

The snow was too deep, there, for them to get far. As their horses floundered down, nearly belly-deep, they jumped from their saddles and ducked for shelter.

Sonny also dismounted, knowing that a mounted man made a better target than one on foot. And he didn't want Paint hit.

"Stand steady, *caballo* boy, I'll be back, or——"

He waded deliberately through the deep drifts, stalking his men. They were scarcely sixty yards from him now, hidden behind stumps.

"Come out from there with yore hands up, both of yuh, or we'll shoot this thing out, here and now!" Sonny called to them.

He was answered by shots and profane shouts. A slug droned between his feet and sprinkled him with snow.

"Have it yore own way, *bandidos!*" the outlaw said coldly, dropping to a crouch and drawing, for the first time, the sheriff's Colt .45. He could see a little splot of color along the edge of one stump—Van Aldean's shirt sleeve. Taking quick aim, he fired.

An exclamation of pain and fury from the bandit leader told him that his first shot hadn't been altogether wasted. The two desperadoes remained behind their stumps, just a few yards apart. They weren't showing themselves now, and Sonny waited.

And they were waiting for *him*—listening for any sound that would

betray his exact location. They'd already experienced a sample of Sonny's gun play, and they didn't intend to take unnecessary chances.

Sonny didn't move for several minutes. Then he scooped up a little snow in his left hand, worked it into a snowball, and hurled it up the hillside. It splattered against the stump that Van Aldean was hiding behind.

With a nervous yell, the broken-nosed hombre bobbed up like a jumping-jack, his gun exploding wildly. And as he showed himself, Sonny's .45 roared.

It was all for Van Aldean! With a weird, freezing yell, the killer leaped high in the air, fell, and then rolled for some distance downhill through the snow, leaving a crimson trail behind him.

"Now I'm callin' yore name, Curtland," said Sonny coolly. "Don't yuh think yuh ought to go back to jail with the sheriff or——"

There was a tense silence, then Curtland fairly screeched:

"I'll see yuh in blazes first! Yuh've busted yore last cap, Tabor! I'm goin' tuh wipe yuh out!"

With his gun beating out a terrific *rat-a-tat-tat*, he jumped from cover, his eyes gleaming murderously.

But he had hurried his shots. Sonny Tabor fired only once, pulling the trigger slowly and deliberately. Curtland staggered, dropped his gun, and clawed jerkily at his chest. Then he went down. His last coughs ended in a death rattle.

It was over. Sonny looked at him carefully for a moment, then punched out the empties from his smoking Colt and turned back down the hill.

He was just in time to meet Sheriff Pat Timlin, who had just come up on his laboring sorrel. He dis-

mounted and joined Sonny on the snowy hillside.

"Did yuh get 'em both?" the officer ejaculated.

"It wasn't much of a fight," Sonny said quietly. "Coyotes don't know how, I reckon. Look in Van Aldean's pockets, sheriff. I think it's likely he's carryin' the bank dinero."

Timlin knelt by the body for a moment, pawing the bandit's clothing. He straightened with a cry of triumph, holding up a thick sheaf of bills, all of large denomination. After counting it he chuckled with satisfaction.

"It's practic'ly all yere," he announced.

"*Muy buenol*!" the outlaw sighed. "The Flagstaff stick-up is *one* crime I've cleared myself of, anyhow."

They returned to the trail, and Sonny swung aboard his pinto pony.

"I'm hittin' for the desert, sheriff, and warmer weather," he smiled. "I hope yuh won't get stubborn and try to stop me. Any hard feelin's?"

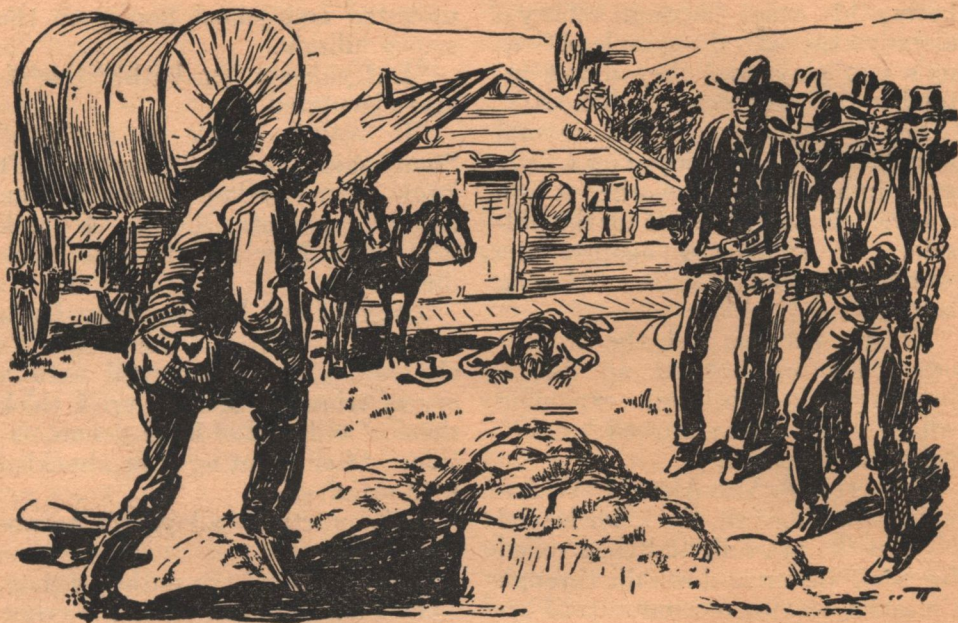
"Hard feelin's?" repeated Timlin with a slow grin. "Fer gosh sakes, younker! And warmer weather? Gosh, but yuh've shore warmed things up in Coconino!"

"Adios, amigo! Stay out o' snowstorms," the outlaw laughed.

"And you stay out o' my county!" yelled the officer, as Sonny's wiry little bronc reared and shot forward, southward bound. "I'm sheriff, and yuh embarrass me! If I ever get my hands on yuh again——"

But Sonny Tabor, bound for the border, was out of hearing, and riding fast. Timlin watched him until he had vanished over a distant hill, then he heaved a deep breath and rolled a brown cigarette.

"Tabor saved my life three times," he muttered. "Thet kid is shore an *onusual* kind of outlaw!"



# Quick-trigger Law

By Philip F. Deere

Author of "Owl-hoot Breed," etc.

**H**AP" CONNORS'S spurs clattered as he dragged them across the boards of the rickety porch. The leather rigging of his gun belt and flaring batwing chaps creaked with each movement. Holstered six-guns thudded gently against his legs as he slouched to a halt before a sun-warped door.

Extending a huge fist, he smacked the panel a few powerful wallops. A broad grin was on his face as he opened his wide mouth in a loud bel-low.

"Hey, there, Pop," he bawled. "Open up or over she goes. Where the blazes are yuh, Pop?"

There was no answer. Hap Connors had a sudden feeling that some-

thing was wrong here. "Pop" surely had seen him coming across the heat-stricken expanse of bitter sage and spiny cactus. Old Pop Mason must be home. His big freight wagon with six horses hitched to it, stood in the barnyard.

Smoke curled from the chimney of the old ranch house. Yes, Pop must be home.

Shifting his six-foot frame and one-hundred-and-eighty-pound body, Hap Connors drew back his right foot and kicked the door panel savagely.

"Dad-blame yuh, Pop, open up, or I'll bust the door down!" he roared half playfully. "Yuh know me. It's yore old pard, Hap Con-

nors. If yo're layin' dead in there, say so."

From inside the tumbledown old cabin issued faint sounds. Hap could not tell whether it was whispering or somebody moving. He heard the door bolt move, and then it was jerked ajar. A gray head came poking through.

Wide, startled eyes, framed in a network of wrinkles stared into the tanned, freckled face of Hap Connors. It was Pop Mason.

A joke was on Hap's lips, but it died as he saw the expression on Pop's features. The little old man looked as if he had seen a ghost.

Pop's toothless mouth opened to emit harsh, squeaky sounds.

"Go away!" choked the old man. "I cain't see yuh now, Hap! Go away."

Before Hap could say a word, the door slammed in his face. For a moment, Hap Connors stood stunned and bewildered on the little porch. Never had old Pop acted like this. Always he had rushed out to meet Hap before his young pard reached the yard.

With an angry snort, Hap Connors crashed his fist against the shaky door. The blows threatened to tear it from its hinges.

"Blast yore wrinkled old hide!" yelled Hap. "You've got ter talk to me. Have yuh gone plumb loco? Yuh better come out. I ain't goin' without seein' yuh."

Now Hap was sure that he heard whispering sounds inside. Some one else was in the cabin with Pop Mason. What did it mean? With startling suddenness the door opened about six inches. Pop's face loomed gray and ghastly in the opening.

"Come back later, Hap," pleaded the old man. "I'm kind o' sick to-

day." His voice broke and his lips twitched. With an abrupt movement he tried to swing the door wide, but something blocked it.

*Br-rr-rang!* A gun roared inside the place.

Pop Mason plunged across the threshold into Hap Connors's arms. The movement knocked Hap off balance. Clutching at Pop's limp body, he took a step backward. His foot plunged off the edge of the porch, and he felt himself falling. His Stetson rolled in the dirt.

There was a clatter of booted feet and a blurred rush of human figures before Hap's eyes, as he hit the ground. The air seemed to bristle with gun barrels, all of them aimed at him.

A big scraggly-bearded hombre stepped forward, twin six-guns gripped in his hands, his glittering black eyes blazing threateningly.

Hap felt a shock of recognition as his eyes centered on a livid scar on the gunman's forehead. This was "Butch" Lake, a notorious outlaw.

Hap gently pushed Pop's body aside and sat up. The old man was dead. There was nothing more he could do for his pard, except avenge his death. That Butch Lake was the murderer, was proven by the tiny wisps of gun smoke that curled from the muzzles of his Colts.

Hap felt rough hands snatch his guns from their holsters. Then a sharp boot toe prodded him in the ribs.

"Git up," snarled a harsh voice. "Rear up on yore legs, or I'll carve a chunk out o' yuh with my huntin' knife."

Hap Connors beat down the rage that filled him. He was helpless. Half a dozen men had the drop on him. Butch Lake was still holding

his smoking Colts not ten feet from Hap's chest.

Glancing over his shoulder, Hap Connors saw the narrow forehead and two gimlet eyes set in the dirtiest face he had ever seen. The grimy-faced gent was "Rowdy" Nuper, the boss outlaw's *segundo*.

The long blade of a bowie knife gleamed in Rowdy's skinny paw. As Hap stared at him, Rowdy drew back the blade as if to strike.

*Wham!* A gun roared, and a bullet knocked the knife spinning from Rowdy's fingers.

Butch Lake, his voice choked with rage, ebony eyes glaring, took a step toward Rowdy, who had dropped to the ground, hugging his wrenched fingers.

"Blast yore measly hide, Rowdy Nuper!" snarled Butch. "I'll kill yuh the next time yuh start ter take things inter yore own hands. Git up from the ground there, afore I plug yuh. Who's boss o' this outfit? Who gives orders around here?"

Cowering back fearfully, Rowdy scrambled to his feet, hands lifted in a gesture of submission.

"Yo're the boss," he blatted. "I was only foolin'. I didn't intend ter kill him."

"All right, that's more like it," said Butch in a mollified tone. "I figure ter use this feller."

Through narrowed, gray eyes, Hap swept the vicious faces of the killers. Blazing sunlight beat upon the thatch of yellow hair that fell down over his high, tanned forehead. His jaw protruded to a stubborn angle, and the corded muscles in his neck bulged.

"Tie him up!" commanded Butch, still holding the death-dealing Colts in his hairy hands.

One of the outlaws stepped forward with pigging strings.

Hap felt his hands yanked behind him. The narrow bonds cut into his wrists as they were lashed together. A gun barrel jabbed into his back.

"Lock him up in the harness shed," barked Butch. "We got things ter talk over."

Inside the shed, Hap heard the door bang behind him. A chain rattled and a padlock clicked. The air was heavy with the smell of leather. Sunlight streamed through a knothole and played on the yellow straw that littered the floor.

## II.

In the front room of the rambling ranch house, Butch Lake lolled in a big chair and faced his killer crew. One stubby, hairy hand tugged at the scraggly beard that adorned his face.

In the center of the room was a long table. A blackened fireplace projected from one side of the room. Hunting trophies adorned the walls.

Butch was speaking in his harsh, throaty voice.

"We're raidin' Rico this afternoon," he said. "There's that there twenty-thousand-dollar Diablo Mines pay roll an' we're goin' ter git it."

Rowdy Nuper ran a grimy hand over his face and squinted one eye at Butch.

"That ain't possible, Butch," he growled. "We all seen sentries through our glasses. They're on every road leadin' inter town. The minute a bunch o' riders is spotted, they give the signal. Afore we could git within six-gun range, they'd burn us down with Winchesters. The whole town's armed. Sheriff Ducker knows we're hangin' around this part o' the country, an' he's jist

darin' us ter show our hand. Ever since we raided Rico last month, he swore he'd never let us git away with it again."

The bandits muttered agreement with Rowdy's words.

"They got us licked on this, Butch," said another outlaw. "I'm fer killin' that feller in the shed now, an' scootin' ter greener pastures."

At these words, Butch Lake got slowly to his feet, beady eyes glaring, thumbs hooked in his cartridge belt, feet spread apart.

"Shut yore traps, all of yuh, an' listen ter me!" he snarled. "I got a plan ter use that feller. We're turnin' him loose."

If Butch had calmly announced that he was going to shoot himself, the words could not have been more astounding to the ten killers lounging in the big room. Through the low cloud of blue cigarette smoke, Butch glared at each of his men in turn.

Rowdy Nuper licked his lips with his tongue.

"Have yuh gone loco, Butch?" he choked. "If yuh turn that feller loose, he'll high-tail it ter Rico an' have the law on our necks. We'll all be jiggin' at the end of a rope."

"We mus' keel the hombre," said a soft-spoken Mexican. "He know too much."

"Yo're doin' as I say!" raged Butch. "I'll explain afterwards!" He hunched forward slightly, and his fingers twitched just above the scarred butts of the two Colts projecting from low-slung holsters. "I'm runnin' this outfit! If there's anybody thet don't like it, drag yore iron!"

Several low growls issued from the throats of the killers, but nobody offered to draw. Butch Lake's rep as a greased-lightning smoke-pusher was too deadly.

The hard lines in Butch's face softened and his thick lips peeled back in a smile.

"Come on outside!" he commanded. "We'll have a little fun."

The old house echoed to the thump of many boots, as the bandit crew trooped after their leader. Straight to the shed door they walked. The padlock was unfastened, the door thrown open and Hap Connors was led out into the blazing sunlight.

"Untie him," said Butch to an outlaw.

The man, knife in hand, stepped behind Hap Connors. Hap felt something cold and sharp laid against his wrists. The bonds that held his hands tugged and then loosened, dropping to the ground.

Needlelike pains shot through his arms as the circulation rushed back into his cramped limbs. Hap rubbed his wrists vigorously as he looked into the long, blue barrels of six-guns.

Butch picked up a shovel, that was leaning against the shed, and shoved it into Hap's hands.

"Yo're diggin' a grave, hombre," rapped out Butch Lake. "Git busy!"

Standing there with the sun boiling down on his yellow hair, head erect, chin up and eyes staring fearlessly at the outlaws, Hap felt a cold chill race along his spine. He saw Butch Lake's glittering black eyes gleam with murderous rage.

Over the heads of the bandits, Hap could see the long, low purple range of the Timaroon Mountains, hazy in the distance. Snow gleamed on the peaks. But much nearer were blistering, barren hills, crowned with dead rocks and clumps of mesquite. Beyond these hills was Rico cow town.

As Hap's hands touched the long shovel handle he had a wild desire to slam the heavy metal end down on the nearest outlaw and make a break for it.

But he would have no chance to make an escape. Before he could move three feet, hot slugs would spatter into his body.

Plunging the shovel into the ground, Hap got busy. After half an hour, sweat had soaked into his shirt, making it like a wet rag.

His mind was filled with desperate plans of escape. A ring of guns surrounded him. The hole was getting deeper.

Hap's grap eyes narrowed as he worked. Rowdy Nuper was standing at the edge of the hole, sneering down at him. If he could grab Rowdy's feet, he could upset him and maybe get his guns.

Straightening up, he made a sudden move in Rowdy's direction. A Colt sent a hot slug into the ground at his feet. The outlaws chortled with glee.

There was no chance to make a break. The space between the waddy's shoulder blades itched. At any minute, a bullet might rip into his back.

A gun clicked behind him. Hap stiffened, and his hands gripped the shovel handle tighter. Then one of the crew guffawed. The realization that they were playing with him as a cat might play with a mouse, swept over Hap as he worked.

"That's deep enough," snapped Butch. "Climb out!"

Scrambling out of the hole, Hap towered above the killer boss, big fists clenched at his sides. Was this to be his last second on earth? Over the sights of the Colt, Hap could see Butch's leering face.

On the ground, arms outflung,

was the body of Pop Mason, still lying where it had fallen. The big freight wagon had been driven around in front of the place.

"Go git thet old goat," rasped Butch, "an' dump him in thet hole."

Butch's sneering reference to Pop Mason sent a flame of anger through Hap Connors's brain. With a roar of anger, Hap took a step forward.

Through narrowed eyes, he watched Butch Lake's calloused thumb pull back on the hammer. The gun clicked. Hap's rage subsided.

Butch was four feet away. Before Hap could make that leap, the gun would explode in his face. No, he would have to wait.

"This is yore deal, Butch," he said slowly. "But yore luck might change if I git the cards."

Butch Lake's thick lips barely moved as he talked:

"I'm a houseman, hombre. And a houseman always deals."

With a jingling of spurs, Hap turned on his heels and walked across the clearing, big hands swinging rhythmically at his sides. He strode with the light tread of a cougar. He picked up his Stetson from the ground.

Pop Mason's gray, ashen face, blended with the gray of the ground that supported his lifeless body. Picking the old man up in his arms, Hap tenderly carried him to the grave, and laid him on the fresh-turned earth.

"There's an old blanket in the shed," said Hap. "Let me wrap him in that."

A roar of laughter greeted Connors's words. The bandits slapped their thighs and guffawed. Butch's scraggly beard trembled as he howled with mirth.

"Go ahead, tenderfoot!" he chor-

tled. "But don't git yore skirts all dirty."

For a moment, Hap's gray eyes glinted dangerously, then he got the blanket, rolled Pop up in it, and lowered him into the open grave. Out of the corner of his eye, Hap saw hands stray to gun butts.

The desert air was blanketed with a mantle of deathlike silence. The only sound was a rustle of brush as a jack rabbit scampered up the side of a hill.

For seconds, it seemed that the killer crew would defy Butch's order not to kill Hap. Standing on the edge of the grave, Hap expected any moment to feel .45 slugs rip into his body, sending him to join Pop Mason. Then he seized the shovel and threw dirt into the hole until it was filled.

"I suppose I'm next," said Hap grimly, when he had finished.

Butch Lake motioned toward the freight wagon with his Colt.

"Yo're free," he rasped. "Git on thet wagon and drive inter town."

A wave of relief swept over Hap Connors. He was not going to be killed after all. Or was he? A suspicious light flared in his gray eyes.

Striding quickly across the gravelly ground he climbed onto the high seat. Gathering up the lines, he released the brake and set the big wagon in motion.

Hap Connors felt like a man who is standing with a rope around his neck, waiting for the trap to be sprung. A wild desire came over him to leap from the wagon and try to reach the safety of boulders.

But he beat down the impulse. Any minute, he expected to hear the roar of guns and have his life snuffed out like a candle.

Hat tilted low over his eyes, Hap stared straight ahead, never once

looking back. If he had to die, he wouldn't give Butch the satisfaction of knowing he cared. If he lived, Butch Lake and every man in his murderous outfit would pay dearly for the killing of old Pop Mason.

### III.

Alkali dust from the man-high wheels of the big freight wagon, hung choking in the air like a curtain. The sun blazed down from an azure sky, dotted here and there with frilly, white wisps of clouds. The road to Rico wound like a long gray snake among waterless, desolate hills.

Seated on the jolting seat of the freight wagon, Hap Connors held the lines of the six-horse team gripped in his rope-seared hands. A worried frown formed two deep ridges between his gray eyes.

Glancing back over his shoulder, Hap scanned the expanse of sage and cactus behind him. No horsemen were visible. Butch Lake and his men apparently were not trailing him. Yet Hap knew that Butch had turned him loose as a trick.

Butch had formed a plan in his cunning brain, and Hap knew that he fitted into that plan somewhere. His guns were gone. Looking around quickly, he carefully noted the weapons he might use. There was the loaded end of the black-snake whip he held in his hand. In the seat alongside him, lay a heavy, rusty wagon bolt. He slipped it into his pocket.

He was crossing a dry wash now where in winter storms, walls of water swept down from the mountains. The big wheels squeaked on dry axles and rumbled over the stones. Hap snapped the black-snake and the canvas-topped wagon picked up speed.

"I've got ter git to Rico an' git hold o' the sheriff," thought Hap.

The sudden death of old Pop Mason had saddened him. In the old covered-wagon days, Hap's father and Pop had fought side by side. Every chance Hap got, he visited the old man. He wasn't very well known in this part of the country and had no friends in Rico.

While standing in front of Pop's house, after his murder, Hap remembered looking through the big door and seeing a large number of bed rolls. The bandits had evidently surprised Pop and used his place as a hang-out.

In the low range of hills to the right were the Diablo Mines. New veins of gold had been uncovered, and the mines were working night and day. A twenty-thousand-dollar pay roll was shipped in the first of every month to the Wells Fargo office in Rico. Hap recalled that this was the first of the month.

Suddenly Hap squinted his eyes and peered far down the road. A tiny black figure moved down there. Through the shimmering heat waves it appeared to be dancing.

"If thet's a rider, I kin send him back ter Rico fer a posse!" exulted Hap. "Mebbe they'll catch Butch afore he beats it!"

Five minutes later, Hap Connors found himself face to face with a tall, bean-pole rider on a slat-ribbed gray. Dust powdered the fellow's walrus mustache and blue eyes squinted from beneath gray brows.

Pulling back on the lines, Hap brought the freight outfit to a jolting halt.

"Git fer Rico an' git a posse!" he yelled. "Butch Lake an' his gang are hidin' out at Pop Mason's ranch!"

The rider tilted his Stetson on the

back of his head and squirted a stream of tobacco juice on the dry ground.

"Come on, feller, the heat's got yuh!" he said.

Hap's blunt jaw protruded.

"Listen!" he cried in desperation. "If yuh git a posse yuh kin head Butch off!"

"I don't know yuh. How do I know yuh ain't stringin' me?" asked the lanky horseman suspiciously.

A sudden desire swept over Hap Connors to pull the skinny gent from his saddle and ride the brone to Rico himself, but he knew that wouldn't do.

"Yuh know Pop Mason?" asked Hap impatiently. "Ever hear him speak of Hap Connors?"

"Pop's one o' my best friends," snapped the horseman, "an' every time I see him he talks o' Hap Connors."

"I'm Hap Connors!" raged the cowboy. "Pop Mason has been kilt by Butch Lake! Now will yuh go?"

The fellow's eyes opened wide, and his jaw grew slack.

"Y-y-yuh mean Pop's dead?" he stammered, and Hap nodded. "Then I'm ridin'," he shouted.

Wheeling the gray around in the road, he hunched forward in the saddle and spurred the animal to a dead run. Then Hap snapped the blacksnake over the glistening backs of the mustangs and set the canvas-covered wagon in motion again.

For long minutes, Hap peered over his shoulder at the expanse of dry waste land, interspersed here and there with Joshua trees, like huge hairy fingers pointing skyward. From all indications, Butch had not witnessed his talk with the skinny rider.

A few short minutes later, the freighter wound in and out among

the sand dunes only a mile from town. Rico was around the hill.

Down the road, the forms of racing mustangs and riders hove into view from a dust cloud. Sunlight glinted on rifle barrels and saddle trappings.

Yanking back on the reins, the riders brought their broncs to a grinding halt. A red-faced man with a star on his vest did the talking.

"This the feller, Milt?" he inquired of the skinny horseman Hap had talked with.

Milt Hooker nodded.

"This is him," he answered.

"I'm Deputy Karns," said the red-faced hombre. "What's this about Pop Mason gittin' murdered by Butch Lake?"

Quickly Hap told of the events at the ranch.

"I sent back the first feller I seen fer a posse," he finished.

"How come yo're here?" asked Karns. "Why ain't yuh a prisoner back at the ranch? Did yuh escape?"

"Butch turned me loose," explained Hap.

"Don't sound right ter me," spoke up one of the riders, "thet a feller as hard as Butch Lake would turn a man loose. Mebbe it's a trick ter draw us off guard."

Karns neck-reined his bronc alongside the heavy canvas-topped freighter.

"Don't worry about that," he said to the rider. "We got sentries watchin' to give warnin' at the first sign of raiders."

"Looks fishy to me," rapped out a posseman.

Murmurs of approval at the speaker's words went up from several of the horsemen.

Hap's gray eyes flashed fire. Here these men argued and delayed while Butch Lake was getting away.

"Go after Butch!" raged Hap Connors. "Git him afore he escapes. He kilt Pop Mason, yore friend! Are yuh goin' ter sit by an' see his murderers make a get-away?"

"I think it's on the level," said Milt Hooker.

"Ride, then!" urged Hap. "If things ain't like I say, yuh kin throw me in the calaboose."

Deputy Karns wheeled his prancing mustang around in the road.

"All right, boys," he commanded. "Sheriff Ducker sent us out here! If this hombre's lyin', he'll stretch a rope! Come on!"

Saddles squeaked as the possemen quirted their mounts to a gallop and thundered up the road, to be swallowed up in a dust cloud.

Unseen by the posse, keen eyes had been watching every move the deputies made as they talked to Hap Connors. Round-topped hills and rolling sand dunes added to the wild and desolate appearance of this stretch of country.

Crouched down behind enormous boulders on top of one of these buttes, Butch Lake and his crew of gun hawks kept an eye on the freight wagon and on the near-by town at the same time.

Over to the south, they could see the squat brown adobes and false-fronted buildings of Rico cow town. Immediately below them, the sheriff's posse was riding up the road toward Pop Mason's place.

Butch rose from a stooping posture and climbed into his saddle.

"The trick worked," he chuckled. "This jist about empties the town of riders. We'll find it easy pickin's with them gunnies gone. Crowd around close, an' I'll explain my plan."

Hard-faced gunmen swung their

brons in a narrow circle around Butch Lake. Some were grinning, but others looked doubtful. Rowdy Nuper was one of the latter.

"Hold up a minute," growled Rowdy. He waved a soiled, hairy hand in the direction of town. A stubby forefinger pointed toward a sentry who was patrolling the main road. "How are we goin' ter git past them guards? They're watchin' every road leadin' inter Rico. They'll give the alarm. At the first shot, even the kids in town will turn out with their rifles. Half of us will be shot down before we reach the main part o' town."

"Shut up!" rapped out Butch. "I told yuh I had a winnin' trick, an' I meant it. Listen close, an' then if yuh want ter bust out bellerin' for joy thet's yore privilege."

For several minutes, Butch talked in low tones to his gunmen. Then he gave the command to ride. The outlaws raced down the slope, chuckling and laughing.

"Leave it to Butch to run a whizzer!" yelped one.

Down the hill they swept and came to a milling halt in front of the freight wagon.

Hap Connors felt a thrill of fear shoot through him as the wild rannies flung off their mounts and turned guns upon him. He thought his end had come. Half rising, he made a move to jump down.

"Stay where yuh are!" barked Butch. "An' keep hold o' them lines. I got some passengers fer yuh. All right, boys, pile in! Eph, you wrangle the hosses an' come inter town with 'em when we're ready ter make a get-away. Let's go!"

Hap Connors sat helplessly in the wagon seat as men swarmed inside the big canvas-topped vehicle. Butch was the last to jump aboard.

Through the canvas flap in front of the wagon, he poked his evil, black-bearded face and the blue snout of a Colt .45.

"Git goin'!" he yelled. "Snap the blacksnake over them crowbaits, pronto!"

"What's the idea?" asked Hap.

A six-gun muzzle rammed him in the back so hard that he doubled over with pain.

"Yo're drivin' us inter town, past them sentries," growled Butch Lake. "An' if yuh think yuh ain't, mebbe a gun barrel laid alongside yore head will convince yuh. Take up the slack on them lines an' git her rollin'."

#### IV.

Gritting his teeth with pain from the terrific blow on his back, Hap Connors snapped the long blacksnake whip and started the six horses trotting toward Rico. His brain was afire with raging thoughts.

He saw through the whole terrible plan, now. The bandits were making a tool of him. They would use him to get past the sentries, and then would riddle him with bullets. Once inside the town, it would be at their mercy.

With most of the Rico gunmen gone, the place would be taken by surprise and easily captured. Women and children would be shot down. Butch Lake spared no one.

He would loot Rico of all its money and valuables, and then probably would set it afire, as he had done to other towns.

"I got to beat him somehow," Hap told himself desperately. "I've got ter warn the defenders."

Ahead of him on the road, he saw a sentry sitting his horse with his rifle hung idly over his bent elbow. The guard suspected nothing. He

was on the lookout for a body of horsemen.

Hap fixed his burning eyes on the sentry and tried to think of some way to give him a warning. Behind him the canvas flap was closed almost shut, but through the cloth, he could feel a gun muzzle pressing against his back.

"Don't try nothin'," warned Butch's voice, in a whisper. "You'll sign yore death warrant an' that guard's, too. Pass the time o' day with him an' keep movin'."

The guard was an ordinary-looking cow-puncher. He lifted his hand to Hap as the freight outfit came abreast of him.

"Hi, yuh, skinner!" he sang out. "I see yo're drivin' Pop Mason's outfit. I reckon yo're the feller that give the alarm about Pop bein' murdered."

Hap Connors merely returned the wave of the man's hand and nodded.

"Larrup them brones," ordered Butch. "Tear inter town at a gallop. An' git ready ter stop when I tell yuh."

Hap cracked his bullwhip over the mustang. Straining at the tugs, they broke into a gallop. The canvas-covered wagon rocked back and forth as it swirled along the twisting, rutty street.

Scattered adobes appeared. Ahead of him, where the street widened into a kind of plaza, Hap could see a few armed men loafing in front of the stone-walled Wells Fargo office.

They did not suspect a thing. All the defenders of the town were relying upon the sentries to give warning in case of a raid.

For days, the place had been in a state of siege as a result of the warnings sent in from a near-by village, which had been burned to the ground by the outlaws.

The guns pressed so hard against Hap's back they almost shoved him out of his seat. He knew that before he could fling himself to the ground, slugs would tear into his body.

He thought of turning the racing horses into a side street and yelling a warning. But he realized that would not do either. He must work some kind of a trick that would delay the bandits long enough for the defenders to gather their wits.

He considered driving right on through town. But if he did that, Butch would kill him and take the reins himself.

Hap's tortured eyes, searching the plaza, fell upon something that caused a thrill to shoot through his body. A huge stump, fully six feet through, with rings embedded in it, formed a hitch rack. But there were no horses hitched there now.

Hap's curling whip-lash struck the off lead horse on the neck, causing it to swerve inward. The lurching wagon turned slightly.

One of the great man-high wheels smashed against the tree stump with a terrific crash. Hap was all set for it. His feet were pressed against the wagon frame.

Just as the wheel hit, he leaped forward, straight at the back of one of the wheel horses. His aim was truer than he had hoped. He lit astride the animal, hands grasping the hames. Keeping his seat there only a split second, he vaulted to the ground.

The team piled up in a tangle of broken harness, but the wagon had not overturned as he had hoped. His hand reached inside his pocket and pulled out the heavy bolt. He was yelling a warning at the top of his voice, as he leaped toward the rear of the vehicle.

He knew the crash had thrown all

of Butch Lake's gunmen to the floor of the wagon. Some were probably injured or knocked out. He saw a leg sticking through a hole punched in the canvas.

A groaning man parted the flap at the back of the wagon and dropped to the ground. Hap was on him in a flash. It was Rowdy Nuper.

Rowdy lifted his gun just as the yelling cowboy jumped at him. Hap hurled the big iron bolt squarely in Rowdy's face. It smashed against the outlaw's forehead, and Rowdy went down.

*Crack! Bang! Crash!* Bullets thudded all around Hap Connors, as he piled on top of Rowdy, clawing for the fallen outlaw's guns.

Hap felt a slug sting his neck. Another sent a sharp pain across his shin.

Rolling over, he came to a crouching position, a flaming six-gun gripped in each hand. Men loomed in front of him above the tailboard of the freighter. They held black objects in their fists—metal things that spurted little puffs of smoke and death.

Hap's fire swept them into eternity. One plunged shrieking to the ground in front of him. Another fell backward inside the wagon. A third slumped down in his tracks.

Over by the Wells Fargo office, firing broke out as the defenders opened up on the covered wagon. Hot lead zipped through the canvas. Howling, begging for mercy, raving and swearing, the killers plunged out of the freighter on all sides, ripping the canvas with knives and the sights of their guns.

They had accomplished their purpose of getting into Rico, but their surprise attack was broken.

Just as Rowdy Nuper had predicted, even the kids began taking pot shots at them with their small-

caliber rifles. The battle became a rout.

Eph, the wrangler, raced in, leading their broncs to give some of them a chance for a get-away. But he never got within a hundred yards of the wagon. Hap Connors shot him out of his saddle just as Eph was blazing away at the cowboy.

Hap's guns were empty. He leaped toward a fallen outlaw to get the bandit's Colts and came face to face with Butch Lake. Butch's features were a picture of rage and despair. At sight of Hap, he uttered a yell and squeezed trigger.

Hap felt a dull pain in his shoulder. The ground seemed to fly up toward him. He was down and Butch Lake was lurching there above him, firing unsteadily, trying to finish him off. Hap flung his guns at Butch, one after another. Both missed.

Throwing himself aside, Hap rolled over and over toward the body of a dead bandit. He saw a Colt lying beside an outstretched hand. His fingers closed around the butt, his thumb worked back the hammer and he turned it on Butch Lake.

Butch was darting in closer to him, eager to finish the kill. Hap fired once. Butch did not stop, but his guns dropped from limp fingers. He plunged right on past Hap and fell on his face.

Dimly Hap heard strange noises. He saw what appeared to be ghosts of riders and then everything went blank.

A blazing sun beat down on Hap Connors's head and shoulders. Flies buzzed around his head. A yelping dog kept running up to him and barking. On all sides of him, a grinning crowd was gathered close, watching the unusual scene.

But Hap Connors had eyes for none of this. His gaze was fixed on a black-bearded man in front of him who was digging in the sand. The blackbeard was Butch Lake.

Butch straightened up and wiped streaming sweat from his face. His eyes blazed with hate as he glared

at Hap Connors, who had a star on his vest and a big Colt in his hand.

"Keep diggin', Butch!" ordered Hap. "I reckon yuh don't like yore own medicine. But yuh got to dig yore grave an' do it pronto. So dig it good and deep. Yo're due ter hang at sunrise."



### ROY BEAN—WOOD MERCHANT

A GOVERNMENT contract had been given to Major Hickman to provide wood for the army post at San Antonio. That brilliant adventurer, Roy Bean, who later became "The Law West of the Pecos," was placed in charge of the work.

After making a thorough search of the country beyond the city limits, Roy found himself a fine big forest of the very kind of timber he was looking for. The fact that said timber grew on land that belonged to others, and that he had absolutely no right to it, did not bother the worthy Roy Bean in the least.

He reasoned that the soldiers had to be kept warm, and their food had to be cooked. Therefore, fires were necessary. To make those fires, wood had to be cut. The health and the fighting strength of the protectors of San Antonio demanded it.

Roy had no intention of allowing any scruple of conscience to interfere with his part in fulfilling such an important transaction as a government contract. Land ownership and timber limits, he told himself, should be disregarded in view of the needs of the hard-working, hard-fighting army. So he set to the task of felling valuable trees regardless of what any one might say or think.

He established a camp and en-

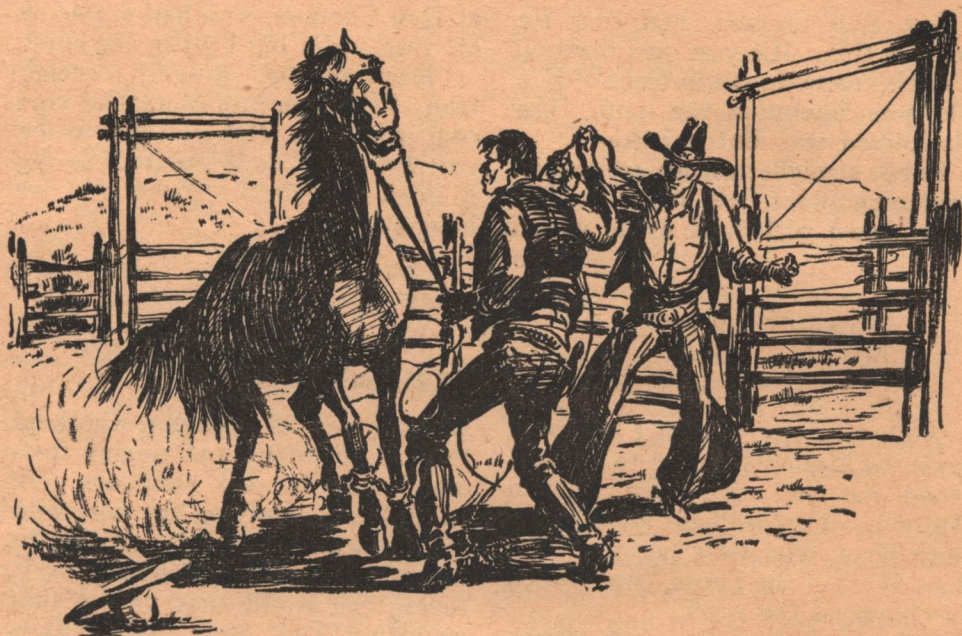
gaged a crew of workmen who kept the axes swinging and ringing from early morning till sundown. In addition to supplying the post with all the wood that was needed, he had a big sign hung above his shack, telling the world that passed that way that Roy Bean, Wood Merchant, was in both the wholesale and retail ends of the business.

Also, he became so generous that, after a while, he made it known far and wide that customers could come and select their own timber, provided they did the cutting and hauling.

Many availed themselves of this privilege, and as the enterprising merchant paid nothing for the timber, it was all profit for him.

He did a lively and flourishing business for some time, until some evilly disposed person, with a mean, sneaking disposition told the owner of what had once been a forest, what Roy Bean was doing.

The owner, Mr. Worthington, joined with other land owners of the country around, and threats of legal action were heard. The forests had been cleared, very little timber was left, and the resourceful Roy slipped away quietly. He kept out of sight until the ruckus died down, and was careful not to set up as a wood merchant again.



# That Bronc Named Buttons

By Stephen Payne

Author of "Stealin' Hot Spur Stage Hosses," etc.

**T**HIS was such a country as Clay Carter had not seen before. It was a land of immense flats and wide, shallow valleys where sluggish streams quickly lost themselves in the always thirsty sands.

Clay, who'd come from the mountains, far to westward, didn't think he'd like it. Yet this was range country—the landscape dotted with grazing cattle and bands of half-wild horses, and, after all, a roving cowpuncher should see how things were done on the plains.

So the lanky, gray-eyed young waddy thought, as he rode past a

muddy water hole and halted his big gray horse at a rock stable. There were other ranch buildings, also corrals, beyond the stable. But this building aroused Clay's curiosity.

"Ain't no timber much in this neck o' the woods," he mused, taking a tug at his long chin. He was lantern-jawed, as homely as a Texas longhorn, this rangy, powerful-shouldered ranny. "So they use whatever they can find to build with. Rocks, fer instance."

The stable was low, squatty, dirt-roofed, with one door at the front end. Wondering about light for

horses unfortunate enough to be tied in this barn, Clay rode around it, then grunted in disgust:

"Nary a window. Hay has to be packed in through the door—if the hombre as owns this spread uses the dag-goned dark hole."

Of a sudden, a harshly bellowed oath cut the stillness, followed instantly by the smack of a rope against flesh, and the enraged, defiant squeal of a horse.

The sounds came from the corrals, and Clay Carter instantly spurred that way. He loved horses as he loved the smell of sage, the cheery crackle of a camp fire, the stars at night on the range, and the morning sunrise. And because he loved horses, Clay always saw red when one was abused.

His level gray eyes were seeing red now, and his wide mouth had set in a grim line. For inside the high-walled, round corral, a big, rawboned hombre was lashing a hobbled horse with a doubled rope.

It was a small brown horse, with a white star in its head, trim, wiry and, as Clay noted in one glance, intelligent and gritty. Yes, gritty. But it couldn't fight back.

The man needed a haircut, needed a shave, needed a bath more than either haircut or shave, and most of all he needed a good beating. He was snarling:

"That'll l'arn yuh some behave, yuh dang cayuse! Try tuh kick the chaw o' terbacker out o' my face, will yuh?" A savage blow with the doubled rope struck the brown's head.

Clay Carter saw the horse's eyes mirror undying hatred for this brutal man, as clearly as if this brown mustang had been human. The waddy had leaped from his saddle and cleared the fence.

His spurs rang as his boot heels

struck the dusty earth inside the inclosure, and the filthy hombre pivoted to confront six foot one of long-armed, lantern-jawed, fighting cow-puncher.

"Who the blazes, and what yuh doin'——"

Clay answered by stepping in and slapping the other's cheek—an open-handed smack that sounded like the report of a gun.

Reeling, the hombre fetched up against the stout fence, dropped his rope, and clawed for his gun. But the coyote-eyed fellow did not get the weapon clear of leather. Clay was upon him like a panther on a deer.

The ranny's left hand caught the other's gun wrist. His right—a huge fist—drove blows to the hombre's snarling lips and already broken nose. And the man—a husky brute—wrenched his hand free to fight back, kicking, biting, gouging, with no regard for fairness.

Clay found that he had tackled something resembling a cornered wolf. But if the dirty hombre was a wolf, Clay was a panther.

It was a savage, brutal, knock-down-and-drag-out fight, witnessed only by Clay's gray outside the corral, and the little brown horse inside it.

Clay was crimson around the lips, one eye closed, his fists skinned, body battered and bruised, when at last he laid the other flat on his back in the dust, knocked cold.

Not one word had the cowboy spoken. Now, gasping for breath, he jerked the man's six-gun from its holster, removed the shells, and tossed the weapon over the fence. Then he turned his attention to the brown pony, which was covered with welts, its head and fetlocks skinned and burned by ropes, also.

The horse struggled to get away

from this stranger. But after a minute of petting by Clay, while he talked reassuringly to it, the animal stretched out its muzzle, smelled this tall ranny, and the savage defiance and hatred died out of its large, expressive eyes.

"Waal, Buttons, let's just take off the dag-goned rope hobble," said Clay, and he did so.

He stepped outside the corral, glanced toward the house and the stable. There was no one in sight. He removed the hackamore from his gray's head, leaving the bridle in place. Returning to the corral, he fitted this hackamore to Buttons's head.

The brown offered no objection. It seemed glad to get rid of the cruel, hard-twisted rope contraption which had been on its head. Already this lanky, efficient waddy had won its confidence.

But sudden fierce hatred flashed into its eyes once again as it saw the filthy hombre sitting up woozily in the corral dust.

Clay turned. "Got enough, yuh hoss-abusin' whelp?"

"Uh?" The man was glowering at the ranny out of one wicked eye. The other was closed, swollen, and rapidly turning black. "Yeah. I'm licked. Don't yuh touch me, yuh—yuh rip-roarin' b'arcats! Who are yuh?"

"Yuh own this brown hoss? Own this spread?"

"Uh-huh, yep." The hombre staggered to his feet, and as Clay turned to indicate the abused mustang, he reached for his gun. Feeling his holster empty, chagrin filled his brutal face.

"Hey," he rasped abruptly, "why'd yuh take the hobble offn that bronc? He ain't broke, an' he showed fight, an' I was goin' tuh take the cussedness all out of him."

"So I reckoned," retorted Clay grimly. "I wish there was some way I could keep a cur like you from abusin' any hoss ever. But yuh'll never beat this un again. I'm payin' yuh forty dollars for him. All the dough I've got, and more'n a fair price."

"Huh? I ain't sellin'——"

"Here's a piece of paper and a pencil. Set down, write me out a bill of sale. Clay Carter's the name. I'm takin' it for granted yuh own this Box 2 brand on the hoss, own the hoss and this layout—— Get busy, or——" Clay doubled his huge right fist.

"Shore I own the loco, fightin' cayuse. I own a thousand dogies on this range, too. I'm knowed as Savage Dolan, and yuh'll shore wish yuh hadn't jumped me." The man's one good eye glared murderously at the lanky ranny. "I ain't goin' tuh sell yuh nawthin'," he defied.

But he did. Five minutes later, Clay had parted with his forty dollars. This left him stone-broke, but he didn't care. Mounting his docile gray, he rode away, leading the newly acquired, newly named Buttons.

"You're shore one humdingin' little hoss," the waddy mused. "I seen you was quicker'n a flea, and I'll bet you can run like an antelope. Yes, sir, Buttons, you're the makin's of a top-notch cow pony. Now to break you to ride like a hoss ought to be broke."

## II.

Clay had traveled seven miles or so across the buffalo-grass range country when he turned in at a small ranch for dinner. This place seemed to be well kept up. There were a lumber stable and shed with

shingle roofs painted red, a tiny bunk house and snug dwelling built of stone.

Here a motherly woman with three small children greeted the roving ranny. She said: "Of course you can get dinner. Tom'll be along soon. Show this cowboy where he can put his horses, son."

"Son" was Tom junior, just eight, and an alert, freckled lad who instantly appealed to young Clay. The boy looked sharply at Buttons and exclaimed:

"Why, that's a Box 2 hoss! Ol' Savage Dolan, he don't never sell none o' his hosses or cows on this same range. How come you got this un?"

Clay grinned. "There's a story back of that, son," he said, and as Tom senior arrived, a moment later, he told the story to both father and son.

Tom Breadon was an up-and-coming young rancher, with those clear eyes and clean-cut features which show honesty. He looked very grave, indeed, upon learning how Clay had man-handled "Savage" Dolan, forced him to sell Buttons.

"You tangled with the orneriest and trickiest hombre on this range, cowboy. Believe me, I know, for my T Slash dogies graze the same range as hisn, and I've got reason to suspect he mavericks plenty of my calves. Fact, I must be gettin' 'em branded, or he'll beat me to some of 'em. Clay, you shore made a wicked enemy."

"I ain't scairt of him," Clay laughed. "That snake'll think twice before he jumps me."

"I'd advise you to keep ramblin'," said Tom Breadon very seriously. "But if you're minded to stay and help me get my calves branded——"

"Tickled to death, Tom," Clay in-

terrupted. "That is, if you don't mind my breaking this Buttons hoss and gettin' him to savvy the cow work."

Breadon didn't mind at all, and Tom junior was even more tickled than Clay had expressed himself at being. For the kid had already taken a shine to this tall, lantern-jawed cow-puncher from parts elsewhere, who seemed to know his onions.

In fact, the whole family cottoned to Clay Carter, and he in turn liked them all immensely—Mrs. Breadon, the two small girls, the kid, and Breadon himself. They were real folks, and as the ranny expressed it: "Gosh! They treat a feller swelligant."

Two weeks passed so swiftly that Clay had no least idea of the flight of time. He was enjoying his work and his friendship with the Breadons.

Lots of fun to teach Tommy things cowboys were supposed to know, like braiding quirts and raw-hide ropes, making horsehair hatbands, watch chains, and *mecates*, or hackamore lead ropes of twisted horsehair. Fun to answer the kid's questions about the work of the range, round-ups, bronc-busting, stampedes, trail herds, rustling.

Tommy Breadon was always tagging the puncher when he was at the ranch, would have liked to be with Clay day and night. But, of course, Clay was doing some work. He rode out across the wide, open, rolling country with Tom Breadon, looking for cows in Tom's brand with young calves.

Whenever they found an unbranded calf of Breadon's, they started a small fire, heated a running iron, and branded it. Since Tom Breadon was no cow-puncher, had little skill in riding and less with a

rope, Clay always roped these calves and tied them down, while Breadon marveled at his skill, and said:

"You shore are a cowhand, Clay. Good as them booze-guzzlin' slant-eyed jaspers who work for Savage Dolan."

"Oh, does that coyote have some punchers?"

"Couple of steady hands, cowboy." Breadon once again looked his concern and worry. "And they're dirt mean. I wouldn't put nothin' past 'em. Kind o' funny—not but what I'm terrible relieved—that nothin' happened yet."

"Perhaps Savage Dolan and his pet sidewinders don't know I stuck in this neck o' the woods," said Clay lightly. He didn't think Dolan would ever make him any trouble, and wasn't he glad he had taken the brown pony, Buttons, away from the brute!

Buttons was coming along fine and dandy. He was naturally a wild bronc, but from the day in the corral at the Box 2, Clay had won its confidence, and Clay managed to keep this confidence.

Buttons did take fright when first saddled, and he bucked like fury with the lanky waddy. But Clay rode him to a stand-still and talked to him, petted him, assured him that things were going to be all right.

Clay rode his new pony every day, taught it something more with every ride, taught it also to come racing to its master from the pasture, or wherever it might be, upon hearing Clay's shrill, peculiar whistle. It wasn't long before Buttons knew that whistle and never failed to respond.

One day, Tom Breadon wanted to corral a bunch of half-wild horses and catch up a couple of his that were in the band. Clay was riding Buttons. He and Tom jumped the

band about seven miles from the ranch, starting them in the right direction, but the bunch swung off to the west, running like the wind.

It was then that Clay Carter found out what a horse this Buttons really was.

The brown wasn't large, but how it could travel! Buttons ran around the half-wild bunch as if they were tied to a post, and when a cunning old mare tried to cut back, he headed her off so fast she didn't know what happened.

Clay, on Buttons, whooped the horses to the T Slash and had them corralled a full two hours before Tom Breadon showed up. He'd been lost miles to the rear.

"Great Scott, Clay! You've got a pony in a thousand there. Never did see a hoss that could run like that little brown bunch of grit."

Clay grinned from ear to ear, rubbing Buttons's wet skin with a wisp of grass. "And the li'le cuss never drewed a long breath," he remarked. "I bet he can run all day. Buttons, yo're some hoss! How 'bout a lump of sugar?"

Buttons nudged the lanky waddy as much as to say, "Come through with that sugar right now." While up at the house, Mrs. Breadon said to little Ethel, "I do believe that cowboy loves his brown pony as much as I love you. It's sort of touching."

Thus the happiest two weeks Clay had ever known swiftly passed. He had forgotten all about Savage Dolan, and Breadon was sure that rancher was no longer a danger to the waddy. The two were on the range seeking T Slash calves to brand, when Savage Dolan struck.

Clay was riding the quick, alert little Buttons. Tom rode a slow and rather clumsy black. They came upon a sizable herd of cattle, at a

stagnant water hole in a deeper valley than most in this plains country. Suddenly Clay ejaculated:

"Look! Big T Slash calf, fresh branded, sucking a Box 2 cow."

"Why, that can't be," Breadon returned. "We ain't made any fool mistake like brandin' one of Dolan's calves with my T Slash."

"But that's Dolan's calf, 'cause a Box 2 cow claims it," said Clay. "Why, salty broncs! There's another!"

"Another?" Breadon's mild blue eyes were as wide and round as saucers. "Great Scott! You're right, Clay. Two calves following Dolan's cows, but branded with my iron!"

"We never branded either one of 'em," snapped Clay. "I smell something powerful like a polecat. Who're those geezers?"

Two riders had appeared and were loping toward the water hole.

"Dolan's men," announced Breadon tensely. "Long-gearred, peanut-headed one is Soapy Gus. Probably he don't know what soap looks like, but that's what he's called. Tother un's Dog-face Fink."

"Consid'able of an insult to a dog to call that hefty walloper after one," commented Clay, sizing up the advancing riders. "They're totin' plenty artillery, I notice, and us peaceful jaspers left our hawlegs to home."

For that matter, Clay had not carried his six-gun since going to work for the T Slash. That day, he whole-heartedly wished he had the weapon.

"Lo, Breadon," grunted "Soapy Gus." "Any Box 2s in this yere bunch? B'gosh, yes! Thar's one—with a T Slash calf taggin' her. Yuh hombres been doin' some maverick-in', huh?"

"Don't be silly," Breadon uttered a forced laugh.

WW-4A

"Aw, yuh can't laugh this off," rasped Soapy and reached for his gun.

"Dog-face" Fink dropped his knotted bridle reins on his mount's neck and whipped out two heavy Colts. He did this with such amazing speed that Clay, not expecting such prompt action, was astounded.

"Pile off yore nags, an' get 'em up!" rumbled Soapy Gus.

"Why, yuh darn locoed——" Clay retorted hotly, and got no farther.

### III.

*Bang!* A bullet ripped through his hat, clipping hairs from his scalp as it passed.

Dog-face Fink's right-hand gun was smoking. Evidently this yellow-eyed, greasy-faced hombre was a crack shot, and dangerous.

Clay controlled Buttons, and swung off, as Breadon had already done.

"Lay down! Stretch out!" commanded Soapy. "Both of yuh. Never mind that hoss, you cow-puncher. It's the one yuh stole off the boss, I see. Yuh'll never swipec another hoss."

"I didn't swipec——" Again Clay got no further. Mad? He was so fighting mad, he was tempted to rush the hombres in the face of all three leveled guns.

Dog-face had bellowed: "Turn the bronc loose an' drap down, or I'll kill it!"

Clay dropped the bridle reins and stretched out on the ground. Buttons had been trained to stand with dragging reins, and he moved away now for only a few yards.

Soapy Gus stepped from his saddle, and while his side partner kept the ranny and Breadon covered, he tied their hands behind

their backs, lashed their ankles together.

And then Soapy searched Clay, finding the bill of sale for Buttons. He stepped back, touched a match to the scrap of paper, and when it was burned, trampled the remains into the dirt.

Lifting his head, Clay saw two more horsemen appear. One was Savage Dolan; the other, a lean and weather-beaten range veteran, wore a sheriff's star on his ragged, unbuttoned vest.

They looked through the herd of cattle, and Clay saw Dolan pointing out the freshly branded calves to the sheriff.

As these newcomers arrived, Clay sat up and grated: "Mighty glad to see yuh on the job, sheriff. Just untie us, pronto."

But the lawman made no move, and Savage Dolan chuckled, then said: "Thar's the hoss I was tellin' yuh this danged, double-rotten cowncrammer stole offn me. Yuh has already seen how these two thieves was misbrandin' my calves."

"Hey, I bought this horse!" shouted Clay. The frame-up was making him so furious that he couldn't keep cool. "Had a bill of sale, but one of these yaller-bellied stink lizards burnt it. And we never branded——"

"Then yuh got nothin' to show as yuh own the Box 2 hoss?" asked the old sheriff. He looked like a square-shooter, and Clay could scarcely believe that Savage Dolan or anybody else could pull the wool over his keen gray eyes.

"Not now," snapped the ranny. "But——"

"But we got the two dirty, thiev-in' skunks dead tuh rights, Sheriff Vincent," roared Dolan. "My good men saved yuh the trouble o' capturin' 'em. Now would yuh like fer

Dog-face and Soapy tuh take 'em tuh town fer yuh?"

"No!" said the sheriff decisively. "Tom Breadon, I'm arresting you and this cowboy on warrants sworn out by Dolan, charging both of you with branding no less than six of Dolan's calves; charging the cowboy with horse-stealing besides. But I'll take you to town, and I don't want no help. That plain, Dolan?"

"Uh-huh," rasped Savage Dolan sourly. "But my good men'd save yuh the trouble, Vincent. They ain't hombres as any foxy cow-puncher and danged nester can get away from, neither. Breadon's a danged nester, squatted here three years ago, ain't got no right on the range. Yuh'd better have help, sheriff."

"Dry up and get out o' here, Dolan," retorted the old lawman.

"All right," snarled Savage Dolan.

He beckoned to his two tough men.

The three rode away at a lope, the sheriff watching them until they were out of sight. Then he climbed stiffly from his saddle, cut the ropes on Tom Breadon and on Clay.

"Don't believe neither one o' you is guilty of a dog-goned thing," he said. "But straddle your bronses and come along to town. Reckon yuh can get out on bail pretty quick and then come in for the trial. Who branded them calves?"

"Dolan did it himself, but we ain't no proof," snapped Clay. "Said I was a hoss thief. How I'd like to nail his hide to the fence. Sheriff, loan me yore hogleg and let me go after three skunks."

"No. I've got to take yuh in."

"Huh? Yuh figure Dolan's goin' to let yuh do it?"

"He's tough and mean, but he won't interfere with the law. Dolan

got me on the job. So naturally he wants you fellows jailed."

Clay wasn't at all sure of that, but he said no more. Once again in the saddle on Buttons, he rode at the officer's right, while Breadon rode at his left.

Their route led past an abandoned sod shanty on the open prairie, and as they came abreast of this, three men jumped their horses out from behind it. Three six-guns covered the sheriff, Clay, and Tom Breadon.

"Vincent, keep yore fist away from yore smoker!" boomed Savage Dolan. "I'm takin' the law into my own hands, by gosh!"

"Dolan, yuh'll——" the startled officer began.

*Whang!* Dog-face sent a bullet whizzing through Vincent's hat.

Up went the sheriff's arms. Buttons snorted and backed up a few yards.

"Hold that bronc, or stop lead, yuh!" yelled Dolan.

No doubt but what Clay would stop plenty of singing lead if he tried to run now. He controlled the frightened pony as best he could.

Soapy Gus spurred in alongside Sheriff Vincent and plucked the Colt from his holster, while Tom Breadon, on his stolid plug, reminded Clay of a statue.

This was a mighty tough break for Tom, for Vincent, and for Clay. Being nobody's fool, the waddy realized that Dolan had planned to have his two tough hombres start with the prisoners for town and shoot them somewhere along the trail.

Later, Soapy Gus and Dog-face would swear that Clay and Tom attempted to escape, so they were obliged to kill them.

Sheriff Vincent had spoiled the plan, and Savage Dolan realized fully that he had failed to pull any

wool over the old officer's eyes. Yes, Dolan knew his frame-up would not work out as planned. Clay now heard from Dolan's own lips just what he had decided:

"Vincent, yo're goin' tuh kick out with yore boots on, an' the story me and my men'll tell is this: Yuh met up with these two hard-boilt characters, what was maverickin' my calves, swiping my hosses, and they shot it out with yuh. Yuh dropped 'em both, but they got yuh, too. Savvy?"

Vincent savvied. So did Tom Breadon, and all the color drained from the young rancher's face.

But not from Clay's. The ranny was burning up with rage. Tom to be murdered! His fine wife to be left a widow, his daughters and little Tommy to be left fatherless! 'Twas a danged——

Dolan and Soapy were both out of their saddles. They had ordered Tom and the sheriff to dismount, and were tying those two, while Dog-face, with his wicked guns, covered Clay so he dared not make a move.

"We've got to fix things so they'll look right to folks as come tuh see this," Dolan resumed. "Yep, we'll get a calf of mine an' have it tied down right yere; have a fire, and Breadon's runnin' iron in it; have the T Slash burnt on the calf, too. Then we'll make it look like Vincent s'prised the maverickers at work, and three guns begun to beller."

With this, Savage Dolan walked toward Clay on Buttons. "Pile off, yuh. Hah, I see yuh broke that hoss tuh ride all jake. I'll have me a good saddler, now. Ifn the brown gets gay with me, I'll beat his head plumb off, too."

Clay started to dismount. What

else could he do when Dog-face's guns were trained upon him?

But of a sudden, Buttons's eyes flamed with the same hate the pony had once before shown toward the human brute now advancing. The pony laid back its ears, bared its teeth, voiced one shrill squeal of fury, and charged straight at Savage Dolan!

Things happened with breath-taking speed. Clay was still in the saddle. Dolan dodged, too late.

Buttons's gleaming teeth caught his shoulder and ripped through vest and shirt to skin and flesh. They snapped together and brought the crimson.

The pony's front feet rose like flashing knives and cut down the man. Roar of six-guns, as Dog-face fired at the horse, at Clay, and missed only because Buttons was moving like a flash.

Soapy Gus yelled: "Quit it, Fink! Boss don't want that hoss kilt. Rope 'im! Rope 'im!"

Suiting the action to the word, Soapy bounded to his saddle, jerked loose his lariat and darted forward. Dog-face Fink jabbed his hot guns in the leather, and likewise took down his rope. All this in sliced seconds, and while Buttons was still pounding Savage Dolan with his sharp hoofs.

Now the pony reared, and whirled on its hind feet as a mounted man shot past on either side of it—whirled to do battle with these new foes. But a rope encircled its neck; another looped both of its flashing front feet.

Hum of tightening lariats, before Clay had a chance to throw either of them off his game little mount. Buttons's front feet had dropped back to earth, only to be jerked out from under him. His body hit ground with a terrific thud.

#### IV.

Clay, thrown clear of horse and saddle, although unhurt, lay as if stunned. This was a ruse which might save his life, for it was Soapy Gus who had roped Buttons's front feet and brought down the pony, and Dog-face Fink had dropped his lariat to jerk his guns once again—guns that now covered Clay.

Hard to lie still thus, peering out through slitted eyes, when Soapy Gus had hopped off and was deftly hog-tying Buttons. The pony's act had failed to give Clay a break, simply because those two efficient, deadly hombres who worked for Savage Dolan had acted so promptly. They were once again masters of the situation.

Sheriff Vincent and Breardon, both tied, were now at Clay's right, thirty feet distant. Dolan lay twenty feet from the waddy, and Buttons and Soapy Gus were between these two.

This individual finished his tying job on the pony, stepped over to Clay and kicked him in the ribs. No movement, no reply, not even a grunt.

"Knocked colder'n a beef," said Soapy Gus. "No danger from him nor from his loco hoss fer a minute. Let's see 'bout the boss, Fink."

Fink stepped down. He and Soapy walked around the struggling brown pony, stooped over Savage Dolan.

"An' he's colder'n a beef, too," said Dog-face Fink, with no emotion. "Scarred up aplenty. That hoss was shore after his hide."

"Ain't out cold," grunted Dolan unexpectedly. "Help me set up." He spat out a tooth, then snarled. "I'll make me a bob-wire whip an' cut that danged hoss tuh ribbons. I'll make sausage meat of his carcass. I'll——"

Clay heard this much, but no more. The instant when Soapy and Dog-face turned their backs on him, he had acted.

A forward lurch, and he was close to Buttons, untying knots in the hogging string. And as the pony lunged to its feet, Clay was up in the saddle, with Buttons leaving the vicinity as if hornets buzzed at his tail!

An oath. A wild yell. Then the spiteful barking of two six-guns. But the fleet pony was sixty yards distant before even Dog-face Fink had his Colts roaring, and he failed to bring down either horse or rider.

"Get him! Get 'im! Got tuh get the——" yammered Dolan.

A tough old buzzard, Dolan. Any ordinary man would have been unable to do more than sit up after the hoof-pounding he had just received.

But this hombre ran to his horse, hit leather, and led the pursuit. Soapy and Fink followed him. Sheriff Vincent and Tom Breadon were left behind—as Clay had hoped they might be.

Two hundred yards from his riled pursuers, the ranny was holding Buttons to an easy gallop. A burst of speed would send him far ahead, but this was uncalled for. He was headed toward town. If Dolan would only follow!

No such luck. Dolan and Fink had pulled up, were turning back—to get the sheriff and Breadon, of course. Would they succeed? Clay's eyes flicked to the now-distant men who had been tied.

As he had hoped, Vincent and Tom had succeeded in freeing each other. Mounted, they were fogging southward, perhaps in the hope of reaching a ranch.

But Breadon's old plug could not run, and the sheriff's horse, to Clay's

dismay, was evidently no better. Dolan and Fink were sweeping up on the two men, their mounts eating up the distance.

Neither the sheriff nor Tom had a gun. They'd be caught again. Killed, too, unless Clay did something about it. If the ranny went on to town, it would be at least an hour before he could get men on the trail. Plenty of time to allow Dolan and his toughs to get away.

Watching this other chase, Clay had slowed Buttons so that Soapy Gus was now much closer to him. The hombre was spurring his horse to a mighty effort, hoping to get within six-gun range of his foe. Clay loosened rein and circled back toward the other wild chase. He said grimly:

"Tag along, Soapy! I'm hopin' the other whelps'll do the same."

Fifty yards separated the fleeing sheriff and Breadon from Dolan and Dog-face Fink, and across the silence of the range boomed Dolan's voice: "Pull up, or we'll bullet-riddle yuh!"

Tom and the sheriff halted. Dolan and Fink swept up to them, guns ready.

A hundred yards on the farther side of these four, Clay galloped past. With helpless rage, he saw that Vincent and Tom were being tied once more, this time, to their saddles.

But that wasn't so bad as it might have been. They were still alive!

Clay cocked an eye rearward at Soapy Gus, who quirted his horse mercilessly. Then he taunted Dolan: "Come and get me, yuh pack o' coyotes!"

He was riding air line for the Box 2 Ranch, Dolan's ranch, doing this deliberately to get the hombres to follow him. For they would rea-

son that they had a chance of catching him. If he wasn't heading for town, they would follow, without waiting to murder Tom and the sheriff!

The trick worked. Dolan was crazy-mad to catch the cow waddy. He left Soapy Gus to bring along the two prisoners, and with Dog-face Fink, he fogged after Clay.

"That jasper's loco, headin' to yore ranch," yelled Fink.

"Shore is. We'll get 'im yet!" bel-lowed Dolan, pounding along beside his gunman.

But Clay grinned. He didn't think he was quite locoed. He had remembered about the rock barn with no windows and only one door—a solid door that fastened on the outside. What a prison that barn would make!

However, Clay was taking desperate chances—chances he had to take playing the game to save two human lives besides his own. His scheme might not work. Then all would be lost. But if it did—

The wild chase flashed across the buffalo-grass prairie. The game little brown horse was not breathing hard. It could have shown the furious men behind a clean set of heels.

But Clay didn't want that. He kept far enough ahead to be safe from six-gun bullets, and that was all. Yet Soapy Gus, with Vincent and Tom Breadon, were far to the rear by the time Clay reached the ranch in the shallow valley.

Gratifying to see that no one was there. Clay dashed straight to the rock stable. The door which opened to the inside stood wide.

Buttons knew this ranch and loathed it. He also was shy of entering anything that looked like a trap.

However, his master certainly

wanted him to go into the dark stable. So in went Buttons.

Clay ducked low to keep from being scraped off. The instant horse and rider were inside, the cowboy slipped from Buttons's back and stood behind the open door, allowing the horse to go onward alone.

From without rang a triumphant shout: "Dang fool's gone inter rock barn! Now we've got 'im!"

Hoofs pounded sod. Dolan and Dog-face arrived in a dust cloud, bounded from their saddles and rushed to the stable door.

But they did not enter. Except where light came in from the one opening, the barn was as dark as a tunnel. Through this darkness, the men could see Buttons's eyes shine like those of a cat; could hear his panting. But they could neither see nor hear young Clay Carter.

"Rake the place with bullets, boss?" Dog-face demanded.

"Nope. Yuh'd kill the hoss. I don't want that did. Me, I want tuh tie that danged fightin', man-eatin' bronc tuh a post an' beat him plumb tuh death. I'll shore get revenge on the blasted ranny, too. I'll whip him with a bob-wire whip!"

"He ain't got no gun, an' he's trapped hisself," said Fink. "Yere comes Soapy now."

"Hi, Soapy," yelled Dolan, "tie them pris'ners' hawsses tuh the corral and give us a hand! Yuh an' Dog-face go into the barn. Keep yore smoke poles in the leather, and drag out that danged dumb cow-puncher alive. I'll watch the door, yuh bet I will!"

Of course, Clay was hearing all of this. He clicked his teeth grimly. Dolan thought he was a dumb cow-puncher, did he? So, most likely, did Tom Breadon and Sheriff Vincent.

For what the ranny had done certainly looked dumb and foolish. But, as a matter of fact, Clay had used his head and played the wild game in the only possible way by which he had a chance of winning, of saving the lives of Tom and Vincent.

He had one card up his sleeve of which Savage Dolan and his killers little dreamed.

Now the door was darkened by Dog-face and Soapy Gus, entering shoulder to shoulder, advancing into the gloom as warily as mountain lions stalking their prey. They stepped to the right to circle around the stable. Buttons, seeing and smelling them, snorted loudly.

"Yah, snort," snarled Dolan. "Yuh'll squeal and beller when I begin workin' on yuh."

He was standing just outside the door with a cocked six-gun in either hand, and there seemed no possible way in which Clay Carter could get past him—alive. But as Dog-face and Soapy moved farther down the stable, the ranny pursed his lips, and a peculiar shrill whistle cut the air.

There was no need to repeat this whistle. Buttons had heard it before many times, knew what it meant. The little brown pony thought his master was outside, calling him, and without a second's hesitation, the horse dashed for the open door, came like a thunderbolt.

Guns blazed and crashed in Buttons's face as Savage Dolan fired wildly. Clay had been forced to take this terrible chance of Dolan's killing his loved horse, for there was no other way.

But the suddenness, the very swiftness and the fury of Buttons's charge rattled Dolan. Besides, the pony had attacked him once. He was scared of it. And now as he

fired, he was jumping aside. His shots were high and wild.

Unhit, Buttons zipped through the door—zipped through and turned as only a real cow horse can turn, and lunged at Savage Dolan, the man he hated with an undying hatred! The crash of a gun—the piercing yell of a man in agony—the squeal of an enraged horse, gone mad!

Clay Carter popped out through the door, slammed it shut behind him, slapped its stout wooden bar lock into place, locked two men in the trap. Then he turned to fight it out with Dolan.

But he didn't have that chance. He saw Buttons smashing a human figure into the hard ground with his iron-hard hoofs.

Clay whistled and called uselessly as he leaped toward the crazed horse. A minute passed before he could get Buttons by the bridle and lead him away.

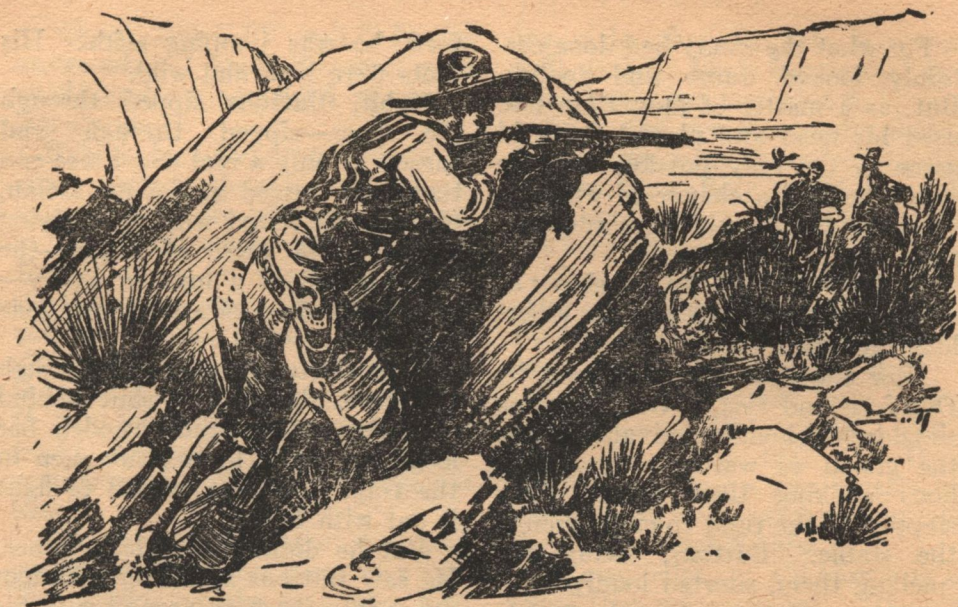
The red light slowly died in the pony's eyes. They became kind, friendly and trusting once again.

He nudged his lanky young master with his damp, crimson-stained muzzle. Then Clay became aware that Tom Breadon and the sheriff were shouting at him.

"Hey, stop foolin' with that wonder hoss of yourn and get us loose! We're still tied. Course them jaspers yuh locked in the barn can't cause no more trouble, but maybe Dolan——"

"Dolan'll never abuse another hoss," said Clay tersely. "I ain't sorry none. He got what he had comin' and——"

"And," shouted the grizzled old sheriff, "this'll be a better country to live in from now on. Thanks to you, cowboy. You, and the hoss yuh took away from Dolan and trained."



# Montana Gun Music

A "Circle J" Novelette

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "Rustlers Of Redfork," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### BULLET SURPRISE.

A HAIL of bullets screamed around Billy West when he topped the tall ridge. He started down the dim trail that led toward the brush-choked valley below.

A bullet plucked at the crown of Billy's big Stetson. Another tugged at his flapping calfskin vest, and still another left a dull brown scar across the leg of his tan batwing chaps.

Other slugs were hammering the scarred boulders beside the trail, to go screaming dismally off into the air.

Billy West ducked low, spoke sharply to the big chestnut horse he rode, and jammed dull rowels deep into the bronc's flanks. The chestnut shot sideways off the trail, crashed into a thicket of mesquite, and came to a snorting halt beside a big boulder.

"Whew!" Billy whistled as he slid nimbly from the saddle and expertly snaked a Winchester from its leather boot. "Danger hoss, that was a close shave. Wonder who feels so plumb hospitable?"

Billy's youthful face was flushed with anger, and lights in his wide-set gray eyes spelled "trouble" for some one. Rattled though he had been at the sudden hail of leaden

death, Billy had not been too badly excited to locate those telltale puffs of smoke that lifted from the heavy mesquite thickets in the valley below him.

He edged his medium-sized body through the mesquite now with little fuss, heading for the lip of the big rock which protected his pet horse. There were slugs snarling through the branches off to his right, and the steady booming of rifles came from below.

Billy gained the end of the boulder, removed his hat, and peered around cautiously. His wide, firm lips settled into a mirthless smile, and the Winchester in his bronzed hands snaked forward carefully.

He saw a man hunkered down behind a tangle of brush, stuffing fresh cartridges into a smoking rifle. He also saw a man lying face down in a little clearing.

A frown creased Billy's smooth brow. That man lying there was unquestionably hurt, or dead, perhaps. Yet Billy had heard no shooting until those slugs had come whistling up at him.

"I shore didn't shoot that jasper," Billy grunted. "But that skunk there who's set on gettin' fresh shells into his gun tried to drill me."

Resting the rifle barrel against the stone, Billy sighted it swiftly, expertly, and squeezed trigger slowly until the flat little hammer flashed down. Billy chuckled grimly, for the jasper who had been reloading his gun was up, squalling in alarm as he tore through the mesquite.

Billy's slug had plucked that jasper's gun from his fingers as if it had been jerked away by unseen fingers, and the fellow was tearing out of there as if his boots were on fire.

Billy glimpsed other forms scuttling through the mesquite in the valley below him, and sent slugs

whistling over and around them until his gun clicked on an empty chamber. He had not tried to hurt any one, for he certainly did not understand what the thing was all about.

Billy West was not the sort to plunge into a serious scrap simply because some one had taken a few pot shots at him. Not that Billy enjoyed being shot at. Far from it.

But he was a stranger here in this heat-warped Southwestern country, and as a stranger, he felt that mixing too readily into a scrap might lead to serious trouble.

Half owner and boss of the big Circle J Ranch, which lay in the foothills of the Bitterroots up in western Montana, Billy came down here into the Southwest each winter to buy up feeder cattle which he shipped home to Circle J range. And with him each year came three men—two top-hand cowboys and a little Chinese cook and handy man.

Billy was thinking of those three pards now, for he knew that they would be topping that ridge at any moment. And if his pards arrived before those bushwhackers got out of sight, Billy knew that trouble would start popping mighty suddenly.

Those two cowboys of his loved a scrap, and would not miss such an opportunity to get mixed up in one.

But it seemed that Billy's pards were due to be too late. In the canyon below, plunging horses carried low-riding masters through the mesquite thickets at a reckless pace.

Billy counted four men, then stood and watched them ride frantically up a side draw that twisted back among steep-sided hills.

Billy stood up then, walked back to Danger, and fished a gunful of rifle shells from a saddle pocket. He had just finished reloading the long

gun and had jammed it into the saddle scabbard, when a roaring voice from the ridge top behind him brought a faint grin to his lips.

"Billy! Whar in tarnation am yuh, pard? What's all the shootin', huh?"

That would be "Buck" Foster, grizzled Circle J top hand. Buck would have tied into those bushwhackers with no gentle intentions, if he had been in Billy's place. For Buck was wilder than any of the others of the harum-scarum crew.

"Set tight, Buck!" Billy called. "I'll be up there in a minnit."

He mounted, rode up out of the mesquites, and halted in the trail, facing a lanky, pop-eyed old ranny who combed at a drooping gray mustache with gnarled fingers.

"Somebody took a few shots at me, Buck," Billy explained quietly, "but I reckon they've give it up as a bad job. Last I seen of 'em, they was cuttin' into a side draw across the canyon yonder."

"By heifers! I see yuh got one o' the skunks," Buck howled. "Yonder he lays, boss, right out in the open. If I'd 'a' been hyar——"

"What's the racket? Who got who fer what?" a voice spoke.

A gangly young ranny rode over the crest of the ridge. He flashed keen blue eyes at Buck and Billy, big beak of a nose twitching a little as he sensed Buck's quite evident excitement.

"Dry up, yuh sorrel-topped young gopher!" Buck Foster howled. "Leave Billy talk, can't yuh? A passell o' skunks jist tried ter bushwhack him."

Joe Scott snapped erect, blue eyes widening a little as he glanced at Billy. Joe's freckled face became grim, and the carrot hair that showed at his temples beneath the

brim of his floppy old gray Stetson seemed to bristle.

"Bushwhackers, eh?" he growled. "I wish I'd 'a' been here!"

Billy grinned faintly at that. Buck had voiced the same wish only a moment before. Billy had no trouble at all guessing what would have happened if his fiery pards had been present.

Those four bushwhackers who had gone streaking for cover would have had something to dodge as they rode. And neither Buck nor Joe would have chosen a bushwhacker's rifle for a target, when the bushwhacker himself was in sight.

Billy was glad, however, that those two scrappy pards of his had not been there to sling lead. He wanted a chance to investigate the thing before he thought of settling accounts with the men who had fired upon him without apparent cause.

For one thing, that man who lay sprawled down there in the clearing puzzled Billy a lot. But the Circle J boss waited patiently until a small Chinaman came over the ridge top, hazing a laden pack horse.

"It's about time yuh was gittin' here, Sing Lo," Joe Scott greeted the little cook and handy man. "Bushwhackers tried to nail Billy, so yuh'd better stick close to us if yuh want to keep healthy."

Sing Lo's almond-shaped eyes widened, and his moonface screwed into a mask of uneasiness. Sing Lo was a clever little rascal, and could match wits with the keenest of men. But he was no fighter, and pulled no bones about admitting it.

"Huh!" Buck Foster snorted. "Let them bushwhackers nail thet carsarn chink. He's about the most wuthless critter what ever——"

"Listen, yuh hoss-faced ol' goat! The chink's worth a dozen o' yore kind," Joe Scott cut in.

Buck turned purple, balled his horny hands into fists, and showed what few teeth he had left in a snarl. Buck and Joe were the firmest of friends, yet they wrangled constantly, each trying to think up some new way of insulting the other.

But Billy put a stop to their argument before it started. "Cut it, yuh two!" he warned them sharply. "I rode on ahead to keep from listenin' to yore fool jawin', an' almost got shot. Pipe down, an' we'll go have a look at that gent down yonder."

"Where?" Joe Scott asked sharply, freckled right hand streaking for the butt of his holstered Colt.

"Haw-haw-haw!" Buck brayed. "Yuh am supposed ter be a wizard at readin' sign. But yuh can't see thet gent layin' down yonder whar Billy dropped him."

"Funny thing about that is I didn't shoot the hombre," Billy put in quietly, and wanted to laugh at the way his two pards stared in surprise.

But the mystery of that man who lay sprawled in the valley below was working on Billy, too, and he turned down the steep trail once more, keeping a wary eye on the thickets below him.

## CHAPTER II.

### "LIFT 'EM!"

THE man who lay in the clearing appeared to be stone-dead. The Montana men ringed about him, looking down, grimly noting the great spreading stain on the back of the cowboy's tough blue denim jumper.

Billy West was the first to dismount. He bent above the man, rolled him over slowly.

Billy knew then that the puncher was not dead. He looked down into the white face of a young waddy, and saw the lips move feebly as pale-

blue eyes opened. Billy dropped quickly to one knee, pressed his hand over the puncher's heart.

"Take it easy, fella," Billy called softly. "Don't try talkin' until I get a look at yore hurts."

Buck and Joe dismounted to rush forward. The tow-headed cowboy's shirt front was soggy with wet crimson, and Billy had a time opening the garment. But he worked swiftly, and was soon looking at a gaping wound in white flesh.

Billy's practiced eyes told him quickly that the wound was not so bad as it looked. The puncher had been shot from behind. The bullet had evidently struck a rib, followed it around almost to the front, then come out, leaving a dangerous but not necessarily fatal wound.

"Not so bad, fella." Billy nodded down at the wounded man. "Yuh've got a nasty wound, but I think Sing Lo can fix yuh up."

The towhead bobbed slightly, while the pale-blue eyes swung slowly from face to face.

Sing Lo trotted forward then, a bunch of small boxes and rolls of bandages in his thin hands.

Sing Lo was very good at dressing wounds, and had much more than the average man's knowledge of medicine. The little Chinaman had hung back as long as he thought the man on the ground dead, keeping his eyes turned away.

But once he learned that the puncher was only wounded, he had dug out his packages of herb medicines and rolls of bandages. He knelt beside the wounded cowboy now and, with Billy West's aid, soon had the soggy clothing back away from the ghastly wound.

"Lis hurt li' bit," Sing Lo warned his patient. "But soon yo' feel bettah. So be."

Sing Lo went to work with skillful

hands, and Billy squatted beside him, studying the wounded puncher's lean young face.

The cowboy winched a little as Sing Lo worked over that wound, and Billy saw great beads of moisture form on his pale brow. But not once did the waddy cry out, yet he was bound to suffer considerably, regardless of how careful Sing Lo was.

"Getee canteen, Mistle Joe," Sing Lo called, without looking up.

By the time he had finished cleansing the wound and started applying ill-smelling but healing ointment, Joe Scott was beside him with a canteen.

"Must have cup, too," Sing Lo told Joe. "Solly, flo' makee noddla tlip."

"Shucks, pard! I'm glad to help out," Joe answered, and trotted away once more.

By the time he got to the pack horse, rummaged through the pack, and found a tin cup, Sing Lo had finished bandaging the strange cowboy's wound. Joe hurried back with the cup and passed it to Sing Lo, who poured it about half full of water.

Then the little Chinaman lifted a small black bottle from a huge pocket which was inside his loose-fitting black coat. He uncorked the bottle, poured a few drops of some amber-colored fluid into the cup, and held it to the wounded puncher's lips.

The cowboy swallowed thirstily, then lay back, panting. But within three or four minutes, color began creeping into his wan face, and when his eyes opened again, they were not so pale with the film of pain and shock. He grinned up at Sing Lo.

"First time I ever knowed a chink could do anything besides cook or do washin'," the cowboy said slowly.

"But yo're a plumb swell sawbones, little feller, an' I shore thank yuh fer what yuh've done."

"Sing Lo cookee and washee, too," the little pot wrestler said blandly, and gathered up his boxes and bandages.

The wounded cowboy laughed, then turned his eyes to Billy West's face. "Yuh—yuh boys are strangers, ain't yuh?" he asked. "Leastwise, I've never seen yuh before."

Billy West nodded, told the wounded puncher who he and his pards were. Billy also told of being shot at, and of throwing a scare into the bushwhackers that sent them on their way.

"I'm Jack Dent, West," the wounded puncher told Billy. "I work for the Boxed C, which lies south o' here a piece. Tom Conrad owns the Boxed C. A plumb white boss, Tom is."

"We passed that place this mornin' early," Joe Scott put in. "Remember, Billy?"

Billy nodded, for he did remember passing a big, prosperous-looking ranch with the Boxed C brand burned in the arch above the wide gateway.

"There's a dam farther up this canyon," Jack Dent spoke again. "Feller name o' Flash Tyrone built that dam, an' it has shut off the only water the Boxed C has. Our cattle will be dyin' like sheep with the rot, onless somethin' kin be done to stop Tyrone."

"What do yuh mean, stop him?" Billy asked sharply.

"Tyrone an' that gang o' gunnies he hires instead o' cowboys is raisin' all sorts o' trouble with the Boxed C," Jack Dent growled. "Tyrone wants the spread, an' it looks like he'll git it. Without water——"

"Better forget about range

troubles for the time bein', Jack," Billy West cut in quietly. "My pards an' me will get yuh back down to yore spread. I reckon yore boss can handle things from there on out."

"I see a saddled hoss standin' up yonder in some brush, so I reckon it's yores, Dent," Joe Scott said. "I'll hustle up there an' git him."

Joe mounted his own gray horse and loped away, a moment later.

Catching Jack Dent's leggy bay cow horse was no task, for the animal proved to be gentle enough. But keeping the wounded cowboy in the saddle was another matter entirely.

Billy and Joe lifted Jack up into the saddle, and saw instantly that he was too weak to stay there. He grabbed at the saddle horn, missed, and would have fallen, if Billy and Joe had not been there to steady him.

"Looks—looks like yuh'll have to rope me to my hull," he gasped weakly. "Gosh! I'm so plumb dizzy, I can't see past my own nose."

"That wound flowed too much," Billy growled. "But take it easy, Jack. I reckon bein' roped to the saddle won't hurt yuh any."

With the puncher's own lariat, Billy and Joe tied him in the saddle as best they could. The Montana waddies mounted then, and with Billy on one side of the wounded cowboy, and Joe on the other, they managed to keep him fairly straight in the saddle.

"Buck, yuh hang back a ways an' keep yore eyes skinned for any jaspers that might take a notion to act up," Billy called as they headed for the steep trail.

"By hokies! I'd like ter see them bushwhackin' snakes try somethin' with me around," Buck growled, gnarled right hand fondling the butt of a battered but very serviceable

.45. "Yuh fellers jist leave them snakes ter me, Billy."

"Our Boxed C cattle keep driftin' up the crick bed that runs through this canyon, huntin' water," Jack Dent muttered thickly. "Every time they git close to the dam, Tyrone's gunnies kill 'em off. I was turnin' back strays when them snakes drilled me from the brush."

"Sounds like this Tyrone skunk needs a lesson," Joe Scott growled, and looked meaningly at Billy.

Billy shook his head ever so slightly. Billy was certainly in sympathy with Jack Dent and the Boxed C, but, he reminded himself sternly, a stranger had no business horning in on local squabbles. The Boxed C was likely capable of handling its own affairs, Billy reasoned, for it had looked like a big, prosperous ranch.

The Circle J boss meant to see that Jack Dent reached the Boxed C safely, then take his pards and head on across the mountains to a ranch where he had been told feeder cattle were for sale.

But Billy was reckoning such things without knowing the Tumbling T crowd. He and Joe were still holding Jack Dent in the saddle, one riding on either side of the Boxed C waddy.

They topped the ridge over which Billy had come not long before to meet snarling bullets. And as they topped that ridge, Billy and Joe stiffened, reining in abruptly. There before them sat four men, glowering angrily down the barrels of leveled guns!

"Reach, yuh meddlesome skunks, or we'll blow yuh out o' yore saddles!" one of the men snarled.

Billy spoke a low word to Joe Scott, who was letting his hand drift toward his gun butt instead of upward.

"Better lift 'em, Joe," Billy growled. "Looks like these gents have got us cold."

"Mebbe yuh ain't so dumb, after all," the man who had ordered the Circle J pards to lift their hands snarled. "But yuh'll wish ter gosh yuh hadn't horned into our business, afore we're through with yuh!"

### CHAPTER III.

#### BUCK TAKES A HAND.

JACK DENT had been leaning weakly forward as Billy and Joe guided his mount up the trail between them. But Jack's head came up at the sound of that voice, and Billy saw the tow-headed waddy's pale lips peel back into a snarl of hate.

The man who had done the speaking was a big, rawboned hombre, with a savage-looking, thick-lipped face and squinty little greenish eyes that stared unwinkingly out from beneath heavy black brows.

"Yuh, Dent, are lucky that these fellers horned in," the big jasper snarled at the wounded cowpoke. "An' they're lucky that I took time to look at 'em through the powerful glasses I allus pack. Seein' that they're strangers, I'll mebbe let 'em off with nothin' wuss than a good beatin'!"

"If I was able to palm a smoke pole, Flash Tyrone, I'd blast that ugly face o' yores clean around to the back o' yore neck!" Jack Dent growled. "Why pick on Billy West, hyar, an' his pards? All they done was——"

"All they done," "Flash" Tyrone sneered, "was horn in whar they had no business hornin' in. An' if yuh think yuh or any o' yore Boxed C outfit kin sass me, Jack Dent——"

Flash Tyrone's voice ended in an oath. He spurred forward, cocked

six-gun lifting, coarse face screwed into a scowl of savage anger.

Flash Tyrone's intentions were quite plain. The big jasper unquestionably meant to bring that six-gun barrel down across Jack Dent's skull.

But Flash Tyrone had another guess coming. Billy West edged his horse Danger in slightly, and into Billy's gray eyes leaped danger lights.

"I don't think I'd try wallopin' a man that's not only bad wounded but tied an' helpless," Billy drawled softly. "Tyrone, I'm beginnin' to smell skunk when my nose points yore direction."

Flash Tyrone whirled on Billy, snarling abusive language.

Billy's face became a little pale, and there were knots of muscle bunched along his stubborn jaws. But before he could voice a reply, there came the dull sound of a bullet hitting flesh, and one of Flash Tyrone's hard-eyed hirelings flopped from the saddle with a bawl of pained surprise.

From behind and above Billy, there came the thunderous roar of a swiftly fired Colt. Flash Tyrone and his three remaining men began yelling in alarm, their guns whipping up and around toward that booming Colt.

Even as they triggered a reply, a second Tumbling T man flopped from the saddle with a scream of pain and terror.

"Steady, Tyrone!" Billy West's voice cut sharply through the sound of gunfire. "Yuh an' that other gent elevate, or yuh'll wish yuh had!"

Flash Tyrone whipped sidewise in the saddle, smoking six-guns streaking around in search of Billy. But even as Tyrone turned, the Colt Billy now held in his brown right

hand boomed, and Flash Tyrone's big brown Stetson jumped from his head.

"I—I reckon yuh win!" Tyrone squalled, and lifted his hands.

Tyrone's hireling had already started clawing the sky, for Joe Scott had singed his nose with a bullet, by way of suggesting that he lift his hands.

Now a raucous voice drifted down from the rough hillside above the spot where the trail topped the ridge. Shod hoofs hammered stone. Then Buck Foster was reining his sturdy black cow horse in with a flourish.

Buck's leathery face was split by a huge grin as he swung a smoking Colt muzzle to cover the two jaspers who were wallowing around on the rocky earth and swearing weakly over burning wounds.

"I told yuh I'd settle these jaspers if they got gay, Billy!" Buck snorted through his badly bent nose. "When I seen what was happenin', I got up high, so's my slugs would go plumb over yuh an' Joe an' this wounded feller."

"Crow, yuh ol' billy goat!" Flash Tyrone snarled. "But I'll settle with yuh snakes fer this."

"Who's a billy goat?" Buck yelled. "By heifers, yuh snake-eyed son of a spider, I'll knock yore ears off fer thet! Crawl ofn thet crowbait an' put——"

"Get down an' see that those two jiggers yuh nicked are disarmed, Buck," Billy cut in. "Don't pay any attention to Tyrone. His blab won't hurt anybody."

"It won't, hey?" Flash Tyrone snarled thinly. "Feller, if yuh've got any sense, yuh'll quit the country, an' quit it fast. Nobody kin treat me an' my men the way yuh have an' live over it."

"My pards an' me ain't huntin' trouble, fella," Billy growled. "On

the other hand, we don't scare easy. We're takin' Jack Dent, here, to his home spread. Then we're ridin' on about our business."

"Boss, can't yuh see what's took place?" the Tumbling T man who was covered by Joe Scott's gun snarled. "Tom Conrad has hired these jiggers ter buck us. They ain't no ordinary cowpokes, as yuh kin see."

The speaker was a small, wiry hombre, with a sharp-chinned face and quick black eyes. His hands were slim, well kept, plainly the hands of a man who would know more about handling guns and cards than he would know about handling a rough lariat rope or a branding iron.

The wiry little jasper's very appearance fairly shouted "gunman," and Billy studied him intently. The fellow was cold-nerved, dangerous—the type of man who would kill without a moment's hesitation.

Billy saw that Joe Scott was keeping a sharp eye on the little sidewinder, and was glad of it. Give that sharp-faced fellow a chance, and he would start trouble aplenty.

"Yo're crazy, Ranse Hillard!" Jack Dent suddenly snarled at the little gunman. "These men ain't on the Boxed C pay roll, I tell yuh. They're——"

"We're down here in the Southwest from Montana, buyin' up feeder cattle." Billy supplied, when Jack's voice choked off. "Tyrone, yuh an' yore men started this, otherwise my pards an' me wouldn't be in it. If yo're smart, yuh'll leave us alone."

"Gettin' scared, are yuh?" Tyrone sneered. "Well, I reckon yo're beginnin' ter see where yuh've bit off more than yuh kin chew, blast yuh! But don't think crawfishin' will help yuh any."

"Yuh swell-headed ape, I'm tryin' to keep out o' trouble, nothin' more!" Billy clipped. "Shut that hole in yore face, take yore pet heel dogs, an' clear out of here!"

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck Foster roared. "Billy, do yuh mean ter say that we're turnin' these sarpints loose?"

Buck had just made sure that the two wounded men were disarmed. He whirled on Billy, brown eyes popping out more than usual.

"Why not?" Billy shrugged. "Long as they keep away from us, they'll——"

"Help me, Hannah!" Buck roared. "Billy, yuh'd better listen ter me. The thing ter do is string these skunks up!"

Flash Tyrone looked so uneasy that Billy wanted to laugh. But the Circle J boss did not laugh, for the situation, outside of Buck's fierce sputtering, was far from humorous. Perhaps, Billy admitted, Buck was right in wanting to keep these men from doing further damage. Hanging them was, of course, out of the question, for Billy had too much respect for organized law to take such matters into his own hands.

"Jack, how far is it to a town where there's a sheriff or some sort of officer?" Billy asked the wounded Box C waddy.

Jack Dent's head lifted wearily, and there was a grim twist to his lips as he eyed Billy.

"Flash Tyrone an' his pack are the only law in this neck o' the woods," his voice came wearily. "In other words, West, Tyrone rules this whole country."

"Yeah, an' whoever messes with me pays plenty!" the Tumbling T owner snarled. "My boys an' me will ride, since yuh skunks have the drop. But yuh'll hear from us again."

Flash Tyrone wheeled his horse then and went spurring down the rocky, brush-grown mountainside, swearing luridly as he rode.

Ranse Hillard turned his beady eyes on Billy, and there was the hint of a smile on Hillard's thin lips.

"Feller," he grated, "Montana is a heap healthier climate than this. But I don't figger yuh fools will ever see Montana again."

Ranse Hillard spurred away then, an ugly laugh floating back to Billy West and the others.

The two wounded men were on their feet now and crawling into saddles, one of them with a badly nicked shoulder, the other limping from a bullet that had scored deeply through the flesh of his thigh.

Billy watched until they had followed their boss, then turned to glance at his pards.

"I wonder," Billy said grimly, "if lettin' them snakes go was the thing to do?"

## CHAPTER IV.

### TROUBLE AT THE BOXED C.

[T was almost sundown when Billy West and his pards came again to the big Boxed C ranch house they had passed that morning. Bringing Jack Dent in had been a tedious job, for the waddy had had to rest often.

Jack was white and sick-looking now, but he tried to grin at Billy West as they reined in before a big corral.

"Sorry to cause yuh gents so much trouble," the wounded man said huskily. "But I shore appreciate what yuh've done, boys. I never would 'a' made it if——"

"Forget it, amigo." Billy smiled. "My pards an' me are plumb glad we happened along to give yuh a lift. Easy, now, an' yuh'll soon be in a bed."

Billy and Joe both swung down, and were untying the ropes that held Jack Dent in the saddle when a door slammed up at the house, and a woman came running toward them. Billy whirled toward her, aware instantly that there was something wrong.

The woman came on at a stumbling run, and as she drew closer, Billy saw that her face was chalk-white. He leaped to meet her, steadying her with one strong hand when she tripped over an outcropping of stone.

Stark fear showed in the woman's wise blue eyes, and Billy West saw that she had not recognized him as a stranger when she frantically clutched his arm.

"Jimmy's gone!" the woman cried in a choked voice. "His pony came in with an empty saddle. There was a note tied to the saddle horn. Please, can't you boys—"

The woman's voice broke, ended in a choked sob. Billy steadied her, turned quickly to face Jack Dent, who had made a choking sound.

"That's the boss's wife, West," Jack called hoarsely. "Jimmy is their twelve-year-old boy's name. My gosh! Do yuh reckon—"

Billy turned, guiding the woman back along the pathway toward the house. She was dazed with grief, and the Circle J boss tried as best he knew how to comfort her.

But she seemed not to hear his voice. Over and over, she called her son's name, and sobbed out a plea for some one to return Jimmy to her.

Billy's keen mind was already turning over what the woman had said. Her son's pony had come home, saddle empty. There had been a note tied to the horn.

Billy's teeth ground together. He had heard enough of the troubles

Flash Tyrone had brought down upon the Conrads to realize that Tyrone was the sort who would stop at nothing. Billy felt pretty sure that he understood Jimmy's disappearance.

But a look at that note which had been tied to the youngster's saddle horn would prove whether Billy's suspicions were well grounded or not.

He opened the back door, ushered the stricken woman into a neat kitchen, and saw a doorway which led out into another room. A low hum of voices came from that room, and Billy let the woman sink wearily down into a kitchen chair. He stepped to the middle doorway, saw a big dining room ahead where a dozen men stood closely bunched before an open fireplace.

Those men were white-faced, tense. They were intent upon what a stocky man was saying. He had traces of gray showing at the temples of his reddish-brown hair. They did not notice Billy until he was already in the room.

Billy realized for the first time that he had done a rather foolish thing in entering without announcing himself, for those twelve men whirled like trapped wolves, their hands streaking for holstered guns.

Harsh, choked oaths rattled from leathery throats, and Billy West knew that his very life depended on how fast he could think and act.

Smiling calmly, he lifted his hands shoulder-high, palms turned outward in the age-old sign of peace. The stocky man who had been talking leaped forward, swearing wildly as he aimed a blow at Billy's head with a gun barrel. Billy sidestepped, and the smile left his lips.

"Steady, yuh men!" he called sharply. "Which one o' yuh is Mr. Conrad?"

"I am, yuh mangy-hided skunk!"

the stocky man who had struck at Billy snarled. "An' I'll show yuh whether yuh an' that dirty coyote yuh call a boss kin grab my boy an' make me knuckle or not. I'll——"

Billy cut in quietly: "Take it easy, Mr. Conrad. I've had no hand in whatever has happened to yore son."

The others were pressing forward now, and Billy saw burning eyes watching him from tense faces. He glanced quickly right and left, saw that there was no hope of escape, and backed until he was against the wall.

"I wish yuh men would listen a minnit," he said grimly. "If yuh'll give me half a chance, I can explain why——"

"We know why Jimmy was stole!" a lanky cowboy roared. "Yore dirty boss aims to make our boss give up the Boxed C. But we'll have the pleasure o' trompin' yore mangy carcass to doll rags, feller. Git 'im, boys!"

There was a forward movement of that grim-eyed pack, and Billy West set himself for the rush he knew would come. Tom Conrad had been squeezed into the lead, so that he was only a pace from Billy now. And in the ranchman's grief-stricken gray eyes, Billy read a grim determination.

"Hold on, boys!" Conrad called huskily. "We ain't gangin' up on even a snake like this Tumblin' T feller. He's my bear meat."

Billy felt relief at that, for somehow he had known that only as a last resort would he hurt any of those grim-eyed cowpokes. He saw them fall back now, and heard their growls of disappointment.

"Conrad, will yuh act sensible an' give me a chance to have my say?" Billy growled. "I ain't a Tumblin' T man."

"Yo're a liar, that's what yuh are!" Tom Conrad yelled hoarsely. "Like all the rest o' yore low-down outfit, yo're too yaller to come out in the open."

Before Billy could voice a reply to that, Conrad was leaping at him, fists swinging. The ranchman had holstered his gun now, evidently feeling that smashing the smaller man down with his fists would be an easy matter.

But in that, Conrad was badly mistaken. Billy West was a trained boxer as well as being able to take care of himself in a rough-and-tumble.

He shifted lightly on his booted feet, rocked his head to let a punch go past, and smiled at the baffled, grief-maddened man who stopped to stare at him.

Billy had not offered to strike back, nor did he lift his hands when Conrad charged the second time. The ranchman smashed mighty blows into the spot where Billy had stood, half turned, then lunged at the weaving, dodging Montana waddy again.

But Tom Conrad saw that he could never match that younger waddy's skillful footwork. The knowledge brought a roaring oath from his lips, and his hand darted for his gun once more. Before Billy could guess what was coming, Conrad's gun was out, whipping up:

"A bullet kin ketch yuh, yuh dirty crook!" Conrad yelled. "See if yuh kin dodge hot lead, blast yuh!"

## CHAPTER V.

### BILLY MAKES A DECISION.

**B**ILLY WEST knew death when he saw it. He saw death in those blazing eyes of the man before him now, and knew that Tom Conrad meant to kill him. But even as

those things flashed through his mind, Billy was acting.

He leaped with all his agile strength, eyes riveted on the six-gun that was already out of Tom Conrad's holster and beginning to tilt up. Billy's lean-fingered right hand streaked out and down, and he winced as the big spiked hammer crashed down.

But the spike on that hammer had buried itself in the edge of Billy's hand rather than falling on a primer that would have sent a bullet crashing through the Montana puncher.

Billy's left hand came over, fastened on Conrad's wrist, and heaved up. The Boxed C owner grunted in pain, lost his grip on the gun butt, and staggered back.

With a deft move, Billy freed the spiked hammer from his flesh, changed ends with the gun, and had it trained on Tom Conrad before any of the dumfounded punchers could take a hand.

"Now, gents, mebbe yuh'll listen to reason," Billy growled. "I might get plumb out o' patience if any o' yuh other rannies was to act up."

"Crow, dang yuh!" Tom Conrad snarled. "But I reckon I was a fool to jump yuh, at that. If I'd 'a' give yuh the killin' yuh need, my—my boy might 'a' suffered fer it."

"Mr. Conrad, I know how you're bound to feel," Billy spoke sincerely. "But I wish yuh'd stop callin' me a Tumblin' T man. I'm not, an' no money could hire me to help a man like Tyrone."

"Save yore breath!" Tom Conrad croaked. "Yo're here on my place to——"

"To help yuh, if I can," Billy supplied quickly. "I found one o' yore men out on the range, wounded bad. I swapped a little lead with this Tyrone stinkaroo yuh accuse me o' workin' for."

"Purty story!" a cowboy sneered. "But why stall, feller? We know what brung yuh here. Yo're wantin' the boss to sign over the papers which'll give Tyrone this spread."

Billy saw that it would take some time to convince these angry men that he was not a Tyrone hiring. Watching them narrowly, he backed to a window which was across the room.

The window looked out into the back yard, and Billy managed to raise it with his left hand. Still keeping an eye on the Boxed C men, he bent down, yelled without turning his head.

"Buck! Joe!" he called loudly. "Bring Jack Dent in here!"

"Yuh know Jack?" a cowboy asked sharply.

Billy straightened, but did not reply. From out at the back, there came answering yells, and a few moments later, boots thumped slowly into the back of the house.

Then Buck Foster and Joe Scott appeared in the middle doorway, carrying Jack Dent on crisscrossed hands. Buck and Joe almost dropped the wounded puncher when they saw Billy holding a gun on those hot-eyed men.

"Steady!" Billy yelled. "Hold onto Jack, yuh two. These men will understand when he explains a few things."

"Jack," Billy called to the wounded puncher, "I'm shore sorry to cause yuh extra pain. But yore boss seems to think that I'm a Tyrone man, an' that I've had a hand in his son's vanishin'."

"Say, yo're hurt, Jack!" Tom Conrad gasped. "Boy, yuh look——"

"I'd be buzzard bait if Billy West, there, an' these two pards of his hadn't give me a hand," Jack Dent called in a weary voice.

Through a silence that suddenly

settled over the room, Jack Dent told his story. By the time he had finished, Boxed C cowboys were rushing forward, to lift him gently from his perch on Buck's and Joe's cross-gripped hands and wrists.

"Take him to the front bedroom!" Tom Conrad called out. "An' Lafe, yuh fork a hoss an' head fer San Clemente town. Fetch back Doc Martin fast as yuh kin."

Tom Conrad turned to Billy West then, and there was genuine shame in his eyes.

"West, I—I dunno how to tell yuh how sorry I am fer actin' like I did," he said hoarsely. "Me an' the boys didn't mean to abuse an honest man."

"Forget it, amigo." Billy shrugged the matter aside as he passed back the gun he had taken from Conrad. "Like I said, my boys an' me will be glad to give yuh any help we can in gettin' yore son back. Mind showin' me that note?"

"I'm afraid there's only one chance o' gittin' Jimmy back," Tom Conrad gulped. "Here's the note. Yuh kin see fer yoreself that my hands are tied."

The ranchman passed over a folded paper, which Billy opened as Buck and Joe crowded forward to join him. On the paper, printed in crudely formed letters, was this message:

TOM CONRAD— Ef yu want yore boy back alive sell yore spred fer one dollar to a gent that will come to see yu tomorrer. Do this an yore boy will git back home safe. Try makin truble an yore boy will be buzzard bait.

The note was unsigned, yet Billy West knew well enough who was behind it.

On the long, slow march back to the Boxed C, Jack Dent had explained at length how Flash Tyrone had tried every foul trick to get his

hands on the Boxed C. Tyrone had built a dam which deprived the Boxed C range of water. That stunt alone was enough to ruin Tom Conrad, force him to sell, or see his cattle die by the hundreds.

But Tyrone was evidently not satisfied to wait the few weeks it would take thirst to kill Conrad's cattle. He had hit upon this stunt of taking Conrad's son and forcing the ranchman to sell his whole spread for a single dollar.

Those things flashed through Billy's mind in the moment it took him to fold the paper and hand it back to Tom Conrad. The Circle J boss explained briefly to Buck and Joe what the note had said, then faced Tom Conrad.

"From what Jack told me on the way down here," Billy said grimly, "I figger Flash Tyrone will be the man behind this stunt."

"Shore, the dirty skunk is behind this!" Tom Conrad groaned. "I'm licked, West. When that feller shows up to-morrow, I'll have to take a dollar for my spread—which is worth fifty thousand if it's worth a dime. But I can't do anything else. Flash Tyrone is worse than any snake that crawls this desert!"

"From his looks, I figger he's plenty ornery," Billy growled. "But would he go far enough to hurt yore boy?"

"West," Tom Conrad said in a low, tense voice, "Flash Tyrone would kill Jimmy. I know, because a nester family moved in over on his range, two years ago, an' took up a claim. It was a man an' his wife, an' they had a boy about Jimmy's age."

"Tyrone jumped 'em, eh?" Billy prompted when the rancher's voice trailed off.

"Their house caught fire one night," Tom Conrad croaked, "an' none of 'em got out alive."

Billy shuddered, face twitching.

"By heifers! A gent thet'd do sech a trick ort ter be strung up!" Buck Foster gulped. "See, Billy? I wanted ter hang thet Tyrone critter whilst we had him."

"Where's Tyrone's spread from here?" Joe Scott growled. "An' which way did Jimmy's pony come in from?"

"Say, that's an idea!" Billy put in quickly. "Joe, here, is mighty good at readin' sign, Mr. Conrad. Mebbe we could back-track yore boy's hoss an' find out a few things."

"Don't try it!" Tom Conrad almost yelled. "West, that Tyrone is a fiend, I tell yuh! Let him see anybody tryin' to pin this on him, an' my boy will suffer!"

"Yeah, reckon yo're right." Billy nodded absently. "Guess my pards an' me may as well ramble. How far an' which way to this San Clemente town yuh mentioned?"

"San Clemente is east o' here, about four-five miles," Tom Conrad answered. "But yuh'd better stay hyar at the ranch, West. Tyrone an' his gang hang out in that smelly hole more than they do at the Tumblin' T. They'll drill yuh if yuh show up in town, after what happened to-day."

"Reckon they might, at that." Billy shrugged. "Well, we'll mosey outside now, Conrad. Yore wife is in the kitchen. Better go talk to her."

Billy's voice was calm, unhurried. But Joe Scott's keen ears caught a note of excitement in Billy's speech. As the three Montana waddies strolled out onto the wide front porch, a few minutes later, Billy spoke in a low, tense voice.

"Foller me, boys!" he hissed. "It's gettin' dark, so nobody will see us leave."

"Whar we goin'?" Buck Foster grunted.

"To San Clemente," Billy rasped. "We'll see how tough Flash Tyrone an' his gang are!"

## CHAPTER VI.

### BILLY PLAYS A HUNCH.

**L**OW-FLYING clouds and a raw, bitter wind came with darkness. Billy West and his two pards were shivering long before they spotted the yellow lights of San Clemente.

"Storm comin'," Joe Scott growled. "I wish to gosh I could 'a' took a look at that missin' boy's pony's tracks afore it was too late."

"Tom Conrad is likely right, Joe," Billy called through the darkness. "If Tyrone seen anybody snoopin' around, he might hurt that boy."

"Wait until I git me sights lined on thet Tyrone skunk!" Buck Foster growled. "By hokies! I'll p'arn thet jasper a few things."

"No rough stuff, hear?" Billy called sharply. "We'll ride on into town yonder, but we're keepin' out on the streets. The thing to do is locate Tyrone an' his gang, if possible."

"Shore," Buck agreed. "Then we'll snag the hull mess at one time."

"We'll steer clear o' trouble," Billy snapped. "What we want to do is locate Tyrone an' his men, then keep our eyes on 'em. Sooner or later, some o' the outfit will go to wherever that boy is bein' held."

"Yuh mean," Buck roared, "thet we're ter stomp around out in the cold, while them other fellers sets by fires an' has a good time?"

"O' course that's what Billy means, yuh thick-skulled ol' maverick!" Joe Scott growled. "An' I hope he fires yuh if yuh don't foller orders."

An argument would have started

then and there, if Billy had not reined in, with a low command for his pards to do the same. They were at the first buildings of the small town now, and Billy dismounted to fade into the night on foot. He was back a moment later, gathering his mount's trailing reins.

"Old shed just ahead here," he called in a low voice. "We can leave our brons there, where they'll have some shelter."

Buck and Joe dismounted, trailing Billy. They left their horses in the shed, then moved off toward the one main street of the town.

Light from windows lay in murky patches across the wooden sidewalks extending on out into the wheel-rutted street. Tinny pianos clattered out ragtime tunes from two different sections of the town, and somewhere along the light-mottled street, a cowboy was singing in a drunken voice. Men were moving along the sidewalks, but not many of them.

The wind had become colder, and Billy felt little pellets of sleet sting his face occasionally as he walked along the street. On such a night, people would stay indoors pretty well, and Billy was glad of that.

He led his pards the length of the town along one sidewalk, then crossed the street and moved back down the opposite side. When they had again walked the length of the town, Billy called a halt beneath a shadowed porch.

"That big saloon we just passed is plenty full," he observed. "Likely enough Tyrone or some of his men will be in there. Yuh two mosey back to it an' get located where yuh can watch the doors."

"Where yuh goin'?" Joe Scott wanted to know.

"I'm goin' across the street yonder to that other big saloon," Billy answered. "An' remember, yuh two,

that the idea is to see Tyrone an' his men without bein' seen yoreselves."

"One danged good thing is that yuh made thet chink stay out ter Conrad's place," Buck Foster growled. "If he was hyar, I'd have ter watch him instead o' the Tyrone gang."

Billy stepped from the sidewalk, grinning a little as he crossed the street. He had left Sing Lo at the Boxed C simply to avoid trouble, for the little fellow never missed a chance to fill his skin with hard liquor, or "tanglefoot," as he called it. And whenever the pards were all in town together, Buck Foster made it a point to tag after Sing Lo and see that he did not become drunk.

"Now if Buck an' Joe just won't pull some rattle-headed stunt that'll tip Tyrone off, we may get the goods on that skunk," Billy muttered aloud.

He gained the far side of the street, stepped up onto the rough sidewalk, and passed slowly along the front of a big saloon.

"Silver Palace Saloon," he read the black lettering across the big windows aloud. "Looks more like a skunk's den than a palace, to me."

Billy passed on to the corner of the saloon, stepped quickly off the walk, and went quietly along the wall to where a square of yellow light marked the location of a window. He came to the window, removed his broad-brimmed hat, and peered in cautiously.

Directly before him, there was a long lunch counter, which ran along the back of the room. Billy could see a squat, ornery-looking jasper moving along behind the counter, swabbing at the polished wood with a greasy cloth.

He could see a long, shiny bar running along the wall farther toward the front, where men stood packed

three deep. Across from the bar against the opposite wall, there were gambling layouts, which were doing a good business.

But Billy could not see as much of the barroom as he wanted to. He was about to move on to the back of the building and pass around to the opposite side, where he could see another window, when the movements of the man behind the lunch counter caught his attention.

The squat hombre was tucking his smeared apron up about his fat middle. Now he lifted a heavy mackinaw from a peg on the wall behind the counter, and shrugged into it.

Billy noticed a tray sitting on the end of the counter—a tray that bore dishes of food and a pitcher of water. As Billy stood watching, a man slid up to the counter, beckoning the waiter. Billy stiffened to attention, for he recognized that man as Flash Tyrone!

He could see that Tyrone was talking earnestly to the squat waiter. And as Tyrone talked, the waiter nodded his head vigorously.

"By golly!" Billy breathed as the significance of it all flooded his mind. "That waiter is takin' food out some place. Now I wonder——"

Billy's voice trailed off, for the waiter had yanked a greasy fur cap down over his flat head and had picked up the tray of food. He covered it with the greasy towel he had used to wipe the bar, then turned to waddle away through a back door.

Billy leaped into action, realizing that he had to move fast if he kept that waiter in sight. The Circle J boss rounded the back corner of the saloon, and a single glance failed to show him any signs of life. He fidgeted uneasily, realizing that he could not see a man more than a few feet.

He was about to move forward when a back door opened, and he got a glimpse into a kitchen. Then the squat waiter stepped out, bearing the tray of food in one hand and a lantern in the other.

Billy heaved a sigh of relief, for despite the fact that the lantern globe had been covered until only a very small beam of light showed, he could now follow that squat hombre without fear of losing him.

Billy's suspicions became stronger now, for the waiter hesitated, glancing right and left. Then he eased the door shut behind him and started away at a fast walk, almost trotting at times.

Billy followed as close as he dared, glad that the wind had set up a dismal moaning which would muffle any light sounds he might make.

The waiter pulled straight away from the saloon and kept going until he was well beyond the last buildings of the town. Then he turned at a sharp right angle, and ten minutes later, Billy followed him down into a deep, brush-choked draw.

The going here was doubly dangerous for Billy. He knew nothing of the country, and might walk off into a ditch or trip over some up-thrust root.

Then, too, the wind made little sound down here, and he had to be careful, lest his passing through the dense brush attract the attention of the man he followed.

But Billy was soon forgetting such things, for ahead of him, he saw an adobe wall and the rough planking of an old door briefly outlined in the small beam of light that escaped the waiter's hooded lantern. Then rusty hinges squeaked, and the light passed from sight.

Billy closed in swiftly now, hand resting on gun butt, eyes and ears

keenly alert. He reached the adobe wall, felt his way to a corner beyond the door, and stopped short.

Somewhere ahead of him, there was a window or some such opening, for voices came to his ears. One of them was gruff, unpleasant. That, Billy knew, would be the squat waiter's voice.

The other voice was thin, and Billy could detect both fear and defiance in it. That voice, he felt pretty sure, belonged to the missing Conrad youngster!

Billy slid down the wall until he was beside a paneless window. He peered in cautiously, gun poking ahead of him.

There in the one room he saw the waiter, hunkered down beside the hooded lantern. Fairly in the beam of light was a chunky, blue-eyed youngster, whose lips trembled a little as he stared up at the waiter's coarse features.

"Eat that grub, I told yuh!" the waiter snarled. "Want me ter slap yore danged head off? I can't set here all night."

"You—you'd better let me go!" the kid cried defiantly. "Dad an' our Boxed C cowboys will fix yuh an' Flash Tyrone for this, Gus Oakley!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### DOUBLE TROUBLE.

**BILLY WEST'S** first impulse was to yell at the waiter, whom the boy had called Gus Oakley, to lift his hands. But Billy realized the dangers that would bring.

All Oakley had to do was smash out the lantern, grab up the youngster, and effectively stop any shooting Billy might do. Billy knew that he could wait until Gus Oakley left, and had just decided to do that, when Oakley slapped the youngster across the face with one hand.

"Eat, yuh mangy little whelp!" the squat rascal snarled. "I told yuh I can't stay here long. Start eatin', or I'll beat yore blasted hide black an' blue!"

The kid cried out sharply at the sudden blow, and something seemed to snap in Billy West's brain. He leaped up and through that paneless old window like a huge cat. Gus Oakley didn't hear him until his booted feet hit the floor inside the shack. The squat waiter came up with a wild oath, one pudgy hand clawing at a gun beneath his mackinaw.

"Hold it, yuh mangy skunk!" Billy rapped. "Pull a gun, an' I'll shoot——"

*Wham! Bra-aa-ng!* Two shots rocked the old adobe shack.

Gus Oakley evidently had a swivel-type holster, for he had tilted his gun and fired from the hip without drawing.

Billy West felt the bullet rip through the side of his calfskin vest. Then Billy's own Colt recoiled in his hand, and Gus Oakley flopped backward as if a mule had kicked him in the face.

"Dad!" Jimmy Conrad was yelling. "Dad, is it you an' the boys?"

The kid could not see into the darkness beyond the hooded lantern. But Billy West was stepping forward now, gun holstered, pocketknife out and keen blade open.

"Take it easy, little fella," Billy called. "I'm not anybody yuh know. Just the same, I'm yore friend. Here, hold out yore feet so's I can whittle those ropes."

Eyes wide, Jimmy poked his booted feet forward. A few deft slashes, and the ropes were gone. Billy West helped the youngster to his feet then, snarling under his breath when he saw that Jimmy's face bore many bruises.

"They—they sort o' roughed yuh up, eh?" Billy asked.

"I'll say they did!" Jimmy answered stoutly. "Flash Tyrone slapped me when him an' Ranse Hildard first caught me. Then they quirted me when I fought back. But who are yuh, mister?"

Billy told the youngster who he was, explaining that he had been at the Boxed C shortly after Jimmy's pony came in. As he talked, Billy was figuring out just about what had happened.

Flash Tyrone and his gun-swift foreman had started to town after Circle J had disarmed them. They had, no doubt, blundered upon Jimmy quite by accident and, in their rage, decided to take him captive. They had been low enough to beat and abuse the youngster. It made Billy see red even now.

"Gee, Mr. West, I'm shore glad yuh found me!" the kid laughed suddenly. "Gosh, it's cold in here! Don't yuh reckon we'd better high-tail it afore some o' Tyrone's other gunnies come snoopin' around?"

Billy could easily enough understand the kid's haste to leave the dirty shack. In fact, Billy wanted to get moving himself, for he realized that some of Tyrone's crowd might have been close enough to hear the shooting.

The possibility was slim, of course, yet Billy wanted to take no chances, now that it was within his power to return this youngster to his grief-stricken parents.

"Shore, Jimmy, we'll skeedaddle right pronto," Billy told him. "But don't get me all swell-headed by callin' me 'mister.' I'm Billy to my friends."

"Gosh, Billy! Yuh'll shore do to ride the river with," the boy said in all seriousness. "An' I'll bet I'll like yore pards, too."

"Thanks, Jimmy," Billy returned just as seriously. "Yuh scoot out the door now while I—while I see if this Gus gent is out o' the picture."

"Aw, heck!" Jimmy snorted. "I'm no local gal that'll go screamin' or faintin' on yuh. Roll that skunk over an' let's see where yuh hit him."

Billy had to grin at the kid's grown-up acting. But he knew better than to insist that Jimmy leave the room. Billy reached down, rolled Gus Oakley over, and took one brief look at his face.

"Plumb between the eyes!" Jimmy gasped. "Gosh, Billy! Yo're some shot!"

"Just luck, mebbe," Billy muttered, and herded the kid out through the door after putting out the lantern.

They moved into the brush then, Jimmy holding tightly to Billy's shell-studded belt to keep from falling. The youngster was stiff and lame from rough treatment and the ropes that had bound him. Yet he made no complaint as they fought their way through the brush and up out of the canyon.

They were approaching the town cautiously, when Billy stopped in his tracks, head lifting sharply. Wild yells and the exploding of six-guns came from the town.

"Buck an' Joe, or I miss a guess!" Billy cried. "Jimmy, I'll have to leave yuh an' go see what's happenin' to my pards."

Billy had circled the town and approached the shed where the Circle J horses were hidden. He ran to the shed now, pulled Jimmy inside, and found him a comfortable perch in an old manger.

"Don't move from here, button, for any reason," Billy warned. "Stay hid here until I come back, if it's plumb daylight when I get here. Will yuh?"

"Shore, Billy, I'll wait," Jimmy answered. "I know Tyrone's gang would grab me again if I was to let 'em see me."

Billy let his hand drop down to his chaps pocket, where a little .32 six-gun nestled. He had seen the gun in the shack where he had found Jimmy, lying on the floor near a small pair of spurs. He figured the gun was Jimmy's, and thought of giving it to him now. But a second thought decided Billy against that. If the youngster was armed, he might become overconfident and wander outside if he had to wait too long.

Billy leaped from the shed and headed for the main street at a run. The sounds of shooting had died down now, but angry voices still came down the cold wind.

Billy reached the street, slowed to a walk, and headed straight for the Silver Palace Saloon. He could see men moving about before its doors, and could hear them muttering angrily.

Then the saloon doors were yanked open, and Billy saw men crowding through them. He stepped off the sidewalk, felt his way along the wall, and halted beneath the window through which he had stood looking into the room not so long before.

He saw the crowd march down almost to the lunch counter, where Flash Tyrone and Ranse Hillard stood side by side. And being shoved along ahead of that crowd were Buck and Joe, both looking as if they had been caught in a stampede.

Buck's bent nose dribbled crimson. His pet bearskin vest he always wore looked mangier than ever under a coat of street dirt, and the old ranny's left cheek was swollen and red.

Joe Scott's red jersey was torn at

the right shoulder, his lips were split, and his whole face looked as if a few boots had trampled it.

Buck and Joe were both glowering as they were shoved up to face Tyrone, and Billy could see that they were talking, although he could not hear what was said.

"Dang the luck!" the Circle J boss growled. "Wonder what happened? I'll have to see if I can give those two a hand. Mebbe—— Ugh!"

Something round and hard jammed savagely against Billy's spine. He knew that the thing gouging him was a gun muzzle before a harsh, raspy voice cut through the darkness behind him.

"Move, feller, an' I'll blow yuh in two!" that voice snarled. "If yo're so interested in what's happenin' in yonder, I'll take yuh in whar yuh kin have a plumb good look."

Billy felt his own gun shucked from leather, felt a practiced hand run over him. Then the man behind him laughed grimly.

"All right, West," he called. "The boss has been sayin' that he'd like ter see yuh. Oh, I know yuh, all right, 'cause the boss give us boys all a good description o' yuh Montanner gents."

"Yeah?" Billy drawled. "Flash Tyrone is gonna keep on until he wishes he hadn't monkeyed with so many Montana waddies."

"We'll see about that," the man behind Billy rasped. "Head fer the back door. We'll go in through the kitchen. An' if yuh want a sudden ticket yonderly, jist try somethin' funny!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A TOUGH SPOT FOR BILLY.

THERE was, indeed, nothing Billy could try just then. He turned slowly, moved along the wall, and came at last to the back door. He

pulled it open, stepped into a filthy kitchen, and stalked on out into the barroom behind the lunch counter.

Flash Tyrone and Ranse Hillard whirled, their eyes popping out. Then Flash Tyrone's thick lips peeled back in an evil grin, and his big, rawboned body swayed forward.

"Waal, Lew, yuh ketched the very gent I've been wantin' ter see!" Tyrone boomed. "March him out from behind that counter, Lew, an' I'll give him somethin' ter remember me by."

Billy moved from behind the counter and out into the room. The place was packed with hard-eyed men who stood watching silently, nudging one another as they saw Flash Tyrone step toward Billy. Buck and Joe were staring in amazement, their battered faces blank with surprise.

"What happened to yuh two?" Billy asked his pards, completely ignoring Flash Tyrone.

"What happened?" Buck Foster howled. "Billy, Joe an' me was mindin' our own business when a passell o' the skunks jumped us. We wa'n't——"

"Yuh an' yore outfit are still nosin' into my affairs, West," Flash Tyrone snarled. "But yore meddlin' days are over now."

"What's nosey about us comin' here to town?" Billy demanded as he turned on the Tumbling T owner. "Tom Conrad jumped me when I got to his place an' accused me o' knowin' what become of his son. Now yuh an' yore men have jumped us, accusin' us o' hornin' into yore business. Fine country, ain't it?"

Flash Tyrone and Ranse Hillard exchanged quick glances. Billy had screwed his face into a dark scowl as if soured on the whole world.

He had told the truth, of course, when he said that Tom Conrad had

jumped him and accused him of aiding in Jimmy's disappearance. Billy did not bother to explain, however, that Tom Conrad had been convinced of Billy's innocence.

"So Conrad accused yuh o' stealin' that kid o' his, huh?" Flash Tyrone chuckled evilly. "Mebbe yuh done it, West."

"Me?" Billy hoped desperately that the sudden start he gave would look convincing. "What in blazes would I want to steal the kid for? Dang it, are all yuh hombres in this country loco?"

Buck Foster started to speak, but Joe Scott silenced him with a gouging elbow. Joe knew that Billy was making some sort of play, but could not see just what Billy was up to. But Joe knew that his level-headed boss had some plan up his sleeve, and felt that Buck might spoil everything if he talked just then.

"Yuh an' yore men tried to drill me to-day for no reason a-tall," Billy was complaining. "What's the idea, Tyrone? All my punchers an' me ask is a chance to clear the country without more trouble. Anything wrong with that?"

Flash Tyrone was about to reply when Ranse Hillard gripped his arm, tugged. The Tumbling T owner followed his cold-eyed ramrod off several paces.

"Listen boss. This is a break fer us," Ranse Hillard hissed softly. "We can't let that Conrad brat go home alive now, even if Tom Conrad does sign over the place. That kid will talk, an' we'll git our necks stretched."

"What's that got ter do with these nosey Montanner fellers?" Flash Tyrone snarled.

"It's like this," Ranse Hillard snapped. "Let 'em ride on, see? Then we send our man over to Con-

rad in the mornin' an' git that deed to the Boxed C. The Conrad kid is found hyar in town, deader than a doornail, with a note pinned onto him, kiddin' his folks about bein' sech suckers. We'll sign the note with West's name!"

"But—but what'll that git us?" Flash Tyrone asked gruffly. "I don't see—"

"While the hull country is tryin' to locate West an' his pards, we'll have time to sell the Tumblin' T an' the Boxed C spreads to that Eastern syndicate man that's due here tomorrow." Ranse Hillard grinned. "Afore anybody gits wise to us, Flash, we kin be in Mexico, with mazuma enough to live easy the rest of our lives."

"By gosh! Yo're right!" Flash Tyrone croaked. "Ranse, yuh've shore hit the thing dead center."

The two turned then, and came slowly back. Billy caught the gleam in their eyes, and knew that something snaky had been planned.

"Waal, West, my foreman says as how mebbe we've all been a mite hasty," Flash Tyrone leered. "If yuh an' yore men will fog on out o' town an' not try startin' any trouble, I reckon we'll let yuh go."

Billy West stiffened, for he knew very well now that Flash Tyrone was up to some evil bit of trickery. But in order to let Tyrone think he was getting his scheme over, Billy grinned broadly.

"Well, now, that's more like it!" he chuckled. "My boys an' me will shore—"

The front doors of the saloon crashed open noisily, and a wild-eyed jasper came burrowing through the crowd, yelling Flash Tyrone's name. The man lunged out into the little celared space facing Tyrone, and stood panting heavily. He was runty, with practically no chin and

stupid-looking eyes that were now wide and staring.

"He—he's gone, boss!" the runty jasper choked. "That Conrad younker is gone from the shack, an' Gus Oakley is layin' thar with a bullet atween his eyes!"

Flash Tyrone leaped, fastened powerful fingers over the runt's thin shoulder, and shook him savagely.

"What are yuh talkin' about, Chigger Nolan?" he demanded. "If yo're tryin' ter play a trick on me, I'll wring yore fool neck!"

"Honest, boss, it's the truth!" the runty "Chigger" Nolan gasped. "I went down thar ter keep guard like yuh told me to. An' I found Gus shot through the head, an' the younker gone!"

Flash Tyrone slapped the sniveling Chigger away from him, then whirled on Billy West, sheer murder blazing in his ugly eyes.

"Yuh know anything about this?" he snarled. "West, if yuh've had a hand in this, I'll make yuh pay plenty!"

"A hand in what?" Billy rapped, doing his level best to look puzzled. "What's happened now that yo're gonna blame onto me?"

Flash Tyrone eyed him narrowly, anger, doubt, uneasiness in his evil eyes. He was about to speak again when Ranse Hillard slid forward, dived a hand into Billy's chaps pocket, and brought forth the little pearl-handled .32 six-gun.

"Oh, no, he don't know what it's all about!" the Tumbling T ramrod snarled. "Flash, this is the gun I taken offn that Conrad whelp this afternoon. I onloaded the gun an' left it down there in the shack with the kid."

"Then yuh kilt Gus an' let that kid loose, West!" Flash Tyrone roared. "Thought yuh had us fooled, didn't yuh? Waal, hyar's somethin'

that'll learn yuh better than ter monkey with me. I'm givin' yuh a couple slugs through yore stummick, so's I kin watch yuh squirm plenty afore yuh cash in!"

Flash Tyrone's hands streaked down, came up with the twin guns he wore. The guns boomed deafeningly, and a scream of agony cut shrilly through the room!

## CHAPTER IX.

### A PLAN FAILS.

A SPLIT second before Flash Tyrone could trigger, Ranse Hillard leaped at him, causing him to reel drunkenly. Flash Tyrone shot one of his own hirelings through the thigh, but his slugs never touched Billy.

"Fool!" Ranse Hillard snarled at Tyrone. "Kill this West snake, an' we're sunk. He ain't had time to git that kid home yet. Make him tell where he's hid him."

Flash Tyrone seemed to realize that his foreman spoke the truth. He straightened slowly, evil lights dancing in his eyes as he holstered his guns and glanced up the room to where his hireling lay screaming from the pain of shattered flesh and bone.

"Shet up, yuh fool!" Tyrone snarled coldly at the wounded man. "Some o' yuh boys drag that beller-in' cuss out o' here!"

Three men moved hastily to obey, and the wounded man's screams were soon coming fainter and fainter from outside the saloon. Flash Tyrone turned to Billy then, lifted one hand, and struck hard at the Circle J boss's face.

Billy side-stepped lightly—and whipped out a fist that cracked like a pistol shot against Tyrone's heavy jaw.

The Tumbling T man staggered

drunkenly, a bawl of rage and pain roaring from his throat. Buck and Joe started forward, but many hands seized them, dragging them back.

Billy stepped forward swiftly and would have floored Flash Tyrone with a left hook. But Ranse Hillard jammed a gun into Billy's side, ordering him back.

"Flash, what yuh got serves yuh right," Ranse Hillard sneered at the dazed tough. "Any danged fool could see that this younker would be poison with his fists."

"I—I'll bust him plumb in two!" Flash Tyrone rasped, and started a charge.

But he stopped short when Ranse Hillard stepped clear, giving Billy room to move.

He yanked his guns, dropped into a crouch, and spat an oath from his thick lips. "Punch me again, an' I'll gun-whip yuh ter death!" he snarled. "Where's that danged Conrad brat?"

"Find him!" Billy told the snarling jasper bluntly. "Yuh an' yore whole pack couldn't make me turn that kid over to yuh again."

"Jist to show yuh that I mean business, I'll let yuh watch me work on that hoss-faced Foster skunk a while!" Flash Tyrone roared. "How'd yuh like ter see me whittle his danged eyelids off, huh?"

Whether intentionally or by accident, Flash Tyrone had hit upon the one thing which would give him the whip hand. He could have beaten and trampled Billy West without getting one bit of information. But Billy was not the sort to make his pards suffer.

The Circle J boss went pasty-white, and desperate lights leaped into his eyes. Flash Tyrone saw that look in Billy's eyes, and backed hastily away, laughing nastily.

"So that's yore weak spot, hey?"

Tyrone snarled. "Waal, how'd yuh like ter git them two pards o' yours hung?"

"What are yuh drivin' at?" Billy grated.

"Jist this, dang yuh!" Flash Tyrone leered triumphantly. "I'll give yuh ontill midnight, which is less than three hours, ter git that Conrad brat back hyar. If the kid ain't in my hands by midnight, we string Foster an' Scott up ter them ceilin' beams yonder."

"Let him talk, Billy!" Joe Scott growled. "Don't turn that kid over to this mangy pack!"

"O' course Billy won't!" Buck Foster roared. "By heifers, Joe, we ain't skeered o' these skunks, am we?"

Billy barely heard what his pards were saying. His mind was racing at top speed, trying to find some way out of this pickle.

Flash Tyrone swore at Billy, waving his twin guns. "Git goin', West!" he roared. "Vamose, or I'll have the boys throw yuh out. An' remember that onless yuh've handed that kid back by midnight, these two pards o' yores git strung up!"

Billy nodded dumbly, turned, and stalked down the room. The Tyrone pack gave way before him, grinning at him, jeering as he passed by. Not until he was out in the cold night wind did Billy fully realize that he was moving.

"What in blazes can I do?" he groaned. "Unless I manage to out-think Tyrone somehow, Buck and Joe will shore hang. If I had some help—— Lay, Tom Conrad an' his cowboys would help me! I can set a trap——"

Billy was already running. He reached the shed where Jimmy was hidden, led Danger out, and boosted the youngster up into the saddle.

Jimmy asked questions, but Billy

barely heard. He headed Danger down the trail toward the Boxed C, and rolled dull rowels along the chestnut's flanks.

Billy's face and hands were soon numbed from the beat of the icy wind. He stripped off his calfskin vest without slowing, wrapped it snugly about Jimmy Conrad's shoulders. The cold bit through Billy's shirt, yet he barely noticed. It was a race with death, and his pards were the ones who would suffer.

As he rode, Billy's mind formed a plan. When the lights of the Boxed C finally showed through the night, the Circle J boss had his plan well formed.

He reined Danger in at the yard, dismounted with Jimmy in his arms, and ran clumsily up to the wide front porch. A door opened just ahead of him, and Tom Conrad stood framed in the lamplight.

Billy called a greeting, stepped on into the room, and let Jimmy slide to the floor. From a chair near the big open fireplace, Mrs. Conrad stood up slowly, a look of disbelief on her wan face.

Then a cry wrenched from her throat, and she was racing across the room to her son. Tom Conrad stood with sagging jaw, looking first at Billy West then at his son.

"Gosh, mom, yuh got any supper ready?" Jimmy blurted. "I'm shore hungry."

"Jimmy!" Tom Conrad found his voice at last. "Yuh—yuh all right, sonny? Yuh ain't—hurt?"

"Aw, dad, I'm fine—'ceptin' I'm hungry an' sort o' coldish," the youngster answered stoutly. "Gee, yuh should 'a' see Billy, here, plug that Gus Oakley skunk! Gus slapped me, an' about that time, Billy jumped in the old winder an' let Gus have a slug to swaller. Only it hit Gus atween the eyes."

Mrs. Conrad was clutching the boy to her, sobbing brokenly. Jimmy looked uneasily at his mother, and smoothed her hair with clumsy little strokes.

"Gee, mom, don't cry!" he pleaded. "Gosh, there ain't nothin' to be cryin' about."

"West, what in tunket happened?" Tom Conrad gulped.

He pulled a bandanna from one hip pocket and blew his nose violently. Tom Conrad was trembling noticeably, holding onto himself by sheer will power.

Billy understood, and wished that he might leave these two people with their recovered son. But within Billy's own heart there were bitter pangs, for in returning the youngster to his parents, he had forfeited the lives of his two saddle pards. Billy began doubting his plan now—doubting if Tom Conrad would supply the help Billy had to have.

In quick, terse sentences, Billy told briefly what had happened—how he had found and rescued the kid, then been captured and taken to face Flash Tyrone.

"So I high-tailed it right here, Conrad, with the kid," Billy finished grimly. "Now, if yuh'll rout yore punchers, we'll be able to trap Tyrone an' his outfit."

"How?" The tone of Tom Conrad's voice warned Billy that the ranchman had already guessed his plan.

"We'll take Jimmy back with us!" Billy drove his words out sharply. "I'll go with him to the Silver Palace an' let Tyrone see him. Then, while I'm bargaining with Tyrone, yuh an' yore men surround the place."

"No!" Mrs. Conrad's voice lifted wailingly. "Tom, we can't do that. Jimmy is home—safe. If we let him be taken back to town, to those awful men——"

"Yo're right, Alice!" Tom Conrad thundered. "Our son is safe, hyar. An' he stays hyar." He turned fiercely on Billy. "West, yuh've shore put us in yore debt. But—but takin' Jimmy back is out o' the question." There was grim finality in Tom Conrad's voice.

Billy paled, and it was on the tip of his tongue to remind Tom Conrad that he was playing the game selfishly, to say the least. But time was precious, and Billy knew that he dared not waste it arguing.

Spinning on one heel, he strode to the center of the room, where Tom Conrad's holstered gun and shell belt lay on a center table. Billy shucked the gun from its holster, saw that it was a .45, and shoved it into his own holster.

"I'm borrowin' yore gun, Conrad," he clipped grimly as he strode toward the front door. "My pards are due to hang. I reckon the best I can do now is try to shoot 'em out o' the jack pot I've put 'em in."

He stooped, snatched his calfskin vest from the floor, and shrugged into it as he passed out into the night.

## CHAPTER X.

### BULLET SHOW-DOWN.

**D**ANGER was dripping sweat despite the cold of the night when Billy stabled him once, more in the shed at the edge of San Clemente. The wind had increased to a roaring demon now, and sleet and snow fell thickly through the dark night.

Billy walked out onto the main street, face grimly set, eyes squinted against the sleet and wind. It was an hour or more until midnight. Yet he meant to waste no time.

"All I can do is waltz into that saloon, start shootin', an' hope for a break," he said harshly. "If Buck

an' Joe had their guns, we might come clear. But the way things stand——"

His voice broke off as a roaring sound of voices reached his ears. He was near the Silver Palace now, and in the murky blotches of light that poured from its windows, Billy saw a big crowd milling on the sidewalk and in the street. The saloon doors were open, too, and jammed with wildly yelling men.

Billy slid forward until he could see what was happening. Two men were there on the sidewalk, slugging fiercely. They were both brawny fellows, evenly matched as to build, height, and weight. Billy saw that the spectators were mostly Tumbling T men, and heard them all yelling one name.

It dawned on Billy suddenly that the Tumbling T gunnies were rooting for a fellow named "Butch." It occurred to Billy at the same moment that the gang was well occupied, for the time being, at least.

He came to life then, sprinted along the saloon wall, and was soon letting himself in the back door. When he peered out into the big bar-room, a moment later, he could scarcely believe his eyes.

Only four men were now in the room—Buck Foster, Joe Scott, and two salty-looking hombres who were guarding Buck and Joe.

Billy blinked, felt like pinching himself to make sure that he was not dreaming. Then he realized that every second counted. Those two men who were fighting in the street could not keep at it much longer.

Billy slid behind the lunch counter, drew the gun he had borrowed from Tom Conrad, and stood up slowly.

The two guards had backed against the counter, and were facing the front of the room, evidently lis-

tening to the cheers for Butch. Buck and Joe were on beyond the two guards also facing the door.

Billy lifted his gun cautiously, hating to do what he must. But this, he told himself grimly, was no time for tenderness.

He brought the gun barrel down sharply atop one guard's head. The fellow wilted with a grunt, and his companion turned with a startled oath to find himself staring into a cocked .45 that was backed by a pair of coldly blazing eyes.

"Make a sound," Billy warned, "an' I'll let lamplight through yuh! Buck! Joe! Get the guns these jaspers have been usin'! Quick, yuh two!"

Buck and Joe had whirled, to stand staring. But they came to life at Billy's sharp order. The second guard had lifted his hands slowly, fear in his eyes. Buck and Joe sailed down the room and, a moment later, had two guns apiece.

"Now, by heifers, we'll smoke this hull outfit!" Buck roared. "We'll git——"

"Quiet!" Billy warned fiercely. "Pipe down, Buck, an' slide around behind this counter!"

Buck would have argued, if Joe Scott had not grabbed him and hustled him around behind the counter. Billy glanced sidewise at the pair—and the guard he had been covering ducked.

"Hey, boss!" the fellow screamed wildly. "Back inside, yuh fellers!"

Men twisted about at the doorway—and oaths lifted wildly.

Billy, Buck, and Joe were racing along behind the counter, heading for the kitchen. But guns began hammering, and bullets made them duck low.

Billy reached the kitchen doorway first, started through. But he saw a man framed in the back door—a

gangly, horse-faced jasper who was whipping up a pair of guns.

Billy fired, saw "Horse-face" fold up like an empty sack, and leaped over him. Buck and Joe were right at Billy's heels, and the three of them darted down the backs of the buildings, disregarding the fact that they might stumble over boxes or other bits of rubbish.

The wind had lessened somewhat, but snow and sleet were falling harder. Billy heard muffled sounds from behind, and knew that the Tumbling T cutthroats were trying to follow him and his pards.

But Billy was more concerned right now with locating that old shed than anything else. The pelting snow and sleet made him uncertain as to directions, for he had the sensation of being completely lost. But he found the shed at last and lurched inside, Buck and Joe following.

"What in tarnation we runnin' fer?" Buck snarled as soon as he could gulp a breath. "We ort ter stay an' smoke them snakes, thet's what."

"We're headin' out o' here fast as we can," Billy growled. "Lady Luck shore smiled on us, or we'd all three be buzzard bait by now."

"I'll say Lady Luck smiled on us!" Joe Scott chuckled grimly. "If that fight hadn't started, Billy, yuh never could 'a' got us out o' that mess. Where's the Conrad youngster?"

"Home," Billy clipped, and told briefly why he had to come back and try rescuing his pards single-handed. "But that's all over now," he finished. "With this storm raisin' Cain, they can't foller us. We'll ride past the Boxed C for Sing Lo, then drift on over the mountains before we get into another jack pot."

Mounted, the three Montana waddies rode into the storm, humped against the driving blast of wind and

sleet. Talk was impossible in the storm, so the three punchers rode in silence, galloping mile after mile into the raw wind.

As they traveled, uneasiness took root in Billy's mind. He kept trying vainly to pierce the storm-swept night with straining eyes, for it had occurred to him that he was traveling unfamiliar ground.

Just how he knew, Billy was not certain. Perhaps it was the fact that they climbed hills and dipped into ravines too often. Or perhaps he could tell from Danger's gait that they were not following a trail, as they should have done. At any rate, Billy became convinced that he and his pards were lost.

He reined in finally, stopping in the lee of a ridge.

"Looks like we've blundered off the trail, boys," he called through chattering teeth. "An' there's no tellin' where we've wandered to."

"An' we don't dast build a fire, 'cause them Tumblin' T snakes will likely be out lookin' fer us," Joe Scott croaked hoarsely. "I didn't think it ever snowed down hyar in this desert country."

"It don't snow often, at that," Billy answered. "By noon to-morrow, the ground will be bare. No snow ever stays on the ground long down this low. Listen!"

From somewhere upwind came the dull pounding of shod hoofs over stony earth. The sound lasted only briefly, but the Circle J pards knew that riders had passed mighty close to them.

"Some o' Tyrone's gang, I'll bet," Joe Scott snorted when the sound died away. "What we gonna do, Billy?"

"Keep ridin'," the Circle J boss said. "That'll beat settin' here freezin' by inches. Come on!"

He led the way up over the ridge

then, swinging slightly so that the wind did not beat so squarely into their faces. And for hours that seemed like days, the three Montana waddies moved through the night, dismounting to walk when they were too cold.

The storm ceased finally, and when the blackness of night gave way to the murky light of coming day, the weary-eyed cowboys looked out over a weird white world that lay cold and still about them. The clouds were already thinning, seeming to retreat to the great peaks of a mountain range far to the north.

"Sun will be out in an hour or so, an' that'll help some," Billy muttered through stiff lips. "Now, if we can get our bearin's—— Say, look yonder!"

Buck and Joe followed the direction of Billy's pointing hand. Below them in a little swale sat a snug-looking adobe house, ridiculously draped in fluffy snow. A rusty stove-pipe lifted above the little lean-to that had been built onto the adobe. A column of pale wood smoke poured from it.

"A nester's place, shore as shoot-in'!" Joe Scott cried. "Billy, I reckon Lady Luck is still on our side."

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck Foster snarled. "So yuh think it's good luck ter romp around all night in a fool blizzard, do yuh?"

Joe Scott was too overjoyed at seeing possible shelter to argue, however. Spurring up beside Billy, Joe rode stirrup to stirrup with his boss down the slant and into the swale. They halted before the cabin, and Billy's voice lifted in a hail.

Sudden sounds came from within, yet the door did not open. Wondering a little at that, Billy and Joe dismounted and walked to the door. Buck Foster was at their heels,

coughing croupily and muttering under his breath.

Billy hammered the door with cold knuckles. After a long pause, sounds again came from within the cabin. Then a muffled voice bade them come in.

Billy lifted the latch, and he and his pards stepped into a snugly warm room that held the pleasant odors of cooking food.

After the snow glare of the world outside, the three Montana cowboys were unable to see at first. A hoarse chuckle sounded, and as their eyes became adjusted, they saw five men before them.

The foremost man was Flash Tyrone, grinning horribly down the barrels of his twin guns.

"Gosh! I shore couldn't 'a' asked fer nothin' better than this!" Flash Tyrone snarled. "Yuh mangy coyotes——"

Billy waited to hear no more. More nimble-minded than his pards, Billy saw instantly that some queer trick of Fate had led him straight into a death trap. One look into Tyrone's bloodshot eyes was enough to convince Billy that he and his pards were slated for sudden death.

Billy leaped, his cold-numbed hand flashing down to the butt of his gun. His left fist caught Flash Tyrone on the cheek, spinning him.

Before the burly rascal could right himself and fire, Billy clipped him across the temple with the barrel of his Colt. Tyrone wilted, and Billy side-stepped another man who rushed at him. The fellow stopped short, slammed a shot at Billy, and swore luridly as a slug from Billy's gun found his chest.

The cabin was full of roaring voices and smashing guns now, for Buck and Joe had gone into action. Billy half turned to see how his pards were faring—and dropped from a

slug that left his whole left arm and shoulder numb.

He fired at the flash of the gun, felt another bullet rip the skin along his neck and jaw, and fired again.

Buck and Joe hurtled past him, whooping shrilly behind blazing guns. Buck seemed to trip, tumbled to his knees. Joe Scott lurched, caught his balance, then stopped dead-still to fire deliberately at the only remaining foe.

Billy got to his knees, saw a wounded man lifting a gun to fire at Joe's back, and sent a slug crashing into the wounded jasper's hand.

Joe whirled, grinned through a mask of crimson. His forehead was furrowed, and the red-headed Montana waddy was having trouble keeping his eyes clear.

"Danged if thet skunk didn't nail me through the laig!" Buck Foster's voice lifted angrily. "By heifers, Joe Scott, yuh hogged the deal an' beat me out o' revengin' meself. I'll git——"

"Listen!" Billy cried. "Watch out, boys! Hossbackers pourin' into the yard!"

Billy gained his feet, stuffed his dangling left hand and wrist inside his shirt front, and began clumsily trying to reload his hot gun. Joe Scott saw, and came to Billy's aid. Gruff voices came from outside. Then a fist hammered the door.

"Steady, out there!" Billy warned grimly. "First man through that door gets a slug for breakfast!"

"West!" a voice yelled back. "Take it easy, son. This is Tom Conrad!"

Billy grinned wanly, crossed the room, and yanked the door open. Tom Conrad and his cowboys stood there in the yard. They were a weary-looking lot, and all wore crude bandages.

"What in blazes?" Billy cried.

"Conrad, yuh an' yore boys look like yuh had tangled with a cyclone."

"West, I'll never forgive myself fer actin' the way I did last night," Conrad said hoarsely. "After yuh left, an' I had time to think a minnit, I seen what a rotten trick I had played. So I got the boys, an' we rode after yuh fast as we could go."

"An' what a sweet mix-up we got into!" A Boxed C waddy grinned. "We hit town, an' them Tumblin' T gunnies hit us. But we shore give most o' that outfit their needin's."

"Tyrone an' four o' his outfit got away," Tom Conrad growled. "We've been huntin' the skunks all night, but I reckon it's no use. This storm—— What the——"

Billy stepped aside, and Tom Conrad looked into the room. The Boxed C men poured in then, guns out and covering the two Tumblin' T men who were sitting up, swearing over bullet wounds that burned their flesh.

"My boys an' me stumbled in here by accident," Billy explained, and told briefly of being lost all night. "These gents started a ruckus, so we sung 'em a Montana gun song."

"Man alive!" Tom Conrad grinned suddenly. "I shore hope yuh gents don't ever decide to sing me yore gun song. I don't want to hear even the chorus."

"Too bad Flash Tyrone got off so easy," a chunky Boxed C cowboy growled. "Some of his men that we rounded up in town have talked to a bunch o' honest citizens. We had enough on Tyrone to see the law hang him legal."

Billy nodded grimly, stepped over to Flash Tyrone, and prodded him sharply with one boot toe. Tyrone grunted, rolled over, then sat up. He tenderly felt the lump over his temple where Billy's gun barrel had landed, then began swearing in

genuine alarm as he glanced about the room.

"I batted him to sleep with my gun instead o' shootin' him," Billy explained. "I reckon he's yore bear meat now, Conrad."

"L-listen, Conrad!" Flash Tyrone gulped. "I—I'm quittin' the country, savvy? I—I found out that dam I built is on State land an' has to be tore down. Yuh—yuh wouldn't——"

"I wouldn't soil my hands by givin' yuh what yuh've got comin'," Tom Conrad snarled. "But the law will, Tyrone. Yore men talked. Outside o' doin' at least two murders, besides burnin' that nester family to death, yuh ain't got much to answer for."

"Yo're right," Billy agreed.

"I'm glad yuh Montana waddies didn't include this whelp in yore gun music," Tom Conrad told Billy a moment later. "Tyrone needs time to set in a cell an' think while he waits fer a noose to crack his neck bones—which will shore happen."

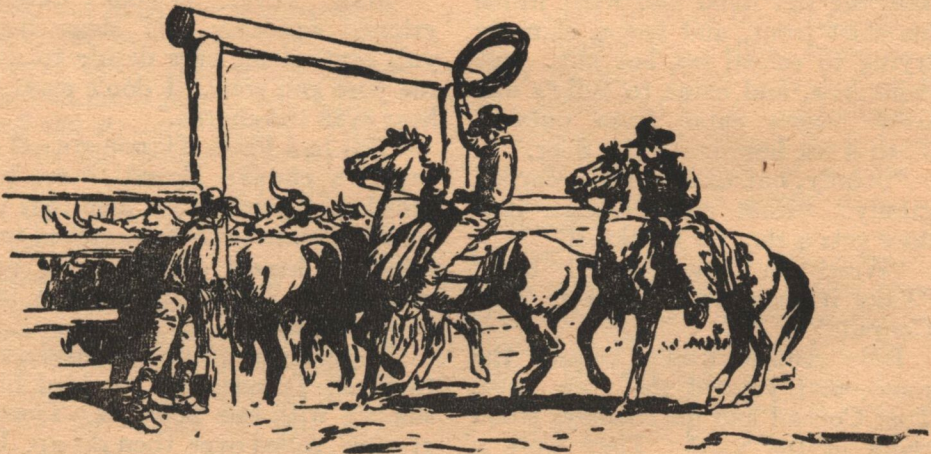
"Huh!" Buck Foster snorted loudly. "I knowed all along he was a plumb ornery critter an' needed hangin'. I told yuh that yistiddy, Billy."

"Fer once, ol' sheep-herder, yuh was right!" Joe Scott growled.

But the way Joe said that was certainly no compliment, and Buck lit into him for fair, while the Boxed C men began backing uneasily away.

"Don't mind that pair," Billy chuckled. "Gather up these three prisoners, Conrad, an' we'll be ridin'. Buck an' Joe will keep that jawin' match up for a week if anybody acts like they're interested in it."

It's a cinch thet an hombre like Flash Tyrone would send Circle J on a rampage. All he'd have ter do ter git Billy West an' his pards started would be ter pull one mean trick on Tom Conrad. But ter pull them stunts one after another—waal thet shore did make them Montana waddies hit leather an' yank smoke poles. An' thet's what they'll be a-doin' right lively in the next Circle J story. Watch fer it in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



# For Murdering The Sheriff

A MAN named Jansen had been beaten up and robbed in San Francisco, and shortly after, a stranger, who said his name was Burdue, was arrested and accused of the assault and robbery. He was identified by Mr. Jansen as the man who had attacked him and lifted his wallet.

While Burdue was in jail awaiting sentence, other men came along and identified him as one James Stuart, a confirmed criminal, who had murdered a sheriff at Marysville, where he had been duly tried in the courts and condemned to hang.

So to Marysville the stranger was taken, and in spite of his denials, he was identified there by several persons as the James Stuart who had murdered the sheriff, and had made his get-away. But some members of the vigilance committee thought the man was telling the truth, and believed that he really was Burdue, and that it was a case of mistaken identity. Then it was decided to hold him for a while until all doubt should be cleared up.

While this matter was under consideration, a trunk containing valuables was stolen from a house in San Francisco. The owner started out on a hunt for the trunk and the thief.

On the outskirts of the city he came across a man who was loitering around as if he had nowhere to go. The seeker of the lost trunk asked him some questions, and, finding that he could not give a satisfactory account of himself, he took

him to the rooms of the vigilance committee.

The loiterer gave his name as Stevens, and said he was glad to have an opportunity to see how the vigilance committee worked, as he had heard a great deal about it, and was interested in its doings.

The committee was composed of men from all walks of life, and the man who was appointed to guard Stevens was a miner, one John Sullivan, who had worked in the mines with the James Stuart who had murdered the sheriff. As soon as Sullivan saw the prisoner Stevens, he immediately told the committee that he recognized him as the Jim Stuart he had know in the mines. He further added that he had seen Jim escape from the lynchers who were going to string him up for murdering the sheriff.

Other miners who had known the real Jim Stuart were rounded up, and when the man was confronted with a bunch of his old acquaintances, he made a full confession. After that, he was taken out and hanged.

Then Mr. Burdue, who was so unfortunate as to bear a striking resemblance to the murderer, was set free with many apologies. It was found that his only crime was being a stranger in San Francisco without a friend to help him prove his identity. He was congratulated on his narrow escape from a swift and tragic exit from this world, and was sent on his way rejoicing.





# Calamity Buys Trouble

By Lee Bond

Author of "The Oklahoma Kid's Rustler Cure," etc.

**R**EINING his dun cow horse to a skidding stop, "Calamity" Boggs squinted keen black eyes at the weathered sign which had been tacked to the trunk of a gnarled mesquite. The sign was only a piece of rough board, roughly sharpened at one end so that it pointed down a trail which turned right from the main trail.

"Snake Track—5 Mile" was all the sign said.

Calamity Boggs shivered in every inch of his big, powerfully muscled body. His ruggedly molded face settled into an expression rivaling that of a bloodhound for misery and gloom.

"Snake Track!" Calamity's voice

lifted in a note of utter despair. "Pard, a town with a name like that is bound to be onhealthy. An' me, with the awful luck I allus have, will die thar—die afore the sun goes down!"

"Shorty" Stevens had wandered along the ragged edges of civilization with Calamity Boggs long enough to know that the big waddy seldom, if ever, had a cheerful thought. And there were times when Calamity's moaning got under Shorty's skin. And this was one of those times.

It had been almost two weeks since the wandering pair had seen anything that even resembled a town. Shorty was anxious to get

into a town, see and talk with people. But here was Calamity, fussing because the town which they could reach very soon, happened to be named Snake Track.

Shorty was a bantam-sized, bow-legged waddy, with snapping gray eyes and the quick-trigger temper of a bobcat.

"Aw, fer Pete's sake, Calamity, stop bellyachin' an' let's move on!" he snapped. "Dang it, don't yuh ever think o' nothin' cheerful?"

"How could a feller in my boots be cheerful?" Calamity sniffed. "Yuh know as well as I do, pard, that the signs is all agin' me, an' that I'm due to die horrible any time. This hyar Snake Track town will be my last stoppin' place. Wait an' see!"

"Aw, rats!" Shorty growled, and threw the hooks to his roan.

He rode past Calamity and turned down the Snake Track trail, muttering under his breath. But Shorty was not the sort to stay peeved very long. He reined up within a mile, and sat grinning ruefully at Calamity, who was tagging along behind, slumped in the saddle as if he were ready to draw his last breath.

"What in blazes is wrong with yuh?" Shorty demanded, as Calamity rode up. "Yuh look like somethin' the undertaker ought to be fixin' up fer burial."

"That's jist what's goin' to happen!" Calamity groaned. "I got a misery in my stummick, pard, that means my finish. I tell yuh we should keep away from that Snake Track town. Besides, I seen a couple fellers with rifles in their hands watchin' us while we read that sign."

"Huh?" Shorty gasped, suddenly alert.

Shorty knew that despite Calamity's moaning and glooming, he was

one of the keenest-witted hombres in the West. Calamity was an expert with either rifle or six-gun, though to hear him talk, a stranger would think that he could not hit the side of a barn.

Calamity had spotted danger back there at the fork of the trail. Shorty could have booted him for not mentioning it before.

"Yuh—yuh big moose!" the peppery little waddy cried. "If yuh seen some jaspers that acted like they was honin' fer trouble, why didn't yuh tell me?"

"That's right, bawl me out when I'm likely dyin' in the saddle!" Calamity groaned. "Anyway, them two is follerin' us, keepin' off in the bresh over yonder."

"Yuh make me sick!" Shorty raved. "Where are the two snakes that are skulkin' along after us? Lead the way, yuh groanin' critter, an' we'll give 'em a chance to show what——"

Shorty never finished, for at that moment a bullet came hissing over his head, whining drearily as it winged its way on into the desert.

Shorty ducked instinctively, his hands ripping twin guns from oiled holsters that were thonged to his saddle-warped thighs.

Shorty heard a grunt, looked around, and forgot about replying to that shot. Calamity Boggs had flung his hands high and was toppling forward. He hit the dirt limply, bounced once, then lay still.

"That skunk got my pard!" Shorty yelled shrilly, and spurred his roan.

It was typical of Shorty Stevens that he did not bother to think of the odds. He rode straight toward a ridge from which he had seen a pale smudge of powder smoke lift into the air. Shorty's guns were cocked and ready for action, and

there were blazing lights in his puckered eyes.

No more shots came, however, and the little waddy knew before he reached the top of the ridge that the bushwhacker had taken to his heels. But Shorty did not slacken his mad pace. He topped the ridge, swung a glance right and left, and let out a shrill, exultant whoop.

Just swarming over another ridge ahead of him were two riders who plied quirts and spurs unmercifully. Shorty sent a pair of slugs screaming at the two, though he knew the range was too great.

"Stop an' fight, yuh snakes!" he yelled, then sent his horse plunging down through a brushy draw and up the opposite hill.

From the top he spied the two men again, and an exultant grin stretched his lips. They were just reining in before a cabin, which stood well back under a grove of leafless cottonwood trees that grew in the heart of a fertile little basin.

Shorty pulled his roan back hastily, circled along the brow of the hill until he was near the point which looked off into the basin, then dismounted.

"Shoot my pard an' then high-tail it, will they?" Shorty gritted hotly. "I'll show that pair a thing or two!"

He slid down into some brush, got to the bottom of the hill, and worked his way out into the basin. He became cautious now, moving slowly from cover to cover, peering toward the little adobe shack at every opportunity.

He could see no one, yet Shorty Stevens knew that those two men who had just gone into the shack must now be watching for him.

"They'll be watchin' from the front, so's they kin see that ridge up yonder," he gritted. "An' that's where I out-fox 'em."

Shorty circled until he was behind the adobe shack, then began closing in. He darted from the last fringe of brush, raced to the back door, and without further ceremony yanked it open with his left hand, right hand holding a cocked gun.

Within the gloomy room, Shorty saw dim figures moving jerkily.

"Hold it, yuh snakes!" he barked, leaping inside with both guns now ready for action. "First man makes a bad move——"

*Bra-aa-ng!* *Wham!* Two guns roared within that small room, filling it with the thunder of their explosions.

Just inside the doorway Shorty Stevens stopped, came slowly up to his toes, then pitched forward, guns tumbling from limp fingers.

His Stetson rolled away over the floor, and from his sandy mop of hair trickled a sluggish streak of crimson that pooled slowly beside his head on the floor.

## II.

The two men who had spun at the sound of Shorty's entrance through the back door stood staring down at him now, their guns still held ready for action.

One of them was a sallow, beady-eyed gent who showed pearly teeth in a snarl as he slithered forward.

"I'm goin' to make shore o' this snake, boss!" he rasped. "That ol' buzzard yonder wa'n't lyin', after all, about havin' some gun-swift friends comin' ter help him buck us."

"Wait!" the other fellow rasped. "Tony Ward, yuh an' yore danged killin's will git us into trouble yit. If that cuss ain't finished off, we kin mebbe make him talk some."

The speaker was a huge, rawboned man, with a small, bullet-shaped head rising queerly above powerful

shoulders. His squinted, gray-green eyes flamed coldly as he holstered twin guns, stepped forward, and yanked the man he had called Tony Ward back roughly.

"Luke Prout, yuh an' Tony Ward will pay fer this!" a reedy voice crackled out suddenly. "Blast yore hides, the law'll take a hand when they find out yuh drilled this stranger."

"Stranger?" Luke Prout cried, swinging his huge body around with surprising speed.

There on a wall bunk lay a frowzy-looking old hombre, who stared up at the two toughs in the room out of watery eyes that were bulging with fright.

"Jud Long, yuh told us yuh had some gun-slingin' friends comin'," Luke Prout snarled. "Tony an' me have been watchin' the trail since last night, hopin' to spot them fellers yuh said was comin'."

"We did spot 'em, too!" Tony Ward snarled thinly. "This sawed-off cuss an' a big waddy come down the trail, a while ago, actin' like they was strangers in the country. But I got the big cuss with a lucky long-range shot."

"An' one o' us got the little runt jist now, looks like," Luke Prout snarled. "Long, mebbe yuh see now, that I ain't bluffin'. Sign over this hyar Sycamore Springs that yuh squatted on an' quit the country."

"Yo're too easy, boss!" Tony Ward snarled. "This ol' buzzard squatted on our best water, blast him, an' has proved up on the claim while yuh chawed the rag like a old woman. If it was me, I'd——"

"Shet up!" Luke Prout snarled. "Yo're ramrod o' the Lazy S, Tony, but I still own it. The way I run it is my own affair."

"All right! All right!" Tony growled. "Jist the same, I say we

ought to finish ol' Jud off, blast his hide!"

"There's been too much killin' already!" Prout roared. "That danged sheriff will come pokin' up hyar from Tucson ter find out who killed these two strangers. We better——"

"Yuh two better stand right still, an' start liftin' yore hands!" came a deep, gloomy voice. "O' course, this ol' cannon o' mine is all bent, the shells cankered, an' there's dirt in the barrel. But the fool thing might let go, if I was to pull the trigger right sudden."

Luke Prout and his foreman stiffened, for there in the doorway stood Calamity Boggs, black eyes blazing dangerously.

But Luke Prout and Tony Ward did not know Calamity. They recognized him as the big stranger who had ridden down the trail with the little waddy who lay there on the floor, and that was all.

From Calamity's voice and looks, they made the mistake that many other tough customers had made when they went up against Calamity. They saw him only as a thick-witted puncher, who had no better sense than to admit that his gun was not in working order.

The sight of that gun should have warned the evil pair that Calamity was simply spoofing them. But they prided themselves on being tough hands, and were known to brag about their speed in handling guns.

Tony Ward's beady eyes became red-looking in the dim light of the little shack. He settled slowly into a crouch, thin, sinewy hands hovering over gun butts instead of lifting as Calamity had commanded.

Luke Prout, seeing that his gun-swift foreman was ready to go into action, decided that the big, gloomy-voiced cow-puncher was just the

same as dead. But Luke Prout found himself suddenly wanting to make sure that the big waddy cashed in his chips.

And thinking that, Prout's huge, hair-matted hands drifted toward the guns he wore in low-slung holsters.

"Look out, stranger!" Jud Long wheezed. "Them two is fixin' ter sallivate yuh."

"O' course, they are!" Calamity's voice sounded as if he were ready to sob. "They'll git me, too, an' I'll die slow an' awful, right hyar in yore shack. But I see my pard, yonder, is comin' out o' it. Mebbe he kin help me some."

Luke Prout and Tony Ward swung quick glances at Shorty Stevens, who was beginning to grunt and roll around. They realized that the little waddy had only been creased. They also realized that they would have two men instead of one to deal with, if they let the little puncher regain his wits.

"Gun 'im!" Luke Prout squalled suddenly. "Smoke that big bag o' gloom, Tony, then——"

*Wham! Braang! Bang-bang!* Four shots rattled out with such rapidity that the sound was one long-drawn explosion.

Luke Prout and his gun-swift foreman were doing crazy jigs, each pawing at bullet-ripped ears.

Their hands had swooped in draws that had never failed them before. Yet before their guns could clear leather and tilt up they were screaming in pain, for that gloomy-voiced waddy was actually ripping their ears from their heads with snarling lead.

The evil pair stopped their wild dance now, to stand shaking in their boots, oaths pouring from twisting lips.

"We—we're ruined, Tony!" Luke

Prout moaned. "My ears is both tore off, and so are yores. We're branded fer life."

"Yup, yo're ruined." Calamity Boggs grinned sourly at the pair. "Them awful wounds will git infected, an' yuh two will die horrible with fits, chawin' yore tongues as yuh die."

The evil pair almost collapsed at that encouraging report. But Calamity seemed not to see them any longer. He sidled past them, stooped, and lifted Shorty Stevens as if the little waddy weighed only a few pounds.

Calamity shook his little pard sharply, then Shorty began struggling, snarling through locked teeth. He stopped struggling after a moment, blinked up at Calamity, then grinned feebly, standing on his own feet now.

"Gosh, pard, I thought yuh was drilled!" Shorty chuckled hoarsely. "The way yuh fell——"

"Jist scairt, that's all!" Calamity sniffed. "That bullet missed me complete. But I'm a nervous wreck an' faint awful easy."

Boots crashed over the floor, then from outside came the sudden rattle of shod hoofs as two horses left at a run.

"Yuh fool!" old Jud Long raved. "Stand thar gabbin' while them two coyotes git away!"

### III.

Shorty Stevens made a wobbly run for the door, snarling angrily as he realized that the two men who had shot him down actually were escaping. But Shorty was too late to do anything about it. Luke Prout and Tony Ward were already crashing into the brush, flogging their horses with quirts and raking them with spurs.

Shorty turned back into the cabin, intending to bawl Calamity out for being so careless. But Shorty forgot about that. Calamity was bending over Jud Long, who was securely roped to the bunk. Calamity got the bonds loose, helped the frowzy-looking old fellow up, then stepped back.

"Who are yuh two?" Jud Long growled, and there was anything but graciousness in his voice.

Shorty Stevens scowled. It seemed to him that Jud Long might have been a little thankful for the fact that he was being set free.

"We're just a couple o' driftin' punchers," Shorty snapped. "And it looks like our driftin' this way got yuh out o' a lot o' trouble, feller."

"Blasted cow-nurses, hey?" the watery-eyed old codger snarled thinly. "Waal, yuh kin jist drift some more. I ain't passin' out no free meals ter yore stripe."

"Why, yuh ongrateful ol' scorpion!" Shorty snarled. "Who asked yuh fer a handout, huh? Calamity an' me have got enough hard cash on us to buy anything we want. We ain't chuck-line riders by a long shot."

"Yeah, I'll bet yuh've got all o' ten bucks between yuh!" Jud Long rasped. "Git, cow-nurses! I hate every blasted one o' yuh. I settled hyar jist ter show that blasted Luke Prout that he don't own land jist 'cause his cattle graze it a few years."

"Ten bucks!" Shorty ranted. "Yuh ol' he-goat, my pard an' me are packin' enough hard money to buy us a good spread any time we git tired o' driftin'. We——"

"What? What's that?" Jud Long gasped suddenly. "Yuh mean yuh've got mebbe six hundred dollars, say?"

"Six hundred!" Shorty snorted, too angry to realize that he was

being pumped. "We've got that many thousand atween us, or mighty close to it. An' it's honest dinero, yuh ol' buzzard!"

"Heh-heh-heh!" Jud Long cackled shrilly. "Young feller, I was jist tryin' ter git yore dander up, that's all."

Through the whole conversation Calamity Boggs had stood quietly, keen eyes studying Jud Long's face. Calamity saw venomous hate mirrored in the old man's watery eyes, and was trying to puzzle it out.

Then on learning that the pards had ready cash on them, the old fellow changed instantly. Calamity saw cunning replace the hate in Jud Long's eyes, and knew that the old fellow was up to something foxy.

"Come on, Calamity!" Shorty Stevens barked suddenly. "We've wasted enough time with this ongrateful ol' lizard already."

"Wait!" Jud Long cried thinly. "Yuh boys hold on a minute. I don't want yuh ter leave feelin' huffed. Would yuh mebbe be interested in buyin' this spread o' mine?"

"Buy this measly layout?" Shorty cried indignantly. "Say, what do yuh think we are, plumb green-horns?"

"Now wait!" Jud Long pleaded. "This hyar section is plumb fine, an' the two springs out back o' the house has never been knowed to go dry. Yuh could raise——"

"We could raise Gila monsters an' fan-tailed goats!" Shorty Stevens butted in angrily. "This place ain't worth a whoop. Besides, them gents that was here don't seem like they wanted anybody on this place."

"Luke Prout is licked," Jud Long almost screeched. "I've got tittle ter this land now, an' Prout an' his hull Lazy S outfit can't oust me or anybody else from the place. It's a good place ter live, too."

"Save yore breath, ol'-timer!" Shorty snorted. "My pard an' me are amblin'."

"Shorty, Mr. Long is mebbe right!" Calamity Boggs drawled suddenly. "This is a fine place an' would be jist what I've been wantin'. With my days numbered like they are, I ought to have a home—a last restin' place."

Shorty stared in amazement. Calamity's face was set into serious lines. His tone was the tone of a man who is deadly serious.

"Mr. Long," Calamity spoke again, "how much would yuh want fer this hyar spread?"

Old Jud Long was rubbing his thin hands together rapidly, a gleam of excitement in his pale eyes. "Why—er—why, I reckon two thousand would take it," he gurgled. "O' course, that's less than the place is wuth. But seein'— Hey, what's the matter?"

Calamity had given his big head a slow shake, turned, and started toward the door. He stopped as Long's voice lifted into a wail of alarm.

"That's too much, Mr. Long," Calamity grunted. "I'd pay five hundred cash fer a place like this. But no more. So my pard an' me will amble, afore this misery in my stummick kills me hyar in yore house."

"Wait!" Jud Long screeched. "It—it's robbery, but yuh kin have the place. Give me the money, blast it! Give it hyar!"

Shorty Stevens stood there in dumfounded surprise, watching Calamity and Jud Long pore over papers, listening to them haggle and argue. But it was over at last, and Calamity strode from the room, pocketing a legal-looking document.

"Yuh—yuh crazy galoot!" Shorty gasped. "Calamity, what in tunket

did yuh do it fer? Don't yuh know yuh jist naturally bought trouble when yuh bought this flea-bit spread?"

"Shore I bought trouble!" Calamity moaned. "Pard, I'm an awful fool. Jist wait! I told yuh this Snake Track country would be my finish. That Prout feller will drill me, when I go tell him I bought this place!"

#### IV.

It was high noon when Shorty Stevens and Calamity Boggs rode into Snake Track town. The place was no more attractive than its name, and did, strangely enough, resemble a sleeping snake.

It had only one street, which curved around the base of a low hill and was flanked on either side by scaly, false-fronted buildings that seemed to crouch in shame at the filth of the street before them.

Calamity and Shorty rode to the center of the town, dismounted, and stalked into a restaurant, where the "misery" in Calamity's stomach was promptly attended to. Having eaten their fill, the pards strolled outside, eying the rather salty-looking citizens who lounged in open doorways or strolled along the plank sidewalks.

Shorty Stevens still wore a worried scowl and kept shooting side-long glances up at Calamity. Shorty knew very well that Calamity was up to something, yet could not figure what it was.

Calamity certainly had not bought that Jud Long property without some mighty good reason for doing so. But what could that reason be?

Shorty fumed and fretted, but refrained from asking questions. He was about to weaken, however, when he spied two men up ahead, who had

just come down a rickety set of stairs.

"Say, that's the two snakes I tangled with!" Shorty cried tensely. "I mean the ones that creased me when I busted into Jud Long's shack. How come their heads all wrapped up?"

"I nicked their ears some when I got there," Calamity grunted. "O' course, it was jist lucky, hittin' their ears the way I did. Now they'll likely report me to the law, an' I'll git strung up fer attempted murder! The signs, pard, is shore agin' me!"

Shorty was about to answer, but Calamity went on after a short pause, explaining who the two men were. Shorty had been unconscious, and did not know until now that Luke Prout was a local ranchman and that Tony Ward was his foreman.

"So yuh see how it is," Calamity finished. "I've bought trouble, like yuh said. Them two will drill me, an' I'll never git to raise no cattle on the place I bought."

"Cattle!" Shorty clipped peevishly. "Calamity, that range ain't wuth two bits. The water——"

Shorty broke off sharply, for down the street Luke Prout and Tony Ward had stopped, staring in open hate at the two punchers. Calamity and Shorty moseyed on until they were within a pace or two of the hot-eyed pair, then halted.

"Howdy, gents!" Calamity rumbled. "O' course, I won't live long, but while I do live I'll be yore neighbor. I bought out ol' Jud Long."

As if to prove his statement, Calamity produced the legal-looking paper and held it open a moment for the evil pair to study.

"Me, I'm Calamity Boggs!" the big waddy grunted. "An' this little feller is my pard, Shorty Stevens. I thought we ought to be knowed to our neighbors, so——"

"Hornin' in, hey?" Luke Prout snarled. "Boggs, yuh bought that place jist ter spite me!"

"Listen, yuh big ape!" Tony Ward growled. "I'm tellin' yuh an' that sawed-off skunk with yuh that I'm gunnin' yuh, see?"

"What's holdin' yuh?" Shorty Stevens rasped harshly. "Yuh saller-faced son of a wire-haired skunk, start hookin' at them smokers if yuh feel lucky."

"Hold it!" Calamity cut in. "Prout, yuh had no business roughin' ol' Jud Long up like yuh did. He had a right to homestead that land if he wanted."

There was no good-natured gloom in Calamity's voice now, and Shorty Stevens forgot his own quarrel with Tony Ward. When Calamity forgot to be gloomy, something was due to happen.

"Who's business is it how I tend ter things?" Luke Prout snarled. "I should 'a' killed that ol' skunk like Tony wanted to, that's what!"

"Mebbe," Calamity suggested quietly, "yuh'll try thet on me, huh?"

Luke Prout blinked, darting a sidelong glance at Tony Ward. The pair had drunk freely of Snake Track's whisky before going to have their torn ears mended by the local sawbones. The liquor had bolstered them up, filled them with false courage.

"If yuh don't clear out o' that place o' Long's by noon to-morrer, I'll bring my hull crew over ter settle with yuh!" Prout snarled. "I tried ter keep from doin' any killin', but yuh've forced it on me, Boggs."

"Did yuh ever try buyin' what yuh want?" Calamity Boggs growled hoarsely.

A crowd was forming swiftly, and it was not hard to see that most of the men present were on Luke

Prout's side of the argument. Tony Ward began grinning thinly, and let his slim hands drop to the butts of his guns.

"I did try to buy ol' Jud Long out!" Prout snarled. "But he wouldn't sell, no more than yuh aim to. I'll——"

"Shore," Calamity cut in, "I'll sell. I paid ol' Jud Long five hundred dollars for his spread, jist to keep the stubborn ol' fool from gittin' his self killed by yuh or some o' yore crowd. If yuh want thet range, I'll sell it to yuh fer jist what I paid."

Luke Prout blinked, glancing about hastily. Then a cunning light came into his evil eyes. "All right, feller!" he called loudly. "Yuh an' yore pard come on over ter the Owl Saloon. I'll buy yuh out, an' glad ter do it."

Shorty glanced quickly at Calamity, and saw that the big waddy was thinking the thing over carefully. Then Calamity nodded slowly, and Luke Prout led the way across the street to an evil-smelling, dive that was the Owl Saloon.

Prout stalked up the bar, grinned broadly at the dozen or more hard-looking men who lined the mahogany, then turned to a doughy-faced barkeep who came waddling up.

"Pete," Luke Prout addressed the barkeep, "open yore safe an' pass me out five hundred dollars o' that beef money I'm keepin' thar."

The barkeep grinned flabbily, waddled down the room and disappeared through a door marked "Private." He reappeared shortly a thick sheaf of bills in his fat hands. He handed the money to Luke Prout, who counted it out carefully where Calamity and Shorty could watch.

"Thar yuh are!" Prout chuckled hoarsely. "Now, sign over the papers, Boggs."

Calamity called for pen and ink, which the barkeep produced after considerable search. While Calamity scribbled on the papers, Shorty Stevens ran uneasy glances over the room.

Tony Ward was passing among the several tough-looking customers, whispering things from the corner of his ugly mouth. But Calamity had finished now, and was reaching for the stack of money.

"Jist a minute, Boggs!" Luke Prout snarled suddenly. "I've got the signed paper, which gives me that water I've been wantin', but yuh don't git that money, yuh nosey skunk! Touch it, an' yuh'll git blowed in two!"

## V.

A single glance showed Calamity and Shorty that they were covered by at least four guns. They looked briefly at each other, then turned their attention to Luke Prout, who was grinning evilly.

"Prout," Shorty snarled, "my pard saved yuh a lot o' trouble—saved yuh from killin' ol' Jud Long an' mebbe stretchin' rope fer doin' it. So this is the thanks he gits, is it?"

"He's got a chance ter git a but-let, if he wants it!" Luke Prout sneered. "Losin' five hundred will learn the skunk ter mind his own affairs."

"I knowed it!" Calamity moaned hoarsely. "Shorty, I told yuh this Snake Track town would be my finish. These gents will drill me, thet's certain."

"Not if yuh clear town an' stay clear o' this hull country," Luke Prout grinned evilly. "O' course, yuh'll have ter walk, 'cause them broncs yuh two been ridin' goes into my private string. An' I reckon

mebbe we better search yuh, in case yuh had more than five hundred dollars."

"Robbers, thet's what these gents are!" Calamity boomed as if greatly surprised. "Shorty, these fellers is plumb desperate. We—we better give 'em what money we got left an' high-tail!"

"That's the spirit!" Luke Prout cackled. "Ain't feelin' so danged smart now, are yuh, Boggs?"

"I never was smart!" Calamity moaned. "I've allus been dumb—so awful dumb I'm always in trouble. Hyar, I've got a money belt with dinero aplenty in it."

Calamity fumbled at his shirt front, snaked out a money belt, and stepped toward Luke Prout. The evil-eyed crew in the room gasped, for that money belt was bulging.

Luke Prout reached out—and went sailing up and back as if a bronc had thrown him. There came the dull sound of flesh striking flesh, and only then did the onlookers realize that Calamity Boggs had lifted Luke Prout up and back with a mighty uppercut.

Calamity spun, drove a fist into the face of the nearest man, then grabbed one end of the money belt in his teeth. At the same time a gun roared, and Calamity staggered, snarling hoarsely. He righted himself, and it seemed that a gun actually leaped into his right hand.

"Down the skunks!" Tony Ward screeched. "Come alive, yuh fools, afore—"

*Bra-aa-ng!* *Wham!* Tony Ward's voice was drowned out in the blast of his own guns.

Shorty Stevens whooped shrilly, drove a pair of slugs at Tony Ward, and saw the sallow killer sag weakly, hands clawing at his middle.

The others in the room were bunched, fighting each other for

elbow space. Shorty drove two slugs at the foremost man, who had drawn and was firing. Shorty felt the stinging breath of death on his sun-burned face, but the fellow who had fired the slug was down, tripping others.

Calamity's Colt boomed twice—and Luke Prout's men decided that they had had enough. Bunched as they were, Shorty and Calamity could not have missed.

Guns thumped the grimy floor, and hands began clawing at the ceiling. Calamity came out of his crouch, took one step forward—and fell headlong as a mighty blow caught him on the head.

Shorty Stevens shifted his right-hand gun, sent a slug smashing at the doughy-faced barkeep, who was dropping the bung starter with which he had walloped Calamity and reaching for a gun. Shorty missed, and the barkeep ducked out of sight, his gun out and ready for action.

Calamity Boggs lay motionless on the floor, half curled up, left hand outflung. Shorty fidgeted, tried to shift his position. But he dared not move too much, for those slit-eyed men of Luke Prout's would seize the slightest opportunity to get back into the fight.

Worst of all, Luke Prout was beginning to groan and was trying to sit up. With the barkeep creeping to some point where he could shoot at Shorty without being seen and Luke Prout coming out of it, the little waddy had more than he could handle.

"Calamity!" Shorty yelled shrilly. "Come alive, pard, an' give me a hand!"

*Wham! Wham!* Shorty jumped nervously, for the two explosions had come almost together.

He risked a side glance, then

grinned happily. Smoke was curling from Calamity's side. And down at the end of the bar, Shorty saw the doughy-faced barkeep spill slowly into view, an ominous black dot squarely between his evil eyes.

"I wouldn't, Prout!" Calamity's voice boomed suddenly. "Better drop it, skunk, afore——"

*Blam! Bra-aa-ng!* Two shots rang out once more, then a man's voice lifted in a thin, shrill scream.

Shorty glanced around once more, saw Calamity up and bending over Luke Prout, who had snatched a gun and tried smoking Calamity despite the warnings the big waddy had sounded.

"All right, pard, that will hold 'em!" Shorty chuckled. "Is Prout done fer?"

"Nope, he's still alive!" Calamity said mournfully. "Which means

thet as soon as he gits his shoulder cured, he'll come an' gun me down. I knowed this town would be my finish."

"Gather up yore money belt, yuh big moose, an' git that dinero off the bar," Shorty snapped. "We better drift while the driftin' is good."

"I've got the dinero an' my belt," Calamity rumbled. "But what good will it do me? These awful wounds in my side an' leg will fester up afore night, an' I'll die horrible somewhere out in the desert. The signs is shore agin' me, pard!"

The signs may all be agin' Calamity, like he says, but when he goes on the prod, said signs is plumb li'ble ter be set agin' the jasper thet Calamity's sore at. When the gloomy cuss gits all het up, a lot o' trouble is due ter pop, right pronto. Watch fer the next story about him. Yuh'll find it in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

BLOCK



DIAMOND

### TEXAS IS FAMOUS FOR METEORS

THERE are many ways of making money. Hunting meteors—and finding them—is one, if you are in Texas, for, according to accounts, the richest place in the world for this sort of hunting is the Lone Star State.

Professor Nininger, of the Colorado Museum of Natural History, pays one dollar a pound for any stray fragments of meteors that he can get hold of. Abernathy and the surrounding territory of Hale County, Texas, is his happy hunting ground.

Several years ago, one of the largest meteors known, the famous "Estacado," fell on the old Harrington place north of Abernathy. One fragment weighed six hundred and fifty pounds, and sold for five hundred dollars. Fragments of other

meteors were found at various times in the plains country, and when news of these happenings reached Professor Nininger, he decided to investigate.

He visited that section of Texas, and went to farms and ranches in his search for the treasures. He bought up all the fragments he could find, some of which were being used by the country folks as doorstops, to keep the doors open on warm days, to weigh down buckets in water troughs, and for any other purpose for which a lump of rock is handy.

Stray particles of meteors are still falling onto Texas soil, and the professor is still gathering them up, as he is anxious to have them as subjects for scientific study. There is no other use for them, but scientists and students prize them highly.



# Señor Red Mask On Bandit Butte

By Guy L. Maynard

Author of "Señor Red Mask Trails Trouble," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### THE LAST LAUGH.

**T**HE squat, stoop-shouldered cutthroat with the mat of greasy black beard on his hideously ugly face, jumped back into the mesquite thicket. At a bend of the rough trail, four sweating mules had just come into view, dragging a heavy stagecoach toward the spot where the six bushwhackers lay in wait. The money for the pay roll of the big Montezuma Mines was in the stage's strong-box.

"El Hiena" (the "Hyena")

WW-7A

chuckled evilly. His beady little eyes glittered greedily as he turned a shifty glance on the five hard-bitten crooks who clustered around him.

"Yonder eet comes, weeth only the driver an' one guard," the half-breed bandit leader whispered shrilly. "We weel shoot them first, then drop the mules. You understand?"

The gangsters nodded. Their hands went to the butts of the six-guns that each hombre carried in tied-down holsters.

"Jest like shootin' fish," gloated

a gangling, sandy-bearded gringo gunman. "Say the word when yo're ready, boss, an' I'll git both of them jaspers."

"Butch" Mingo took a lot of credit to himself for this job. It was the murderous American "border jumper" who had first learned of the shipment of money which was being made to the mines. By tipping off El Hiena, he had been taken into the latter's gang, and now stood high with his new companions.

"Nogales," a Mexican knifer, who was as vicious as a sidewinder, palmed a glittering cuchillo with an eight-inch razor-sharp blade. He was noted along the border for his uncanny ability to throw that knife with the speed and accuracy of a bullet.

"I weel take the guard," sneered Nogales, who was jealous of the boastful Butch Mingo. "Thees knife ees very fond of gringos."

El Hiena hissed a sharp demand for silence before Mingo could voice the angry retort that hovered on his suddenly snarling lips. One huge hairy hand of the crouching Hyena clutched the stock of a long-lashed bull whip which served him both as a weapon and as his favorite means of torturing luckless captives.

"Ready, hombres!" whispered El Hiena, peering through the lacy branches of the mesquite at the rapidly approaching stage. "Now, geeve eet to them!"

Like beasts of prey, the bandits sprang from cover. Their six-guns jerked up for the kill.

*Brang! Bang-bang!* The roaring .45s gave the driver and guard no time either to fight or surrender. Almost before they were aware of what was happening, both men slumped from their seats, dead or dying.

Another quick volley dropped the

frightened mules in a kicking, tangled mass.

"Hey—hey-y-y!" A shrill howl of triumph, like the weird laugh of a grave-robbing hyena, came from El Hiena, the bandit chief. The long lash of the great bull whip in his hand whizzed forward in an ear-splitting crack.

The lean-bodied Nogales was the first of the murderous gang to reach the victims. He coolly plucked his knife from the sprawled body of the dead guard and wiped its dripping blade on his leather *pantalones*.

"Deed I not say that my cuchillo had a liking for gringos, amigo?" Nogales asked with a taunting leer at Butch Mingo.

Butch reached down and quickly turned the body of the guard so that it faced the glaring Mexican sun overhead.

"Yuh see that?" he rasped at Nogales, pointing a grimy finger at a round hole between the guard's sightless eyes. "Waal, my slug got him afore yore danged pig-sticker did."

El Hiena suddenly thrust his hulking body between the two cut-throats.

"Stop thees foolish talk," he snarled out of his mat of black beard. "Get the strong-box out of the stage, pronto!"

Muttering oaths, gringo and Mexican turned to help their companions lift the heavy metal box down from the stage.

"Eet ees locked," said a panting half-breed, as the box was carried to one side of the trail. "How weel we open eet?"

"There ees no need to open eet here," rapped El Hiena. "We know that eet holds much dinero. Eet ees better that we pack the box on a stout horse an' take eet to our hang-out, queeck."

"Thet ain't a bad idea, boss," Butch Mingo agreed. "We got a fortune hyar, an' we'd ought ter git it safe from any prowling rurales afore we stop ter divvy it."

A sharp command from El Hiena sent two of the crooks hurrying into the chaparral for the hidden mounts of the gang. A heavy-muscled bay bronc was selected for pack service, and the strong-box was quickly lashed to its saddle with rawhide reatas. The bay's rider doubled up with another crook, and everything was in readiness for the get-away.

"Let's go, hombres!" cried El Hiena, clapping spurs to his big white bronc. "Hey—hey-y-y!"

The eerie, hyenalike laugh of the bandit chief came back in mocking tones as the vicious gang disappeared down a brushy draw. It roused a dying man to one last conscious moment.

Painfully raising himself on one elbow, the bullet-riddled stage driver gazed with glazing eyes after the departing cutthroats. Groaning, he feebly shook his fist and swore feebly. Then, as delirium seized him, he burst into wild laughter.

"Haw-haw-haw! I got—the last laugh—on yuh dirty thieves!" the driver gasped. "Yuh got a—a surprise—comin' ter yuh—when yuh open thet box!"

A crimson-tinged froth bubbled on the dying man's lips. With a low moan he sank back on the sun-baked ground and lay still.

## CHAPTER II.

### A TORN MESSAGE.

"Like the hawks of the Rio strike their prey, I ride the dim trails and outlaws slay!"

THE grim Spanish words of "Camino de Muerte" ("The Death Trail") rolled down a chaparral-dotted slope as the singer reined

up his mount on the crest of a rise. It was a favorite fighting song of the Mexican rurales, and it was well suited to the occasion which had brought "Señor Red Mask" into that forbidding, bandit-ridden bad lands.

The mysterious rider was a striking figure, mounted on a splendid black horse whose silver-mounted saddle and bridle flashed in the sunlight.

His youthful face, with its brown skin and tiny black mustache, was partly concealed by a scarlet silk half mask. His curly dark hair was covered by a massive, silver-trimmed black sombrero.

The caballero's slim, muscular body was garbed in the picturesque *charro* costume of old Mexico—black velvet jacket and tight-fitting *pantalones*, trimmed with bright silver buttons, conchas, and lacings. His boots were of soft black kid, spurred with jingling silver rowels of Spanish design.

Gazing out over the rough and desolate bad lands that stretched away from the rise on which he had halted, the caballero's dark eyes narrowed.

"Thet big hunk of red sandstone yonder is Bandit Butte," he muttered to himself. "An' there's a reason fer its name. This is jest the sort of country El Hiena would hide out in, pervidin' he didn't die from thet dose of hot lead he carried away after the last mix-up him an' me had."

Miles to the westward, in the heart of the bad lands, the great lone butte reared its sinister bulk—a landmark for the tough hombres who infested this evil country. Its very name came from the fact that outlaws from both sides of the border found a haven in its sheltering shadows.

Señor Red Mask, whose real name was Tom Goodwin, and who owned the Bar G Ranch on the American side of the Rio Grande, fished a torn scrap of paper from a pocket of his jacket. Glancing over the pencil-scrawled words of a message, he read:

"Tom: The Injuns say the sun is pure gold and the moon is silver. When they hid an eagle feather on the flat round top of a hill of red sandstone a bandit climbed the steep butte. He did not look fer the treasure in a cave of the canyon thet——"

The queer message ended abruptly, unfinished, on a ragged edge of the paper.

"Dog-gone the luck!" the young caballero exclaimed impatiently. "Losin' thet other piece of pore Jim's message shore messed things up fer me."

It was a cipher, left in a poke of gold nuggets by a young waddy named Jim Trent. Trent had discovered a rich mine of gold in the Mexican mountains, but had been forced to cache his treasure in vari-out out-of-the-way places along his homeward trail, to save it from the clutches of El Hiena.

Before he was finally caught and tortured to death by the outlaw, Jim Trent had sent a call for help to Tom Goodwin, his boyhood pal of the Verde Valley cattle range.

Reaching his friend too late, Tom Goodwin, or Señor Red Mask as he was known along the border, took a solemn oath to do two things for his murdered amigo: Bring the killer, El Hiena, to justice, and to secure the cached treasure for Jim's widowed mother.

While Red Mask had been unsuccessful, thus far, in downing the bandit chief, he had already recovered several of the pokes of gold. And in each one he had found a cipher message, to which he knew the se-

cret key, telling him where to find the next cache. This last message, however, had been torn and a small section of it lost.

The caballero shook his head hopelessly, after studying the scrawled words for a long moment.

"Readin' every fourth word, accordin' ter the code Jim give me, it says:

"The gold is hid on top of Bandit Butte. Look in the——"

Red Mask paused as he read the last word of the unfinished message, then added, "Look in what? There must be a thousand hidin' places fer a poke of gold on top of thet butte. I sure got a job on my hands ter solve the secret."

Returning the torn paper to his pocket, Red Mask was about to urge his mount down the slope, when he suddenly tensed in his saddle. The faint echo of gunshots had reached his ears.

"It's off to the south, a mile or so," he judged. "Somebody needin' help, mebbe. An' like as not, Gray Eagle will hear it, an' go ridin' down there, thinkin' it's me in trouble."

The Mexican Indian, Gray Eagle, was a faithful amigo and guide who rode with the caballero on his relentless pursuit of El Hiena. He had followed a separate trail earlier in the day, seeking a clew to the whereabouts of the bandit chief.

"Reckon I better go find out what's happened," Red Mask decided after a moment's thought. "Yuh never can tell what six-gun shots might mean in a tough country like this."

Loosening his long-barreled, pearl-handled Colts in their holsters under his scarlet silk sash, the caballero wheeled his big black horse and set off at a lively pace in the direction of the gunshots.

The breeze whipped the dangling fringed ends of a red-white-and-green silk serape tied behind the cantle of his fine saddle, adding a gay touch of color to the somber black outfit of the young justice rider.

But short though the distance was, it took many minutes of steady riding over the coulee-gashed bad lands to reach the spot from which the gunshots had come. And when he rounded a thicket of stunted mesquite, and came suddenly upon it, Señor Red Mask's veins ran cold with the horror of the grisly scene.

"My gosh, a stage holdup!" cried the startled caballero. "An' the bandits killed the driver an' the guard an' all the mules!"

A croaking buzzard flapped heavily away as Señor Red Mask slid from the saddle and ran to the nearest corpse. He quickly satisfied himself that both men were past needing help. Nor did he fail to note that the strong-box of the stage was gone.

Lifting the bodies of the two slain men inside the coach, the caballero closed the doors. They would be safe there from the buzzards and coyotes. And when the stage failed to arrive at the mines on time, a searching party would quickly set out over the trail.

"It's all I can do fer them pore jaspers," Red Mask muttered wrathfully as he went back to his horse and swung into the saddle again. "But I shore aim ter hit the trail of the dirty skunks thet killed 'em. There's no tellin', but El Hiena might be mixed up in this job. Leastways, by runnin' down this gang, I'm likely ter find out if the Hyena is hid out round here anywheres."

Thunder, the spirited black horse, snorted and champed his silver-

mounted bit as Red Mask reined him past the terrible scene of death. But he was scarcely clear of the trail, when a Mexican Indian on a sweating buckskin pony wheeled alongside.

"What happened, señor?" asked the Indian, whose stolid bronze face plainly showed relief at seeing Señor Red Mask alive and unhurt. "I heard the shots from far away een the bad lands and rode hard to get here."

The caballero pointed back through the chaparral. "Ride closer to the trail, Gray Eagle," he said, speaking in Spanish as had the Indian, "and you will see what happened."

Urging his mount through the greasewood and ocotillo that fringed the stage road, Gray Eagle gave a sweeping glance at the grisly scene. Then he turned quickly away, to rejoin Señor Red Mask.

"You will ride the trail of those bandits, then?" he asked eagerly.

"I was starting, when you arrived, amigo," the caballero answered.

"*Bueno!* We will find those hombres, pronto," Gray Eagle rejoined with a nod of his dark head. "It is very sure that they have gone to Bandit Butte."

Red Mask hipped around in his saddle and eyed the Indian keenly. "You talk as if you could lay a hand on those killers easy," he said in some surprise. "Do you happen to know where their hide-out is?"

"At the foot of the butte there is an inn which is called El Nido del Zopilote. It is there that evil hombres gather to spend their stolen money," answered Gray Eagle.

The dark eyes of the caballero gleamed through the slits in his scarlet silk mask. "El Nido del Zopilote! The Buzzards' Roost, huh? I'll go there and spy on them," he promptly

decided. "As El Muchacho—the Kid—I'll entertain them while I find out who those killers are."

Dismounting, Red Mask took a blanket roll from under the gay-hued serape tied behind the cantle of his saddle. Opening the roll, he removed a complete costume of cheap cotton garments, cowhide sandals, and huge palm-fiber sombrero.

In a few minutes, he had altered his appearance completely. Instead of the rich and dashing caballero, Señor Red Mask, he now appeared as "El Muchacho," a poor peon. His red silk mask was discarded, and in its place a gaudy cotton serape muffled a portion of his brown-stained face. The wide-brimmed palm sombrero was pulled low over his brow.

"And now El Muchacho will ride his buckskin pony to the Buzzards' Roost," announced the young rider.

Gray Eagle grunted his disapproval of the idea as he slid from the buckskin's back. "Does the señor forget that El Hiena and his gang may be at the inn?" he asked. "Those hombres have seen the señor in thees clothes before. They will keel him."

El Muchacho nodded soberly. He realized the risk he would run in entering the bandits' hang-out. But this disguise had served him many times before in getting a line on his enemies, perhaps it would again.

"Quién sabe? I will take the chance," he answered. "You follow later with Thunder and my clothes and guns, amigo. Hide in the chaparral near the inn and listen for the cry of a striking hawk."

The Indian reached for Thunder's reins as Señor Red Mask swung lightly into the buckskin's saddle. "Adios, señor," he said.

### CHAPTER III.

#### AT THE BUZZARDS' ROOST.

THE Buzzards' Roost was well named. It was a squat, ugly building with gray adobe walls and flat dirt roof, that skulked half-hidden in the scrub mesquite and cactus at the foot of Bandit Butte.

El Hiena and his evil gang found the Roost a safe and convenient hang-out. Seldom did the rurales ride the dim trails which led into that desolate and dangerous bad lands. And if trouble threatened, it was easy to slip out into the trackless chaparral, to hide for a while in some cave or gloomy canyon.

Following their robbery of the stage, the bandits had ridden straight to the Roost. They were gathered now in a dirty, ill-smelling back room, impatient to get their hands on the contents of the strong-box which they had stolen.

The loot was safe from the curious eyes of the border riffraff who drank and gambled in the big bar-room at the front of the inn. It would be divided quickly among the six members of the outlaw band, and each ruffian could start spending his share of the dinero.

El Hiena rubbed the palms of his big hairy hands together in a sliding motion as he crouched beside the treasure box. A greedy glint brightened his evil little eyes.

"Queeck, hombre, breeng a hammer and break thees lock," the bandit chief rasped at a pock-marked hombre in the group which crowded eagerly round the box.

"Thar's a heap of mazuma in it, way it hefts," gloated Butch Mingo, lifting an end of the strong-box and letting it drop heavily to the floor with a clank of metal. "Did yuh hear them gold pieces clatterin' around in thar?"

The Mexican with the hammer stepped forward and bent over the box. With several hard blows he soon smashed the lock. Eager hands jerked open the lid.

Then, for the space of a couple of heartbeats, there was silence—the breathless silence of men who are too stunned by surprise and amazement to think or act.

El Hiena came to his senses first. Leaping to his feet, he vented a wild screech of fury.

"Eet ees a treeck! We have been fooled!" he shrieked, gazing wide-eyed at the rusty mass of scrap iron and old horseshoes which filled the strong-box.

"I didn't have nothin' ter do with it, chief, honest I didn't!" cut in Butch Mingo, his voice hoarse with sudden alarm. "I heard some jaspers in town say thet the mazuma was goin' ter be shipped to the mines ter-day. They must 'a' figgered thar would be a holdup, an' they played this dirty trick on us."

The Mex knifer, Nogales, sneered. "Quién sabe? Mebbe the—the—what you gringos call—double cross ees feegure een thees holdup job, sí," he said.

The thinly veiled accusation brought Butch Mingo whirling to face his jealous rival for second place in El Hiena's gang. His right hand was clawing at the notched butt of a six-gun, even as Nogales went for his deadly knife.

"Stop eet!" snapped the furious leader of the crooks, hurling his squat, leather-clad body between Nogales and Butch for the second time that day. "The dinero ees lost, but we weel——"

What El Hiena planned to do about the mine pay roll which the bandits had been tricked out of, would never be known. For he stopped talking as if suddenly struck

dumb. For a long moment, he listened intently to a Mexican song that came to his ears through the closed door of the gloomy back room:

"Yonder on the big ranch,  
Where I used to live,  
There was a pretty maiden,  
Who merrily said to me:  
Oh, a vaquero's life is gay and free,  
But a vaquero's wife I never shall be."

The clear tenor voice of the unseen singer paused, but the lively strumming of a guitar continued.

"You heard that seenging, hombres?" El Hiena fiercely demanded.

"Eet was only some drunk singing the chorus of 'Rancho Grande,'" grumbled Nogales.

But El Hiena was already slogging toward the door, his hand tugging at the great bull whip caught up in a loose coil across his heavy shoulders.

"Vamose, we weel see," he snarled out of his mat of greasy black beard. "To me, eet sound very much like the voice of that *maldito* Señor Red Mask."

Nor had the ears of the bandit leader deceived him. It was the famous young justice rider, disguised as a poor Mexican peon musician, who played and sang in the barroom of the inn.

He had ridden the buckskin pony at a fast pace, to reach the Buzzards' Roost almost as soon as the bandits, who were slowed by their heavy load of supposed treasure.

Leaving his mount ground-tied in the shade of the old adobe inn, near an open window, El Muchacho had fearlessly entered the place. He carried a somewhat battered guitar, which had been tied to the blanket roll behind Gray Eagle's saddle.

Once in the barroom, the Muchacho sought an out-of-the-way cor-

ner and dropped quietly onto a bench. He wanted a little time to size up the bunch of tough hombres who lolled around the gambling tables and the long bar.

He believed he would be able to pick out the murderous crooks who had held up the stage, by their talk and by the wild orgy of gambling and drinking in which they would indulge on their stolen money.

But in spite of El Muchacho's quiet entry, he was barely seated before he began to attract the attention of the ruffians nearest to him. It was unusual for a poor peon to seek entertainment in a tough resort for outlaws, such as the Buzzards' Roost was known to be. It was too good an opportunity for some rough sport to be passed up.

"Look, *compadres*, at the fine gentleman who has favored us with his presence!" cried a swaggering Mexican at the bar.

The jibe was hailed with guffaws of loud laughter by the crowd of crooks. They turned to sneer at the cheap, baggy cotton clothes which El Muchacho wore. His old guitar was the object of several ill-chosen jests. Its owner's ability to play it was questioned.

"Señor Don Ragamuffin will perhaps entertain us poor hombres with a song, *si?*" a burly Mexican asked with sneering sarcasm.

El Muchacho's ears burned with the insults and jibes he heard on all sides. But he kept a tight rein on his temper. He was here on a very important mission, and he meant to go through with it.

All the while that his tormentors were having their sport at his expense, the young hombre was shrewdly sizing them up.

"This bunch of two-legged coyotes don't act as if they'd jest pulled off a big holdup job," El Muchacho

told himself after his narrowed eyes had searched the barroom. "Reckon I better treat 'em ter a real surprise, an' give 'em some music. Mebbe I kin draw out any of the crooks thet happen ter be keepin' out o' sight."

The worn guitar dangled by a cord from his shoulder. He pulled it around in place and deftly tuned it. Then he struck into the lively and popular Mexican tune of "Rancho Grande." His tenor voice lifted in the melodious Spanish words of the song:

"Yonder on the big ranch,  
Where I used to live——"

When El Muchacho had finished, there was a loud burst of applause from his audience. Gone were their sneers and jibes. They realized that here was an hombre who could make music the like of which was seldom heard in the rough border country.

The innkeeper himself, a fat, pig-eyed hombre who was as much of a crook as any of his tough patrons, came waddling over to take the strange musician's order for a drink.

"You will have a glass of good Spanish wine, *amigo?*" he wheezed.

El Muchacho smiled behind the muffling folds of his gaudy cotton serape. He was enjoying the surprise of his audience.

"A glass of plain water, if you please, señor," he told the innkeeper. "It is better for the music that I do not drink the wine." To himself, he added under his breath, "And better for the shooting."

Now, the young musician was ready to sing something that would bring his little entertainment to a quick, and perhaps exceedingly dangerous, finish. He was satisfied that the hombres in the barroom had taken no part in any successful robbery that day.

There had been neither word nor act to show that they had, and he believed they would not try to conceal any crime. They like too well to boast and swagger.

"If there's any more of these ornery skunks skulkin' in the back rooms, I reckon this will make 'em show themselves," El Muchacho muttered into the serape that covered the lower part of his face.

Giving the strings of his old guitar a few sharp plunks, he began to sing loudly a verse of the *rurales'* fighting song, "The Death Trail":

"Below the Rio's yellow flood,  
Dim outlaw trails run red with——"

The last word was drowned in a mad uproar of angry voices, the crash of a door, and the pounding of spurred boots.

El Muchacho hastily rose to his feet, slung the guitar by its cord around to his back.

"Gosh, that sure stirred 'em up!" he exclaimed.

Like a nest of mad hornets, the outlaws were milling over the barroom. They had heard that song before, knew what it meant for them when sung by the grim mounted police of Mexico. And now, to have it flung in their teeth by this young peon, was an insult too bitter for them to bear.

"Kill him!" bawled a scar-faced outlaw.

But before the furious mob in the barroom could reach their intended victim, there was a sudden interruption.

Hey—hey-y-y-y!" screeched a wild voice, followed by the swish and crack of a heavy whip.

The barroom loafers turned aside, clearing a pathway for the rush of a gang of murderous cutthroats who had burst into the room through a rear door.

El Muchacho caught his breath with a gasp. "It's the Hyena!" he cried. "I wonder if he knows who I——"

A vicious crack of the long-lashed bull whip, full in his face, cut short the alarmed Muchacho's words. He reeled backward, suppressing a cry of pain from the welt of the stinging lash.

"Grab heem, hombres!" howled El Hiena. "Eet ees the spy for that *maldito* Señor Red Mask! I weel wheep heem to death!"

Like a cornered lobo, El Muchacho's lips lifted in a snarl of defiance to his enemies. He shot a swift glance around him. Could he escape from this deadly trap?

## CHAPTER IV.

### A MYSTERIOUS TRAIL.

MUCH experience in matching his wits and weapons against those of the border crooks, had taught the young justice rider the value of doing the unexpected thing, of making a surprise move, when caught in a bad jam.

A quick flash of thought told El Muchacho that his foes expected him either to surrender or make a futile dash for liberty. He did neither. Instead, he sprang at El Hiena like a cougar pouncing on a deer.

Startled, the bandit chief tried to dodge the agile Muchacho, at the same time lashing out wildly with his heavy bull whip.

But El Muchacho's rocky fist shot forward with the speed and force of a bronc's kick. It smashed El Hiena on one of his beady little eyes.

The bandit spun around under the impact of the blow. Dazed and groaning, he was helpless for a moment. And for the next few seconds, things happened to him so fast

that he had no chance to recover his wits.

Grabbing his enemy by the greasy collar of his leather jacket, El Muchacho jerked him backward. It was the first of a series of jolting jerks that half-dragged and half-flung the sputtering, gasping crook leader toward an open window of the long barroom.

The Hyena's thickset body was between El Muchacho and the mob of outlaws, a living shield against any bullets they might fire at the escaping justice rider.

The quick-witted Muchacho had nearly reached his goal before the amazed outlaws in the room fully realized what was happening. Then the hoarse voice of Butch Mingo bawled a warning to his fellow crooks.

"Ketch that peon afore he gits ter that window!" shouted Butch. "Come on, rush him! He ain't got no gun!"

The howling mob rushed forward like a famished wolf pack to the kill. They started closing in on their quarry with swift and deadly purpose.

"I can't drag this heavy brute to the window afore they reach me," panted El Muchacho, "an' if I let go of him, they'll shoot me."

He had already noticed that his captive was not wearing the heavy cartridge belt and six-guns with which he was usually armed. Evidently, he had laid them aside after returning from his murderous hold-up of the stage. Yet a gun seemed the only thing that could save El Muchacho from the clutches of his enemies now.

Stopping suddenly in his tracks, the Muchacho risked his last thin chance of making the window before the onrushing crooks grabbed him.

In another pair of seconds he would be lost, unless——

Darting a hand inside the struggling Hyena's open jacket, El Muchacho felt for a hide-out gun. Such vicious, unfair killers as this bandit often relied on a hidden gun to give them a cowardly advantage over their foes.

A thrill of joy surged over the Muchacho as his searching fingers found the butt of a short-barreled .45 that was holstered under the bandit's left arm. He whipped it out, despite El Hiena's frantic effort to prevent it.

*Brang! Bang!* The heavy Colt roared across the shoulder of the badly frightened crook.

Whistling slugs ripped into the charging gang. An hombre in the lead groaned and staggered from the shock of a bullet in the shoulder. The man behind him turned back with a nicked ear. Taken by surprise, the rest of the gang stopped short before that warning volley of hot lead.

"Hey-y-y!" El Hiena screeched like a madman as he jerked and twisted to break the Muchacho's grip on his stout leather jacket.

It was evident that he had recovered from the effects of the dazing blow dealt him by the young justice rider. No longer could he be held at arm's length as a shield. He clawed at his captor, struggled to get hold of him.

But El Muchacho was wary. He had come to grips with the Hyena before. He knew the tremendous strength that lay in the bandit leader's thick, muscle-padded shoulders and in his huge hairy arms and hands. Once that beastlike body had fastened on him, his capture was certain.

"I'll bend this gun barrel over your head, you ornery skunk!" the

desperate Muchacho snarled as he wrenched an arm free of his enemy's clutching fingers.

Before the uplifted six-gun could start downward, the justice rider found himself holding an empty jacket in his other hand. El Hiena had wriggled out of it, was free, and scurrying out of the line of fire.

Exultant howls came from the gang as they saw the sudden change in the situation. Their guns flashed and bellowed under the low-beamed ceiling of the smoky barroom.

Bullets tore at the loose cotton garments of the Muchacho as he whirled and dashed for the open window. Twice, he was raked by slugs that seared his flesh like red-hot brand irons. A shower of dust and pieces of dobe brick, chipped from the walls by flying lead, half-blinded him when he dived through the narrow opening.

"Gosh, but thet was a close call!" gasped El Muchacho as he landed on the hard ground with a breath-taking jolt. "Them murderin' thieves was sure measurin' me fer a wooden overcoat."

Nor was he yet safe from his enemies. As he leaped to the saddle of the waiting buckskin, a volley of gunshots came from the window. A bullet knocked his big palm-fiber sombrero nearly off his head, exposing a mop of curly dark hair. The rawhide-covered horn of his old Mexican saddle was ripped by a whizzing slug.

Then the rangy buckskin was streaking through the chaparral like a scared coyote. In a couple of seconds, the Muchacho was breathing freely in the cover of mesquite and paloverde. Hearing no sound of pursuit, he slowed the pace of his mount and started to circle the base of Bandit Butte.

A few hundred yards from the

Roost, El Muchacho halted and closely inspected the near-by bad lands. Almost at his horse's feet a steep-banked arroyo slashed the desolate flat. It led off into a maze of coulees and low, barren hills.

But as the Muchacho turned to look at its upward course, he saw that it headed far up the clifflike slope of the butte. And, to his amazement, there was a well-worn trail at the bottom of the defile, leading upward to the towering crest of the lone peak.

"Thet's dog-goned funny," muttered the perplexed justice rider. "What's on top of thet old butte, thet a lot of hombres would wear a trail up ter its rim?"

El Muchacho sat slumped in his saddle for several minutes, trying to figure out an answer to that bothersome question. He recalled the words of the torn cipher message: "The gold is hid on top of Bandit Butte. Look in the——"

"If I had the rest of the message an' knew what ter look in, mebbe thet would tell me what thet trail is used fer," the Muchacho reflected. "An' I wonder how come Jim Trent ter climb up there an' cache his gold."

Unable to solve the puzzle, El Muchacho gave up trying for the moment. But he was none the less determined to clear up the mystery of the grim butte at the earliest possible moment.

Meanwhile, he would signal Gray Eagle, and change back to his fine caballero outfit. His visit to the *posada* had been a success, as far as getting information about the stage robbers and of his deadly enemy, El Hiena, was concerned.

He had no doubt that the murderous Hyena and his gang had committed that terrible crime back on the stage trail. But he was unfor-

tunate in having his own identity discovered so early in the game. It would hinder and delay him in the fight which he resolved to make on the bandits.

Suddenly straightening in his saddle, El Muchacho sent his voice ringing out in a wild, strident cry—a perfect imitation of the fierce screech of a Mexican hawk as it swoops to strike its prey. His dark eyes were gleaming now. On the spur of the moment he had decided on a plan of action that promised thrilling adventure.

Before the echo of the signal call had died down, a rustling in the chaparral told the Muchacho that his faithful Indian guide had heard and obeyed the summons.

"Bueno, amigo!" he called softly, as Gray Eagle rode up on Thunder and dismounted. "El Muchacho will now turn into a rich caballero—Señor of the Red Mask."

Swinging down from his saddle, El Muchacho began making the transformation from poorly dressed peon to *charro*-clad caballero, as Gray Eagle handed him the handsome costume he had been keeping. Meanwhile, the young justice rider related the happenings in the Buzards' Roost.

"And now that the señor has found El Hiena, what will he do?" the Indian asked when Señor Red Mask had finished and was slipping the scarlet silk mask over his brown-stained face.

"When darkness comes, I will seek the Hyena in his den," clipped Red Mask. "But in the daylight, no. There are many outlaws in that Roost. It would mean death to go there now."

"Then the señor will rest until night?" Gray Eagle inquired curiously.

The caballero's firm lips quirked

in a fitting smile that uptilted the points of his tiny dark mustache. "I will be very busy on top of Bandit Butte, amigo," he said. "I go there to find out the secrets which it keeps—the secret of why so many hombres have climbed to the top, and where Jim Trent's gold is cached."

Gray Eagle nodded, his smoky eyes narrowing as he glanced up the steep, winding trail that led to the flat top of the butte.

"I will tell the señor why the trail is worn by many climbing feet," he said slowly. "It is because there is a temple there—a temple built by the Indians of olden times—in which to worship the sun."

Señor Red Mask started in surprise. "A temple of the ancient sun worshipers, eh?" he muttered. "But this trail is fresh, amigo. How come?"

"There are Indians still living in this malpais, señor," Gray Eagle answered. "The descendants of those ancient ones, they still worship the sun. Very often they climb to that old temple of their forefathers."

"And Jim Trent went up there to hide his gold," added Red Mask thoughtfully. "Maybe he hid it in that old temple. Quién sabe? I will go——"

"But the señor must not enter the temple!" Gray Eagle exclaimed in a tone that betrayed more than a little alarm. "It would be very dangerous. Those Indians do not permit gringos or Mexicans to go there."

"Yet I will go," the justice rider announced with a tightening of his jaw muscles. "The secret of Bandit Butte must be learned and its golden treasure taken to Jim Trent's mother."

Gray Eagle's bronzed face was as

expressionless as usual when he spoke again. "What does the señor weesh me to do?" he asked.

"Guard the horses till I come back," Red Mask replied, and turned to walk toward the foot of the trail.

"And if the señor does not come back—if he meets with trouble?" the Indian called quickly after the caballero.

"If I am not back here by sunset, you can be very sure that I am in trouble. Come and help me—if it is not too late!" Red Mask grimly called back over his shoulder.

## CHAPTER V.

### TROUBLE ON BANDIT BUTTE.

**A** STIFF climb of about a quarter of an hour brought the caballero to the top of Bandit Butte. Luckily, its rim was fringed with a thick growth of buck brush that concealed him from hostile eyes, if such there were on the round, tablelike top of the tall standstone hill.

Crouching in the brush, Señor Red Mask cautiously surveyed the small mesa upon which he now found himself. It was almost as level as a floor, and dotted with clumps of stunted chaparral and boulders.

But what instantly caught the caballero's eyes, was a massive, half-ruined building set squarely in the center of the tiny mesa. Its thick walls and great columns were built of huge blocks of quarried red sandstone. Its roof, now partly crumbled away, was made of thinner slabs of the same rusty-red rock.

From where the justice rider stood he could see what was evidently the main, perhaps only, entrance to the ancient temple of sun worship. Wide stone steps went up to a great portal of heavy masonry, the stone fac-

ings carved with queer, outlandish designs of misshapen men and beasts.

"Gosh, thet old relic must 'a' been built thousands o' years ago," Red Mask told himself as he gazed at the imposing, time-worn edifice with a feeling of awe.

Before venturing inside the old temple, the caballero decided to scout around over the few acres of ground that surrounded it. Keeping close to the rim rock, he circled the top of the butte. And much to his surprise, he found that the trail which he had ascended in the rock-walled defile, was the only possible way to reach the top. On every side there was a stretch of bare cliff, extending for a hundred to two hundred feet below the rim rock, and so steep as to be unscalable.

Satisfied after a while that no foes lurked in the chaparral or among the big boulders that littered the mesa, Red Mask made his way toward the entrance to the temple. But in spite of the apparent absence of life on Bandit Butte, the caballero had the uneasy feeling that he was not alone, and that unfriendly eyes watched his movements.

This hunch was well founded, at least as far as his being watched was concerned. For a gringo rustler, seeking refuge in the Mexican bad lands from the law, had been crossing a distant ridge just as Señor Red Mask topped the rim of Bandit Butte. His wary eyes had glimpsed the caballero. Prompted by both suspicion and curiosity, the fugitive from justice had focused a pair of field glasses on the climber.

Later in the afternoon, the gringo "border jumper" was quenching his thirst for hard liquor in the barroom of the Buzzards' Roost. His curiosity regarding the mysterious

masked man on top of the butte mounted higher with each drink he took.

"I'm a stranger in this hyar country, an' danged if I wouldn't like ter know who the Mex dude wearin' a red mask is, thet I seen ter-day?" the newcomer finally asked of the crowd in general.

Butch Mingo heard and answered. "A masked Mex, huh?" the gringo cutthroat rumbled, then turned and called to El Hiena at the other end of the barroom. "Hey, boss, hyar's a fella thet seen the red-masked hombre yuh was fussin' about, a while ago."

The Hyena was on his feet instantly, swishing his bull whip viciously as he slogged through the crowded *cantina*.

"What ees that? You haf seen Señor Red Mask?"

The strange outlaw put his half-empty glass down on the bar and glanced around in wonder. "Sure, I seen a dude wearin' a swell *charro* rig with a whole silver mine glit-terin' on it, an' a red mask. But what's all the ruckus about? Who the heck is——"

"Where deed you see heem, amigo?" cut in El Hiena impatiently.

"Why, he was climbin' right onto this hyar butte thet sticks up out of the bad lands like a sore thumb," replied the stranger surlily. "What does yuh aim ter do about it?"

"Plenty!" snapped El Hiena. "He ees a very dangerous hombre. We weel keel heem!"

Calling the members of his own gang to follow him, the bandit leader hurried out of the inn. For the first time since he had discovered the hoax put over on him and his henchmen by the filling of the stage strong-box with scrap iron, El Hiena was in a good humor.

"Leesten, hombres!" he told his

men as soon as they had walked out of hearing of the noisy crowd in the barroom. "We are een great luck. Thees ees our chance to break even on losing that mine pay roll. The gold of that young ranny, Jeem Trent, who I keeled, must be cached on top of thee butte. We weel——"

"What makes you think that, boss?" broke in the Mexican knifer, Nogales, in Spanish.

"Because Señor Red Mask knows where Trent hid his gold," El Hiena snapped back in the same tongue. "Always he is hunting that gold. If he is on top of Bandit Butte, it is certain that the gold is there."

"Does yuh know how tuh git up thar, boss?" asked Butch Mingo. "Danged if it don't look ter me like a goat would break its neck tryin' ter climb thet pile o' sandstone."

"Let's go, hombres! I weel show you a trail wheech has been climb' by many feet," declared the elated Hyena, dropping back into broken English. "Already we have Red Mask trapped. There ees but one trail up the butte. We weel get heem and the gold!"

With that magic word, "gold," ringing in their ears, the evil gang rushed away through the chaparral.

But finding the yellow treasure hidden by Jim Trent was not so easy. Señor Red Mask was finding it anything but a simple task to locate the gold. In fact, he was almost on the verge of giving it up as impossible.

During the long, hot afternoon, he had searched through scores of gloomy nooks and crannies that abounded in the interior of the old temple. He was still searching as the westering sun dropped low over the barren hills of the desolate bad lands.

"Looks like I've jest poked my nose into every crack an' crevice in

these old walls," the dusty, sweating caballero muttered to himself as he finally stopped his tiresome work and gazed wearily over the great bare room.

At the western end of the big worship hall was a massive altar of highly polished black stone. It was elaborately carved, and from its appearance had once been heavily inlaid with gold and jewels.

But vandals had long since stripped it of every vestige of precious stones and metals. The yellow light of the setting sun filtered through a narrow opening in the temple wall and gleamed on the shiny black surface of the altar.

Señor Red Mask stood for a moment, resting and gazing in admiration at the grim, barbaric beauty of this relic of an ancient race.

"I've heard tell that them old-timers used ter make sacrifices to their gods of the prisoners they took in battle," he reflected soberly. "I'll bet there's been a lot of pore hombres had their heads cut off on that big black rock."

Suddenly remembering that he had told Gray Eagle to come to his aid if he had not returned to the valley by sunset, Red Mask turned to leave the temple. He felt discouraged over his lack of success in finding the treasure, but he grimly determined to make up for it in full measure by bringing El Hiena to justice.

"I'll go back ter the Buzzards' Roost to-night, an'——"

The caballero stopped short. Through the doorway of the temple came sounds that sent a chill racing down his backbone. Not such sounds as barefoot Indians would make in coming to the temple to practice their heathen rites, but the jangle of heavy spurs and the thudding of booted feet on stone steps.

"It's—it must be El Hiena an' his gang," Red Mask gasped in alarm.

Before he could even start to seek a hiding place, the doorway was darkened by an evil, squat figure. The long lash of a bull whip dangled from one of the ruffian's hairy hands. Through the mat of greasy black beard on his hideous face came the evil, laughing cry of a hunting hyena.

"They knew I was here—they trapped me!" gritted the caballero, while the color drained from his face, leaving it ash-gray below the scarlet mask.

## CHAPTER VI.

### IN THE TRAP.

**H**HEY, hombres! There he ees—grab heem!" screeched the Hyena as the five cutthroats at his back burst into the temple.

Howling oaths, the men lunged forward. It was a game very much to their liking, with the odds heavily in their favor. They whipped out their long-barreled six-guns as they ran, ready to shoot down their prey unless he instantly surrendered.

But the crooks were in for a surprise. Instead of the expected victim waiting to be overcome by his enemies, he took very prompt action to prevent it.

With a long leap, the caballero placed one of the huge pillars that supported the temple roof between him and the charging bandits.

He might have remained there and fought them off for a while. But he realized instantly that it would prove to be poor cover after the crooks recovered their wits and separated to surround him.

While there still remained a few seconds of time before his foes reached him, Red Mask sped away down the long room. The thick pil-

lar was still in the line of his flight and afforded him a measure of safety from the hail of bullets which his pursuers hurled after him.

Straight to the high altar he dashed. Protected by its solid stone front, he could put up a good fight. And there was the added advantage that his enemies could not get behind him.

Without pausing to see what was on the other side of the altar rail, Red Mask took it at a single bound. Luckily, he broke no bones, although the fall was farther than he had expected. He landed with a jarring, bruising crash in the bottom of a small, shallow pit that seemed to form the center of the great altar.

Gasping breath back into his empty lungs, the hard-pressed caballero scrambled to get on his feet. He had to stop the forward rush of the bandits before they reached the altar, or they would overwhelm him by sheer numbers. But as his outflung hands swept over the smooth bottom of the pit, he struck an object that made him forget for the moment that his life was in danger.

"Gosh!" exclaimed the amazed Red Mask, hastily straightening and holding a buckskin bag up to view. "It's the cache of gold. Now I know what the rest of that message was—'look in the altar.'"

There was no time to exult over the lucky find that he had made. The secret of Bandit Butte was solved, but it seemed very doubtful if he could get away with the treasure, now that he had found it.

Thrusting the bag of golden nuggets into a niche of the altar wall, Red Mask snatched one of his pearl-handled Colts from its holster and made ready to give battle to the charging outlaws.

*Wham! Bang!* The roaring defiance of the caballero's .45 sent El Hiena and his yelling gangsters scurrying to the protection of the stone pillars.

"If I can hold 'em off till Gray Eagle comes lookin' fer me, mebber we can turn the tables on these ornery skunks," Red Mask told himself hopefully.

But the next moment he was anxiously wondering if the faithful Indian had been discovered and killed by the ruffians as they came through the chaparral on their way to the foot of the trail.

Then for several seconds, the caballero was too busy swapping hot lead with his enemies to think of anything else. He crept cautiously along behind the altar rail in a lull of the firing.

His feet were on the bottom of the shallow pit into which he had fallen when he first leaped the rail. A knoblike projection at the rim of the pit was in his way. He placed one foot on it and started to raise himself to a position from which he would be able to look over the stone rail.

It was an unfortunate move. The very instant that the caballero's weight was borne by the smoothly cut knob of stone, it lurched under him. A sudden grinding noise filled the air. The bottom of the altar pit abruptly tilted. Red Mask lost his balance and sprawled backward on the slanting stone.

Cold with horror at what he realized was happening, the caballero strove frantically to grab hold of something that would stay his descent. But the walls of the pit were as smooth as glass, his clutching fingers failed to find a grip. Before he could even cry out, he slid off the tilted slab into a yawning void of darkness.

Fearful thoughts flashed through Red Mask's mind as he shot downward. That death in some horrible form awaited him, he had no doubt. It seemed to him that he dropped a long way before he suddenly crashed into a mass of dry, loose stuff that sent up a stifling cloud of dust.

Dazed and shaken, the caballero lay for a moment trying to collect his wits. A dank, musty odor like that of a tomb assailed his nostrils.

He opened his eyes and tried to pierce the darkness, but a solid black wall seemed to hem him in. Above him, at no great distance, the rumble of the altar pit bottom sliding back into place, died away and left him in utter silence.

Red Mask moved to see if any of his bones were broken, and had a moment of relief when he found he was apparently safe and sound. Then his groping fingers touched something round and hard, like a huge billiard ball, at his side.

Startled, he jerked his hand away, only to contact another similar object. Getting a grip on his shaken nerves, he carefully felt under and around his prostrate body.

"Skulls—human bones an' skulls!" gasped the caballero.

It was evident that the ancient Indians had sacrificed their victims on the massive stone altar, then by tilting the slab they skidded the remains into an underground tomb.

While Señor Red Mask lay blinking into the darkness, wondering if he had escaped the bandits, only to meet a worse fate by starvation in that gruesome place of the dead, he heard again the rumble of the stone slab above him. Feeble rays of light penetrated a few yards into the gloom. Evil faces peered down through the opening made by the tilting of the altar bottom.

WW—8A

"Hey—hey-y-y!" shrilled a mocking, hyenalike laugh. "Speak up, Señor Red Mask, eef you are still alive!"

The caballero kept very still for a moment, debating what was best to do under such desperate circumstances. To remain where he was meant almost certainly a horrible, lingering death amid that welter of grisly skeletons.

There was hardly a chance that Gray Eagle, if he was still alive, would be able to rescue him in time. On the other hand, there would be scant chance of escape, if he surrendered to the fiends who now leered at him in the gloom. Death by awful torture would be his lot at their hands.

"What do you want, you carrion-eating hyena?" snapped Red Mask, suddenly making his decision.

"Hey-y! The fine caballero ees not dead—only caught een a nice leetle trap!" jeered El Hiena, while cries of triumph and surprise came from his henchmen. "Weel the señor come up and honor us weeth hees presence, or does he like the company of those skeletons better?"

"Leave off the smart talk and lower a rope," growled the desperate caballero. "Not but what I prefer these dead ones to a flock of buzzards like you and your amigos."

"A reata weel be lowered, but you weel first tie your seex-guns to eet," called back the bandit leader.

Señor Red Mask frowned his disappointment. He had hoped to keep his guns until he was pulled up into the daylight, on the slim chance that he might get a break to use them. But there was no help for it. When the dangling rope brushed his outstretched hand, he drew both of his handsome Colts and tied them securely to it.

The guns were whisked upward,

and after a short wait the rope came back empty again.

"Now fer it," Red Mask muttered as he steeled himself for the ordeal ahead.

In a trice he had the rawhide reata looped under his arms and had given the word to the impatient bandits to haul away on it.

But any slight hope which the caballero held of escaping from his enemies, was dispelled the moment he reached the surface. Strong arms grabbed him as he was dragged out by the rope. By El Hiena's orders he was bound to the altar, the rope fastened to carved projections which doubtless had been used for the same purpose by the ancient Indians.

"Buenol!" cried the exultant bandit chief. "Now we weel have some fun weeth thees fine-feathered bird. Tell us, Señor Red Mask, where ees the gold wheech you came here to get?"

As he spoke, El Hiena shook his heavy rawhide bull whip threateningly.

But the caballero clenched his teeth and made no answer. Only too well he knew that El Hiena would not spare him, even if he told where he had hidden the poke of gold.

The outlaw was a mixture of gringo, Mexican, and Apache Indian, inheriting the vilest traits of all three races and the good of none. He loved to torture his victims.

Red Mask remembered, with a shudder, that his boyhood pal of the range, Jim Trent, had been horribly beaten to death with that very whip which now swished and cracked in its murderous owner's hand.

"Hey-y-y! You weel not tell, eh?" El Hiena half shrieked the words in a sudden fury of anger. "Then I weel first cut the red mask from your face weeth my whip, an'

then I weel make you food for the buzzards!"

The bandit leader's huge hairy right arm jerked up, his hand gripping the stock of the vicious bull whip. The long lash fairly hissed as it shot forward.

A fearful scream of agony rang through the great temple.

But that awful sound was not forced from the lips of Señor Red Mask. It was the death cry of a Mexican outlaw.

Before the horrified eyes of his companions, the stricken hombre pitched forward on his face, at the foot of the grim black altar. An Indian arrow was half buried in his side.

"Hey-y! What ees happen!" screeched El Hiena, who had seen nothing of the sudden killing of his henchman.

Butch Mingo wet his dry lips with a thick red tongue. "Yo're in luck, boss," he muttered hoarsely. "Thet Injun arrow was meant fer you, an' Pedro stepped behind yuh jest in time ter stop it."

El Hiena's beady eyes opened wide in sudden fear. He turned on his startled men with a harsh command.

"Queeck, hombres! Run for thee door," he shrilled. "Eet ees the Indians coming to drive us from their temple. We must stop them!"

Whirling in their tracks, the four remaining ruffians and their leader darted toward the open doorway from which the fatal arrow had apparently come.

## CHAPTER VII.

### LEAD AND GOLD.

SEÑOR RED MASK was as startled at the sudden tragedy as his captors were. His attention had been centered on El Hiena, watch-

ing for the stroke of the whip that would tear his mask away. When it came, a quick twitch of his head caused the lash to miss its mark. He had seen nothing of the mysterious hombre whose timely shot had saved him from terrible torture.

"It must have been Gray Eagle," guessed the caballero. "He come up here at sunset ter find me, an' run right onto thet gang of crooks. He saved my hide—now it's up ter me to get loose an' help him."

Even as he swiftly sized up the changed situation, Red Mask was tugging at his bonds. The rawhide reata bruised and cut his wrists as he twisted and wrenched it with all the strength of his muscular arms.

But he quickly decided that it was no use. There was so little give to his bonds that it seemed hopeless to get free in time to save either himself or the Indian. The gang might come back at any moment.

Panting from his strenuous exertions, Red Mask lay still for the space of a half dozen heartbeats. Spread-eagled on the altar, he seemed utterly helpless. But his keen wits were struggling with the problem of getting loose.

Then the answer came to him—so quick and easy that he wondered why he hadn't thought of it sooner.

A huge copper knife—the terrible instrument with which the ancient Indians had no doubt beheaded their victims—lay in a groove on top of the altar. By turning his head he could see it. The hilt was close to the fingers of his right hand.

Close, but just out of reach, as the caballero discovered when he tried to get hold of the heavy knife. His fingertips touched it, but he was unable to grasp the elusive weapon.

Tantalized to the verge of madness by his nearness to a means of escape, Red Mask struggled fran-

tically to loosen his bonds. Crimson oozed through the broken skin on his wrist as he jerked till he nearly dislocated his arm.

"It's slippin'—a little," he panted, feeling some slack in the rope.

Encouraged, the caballero surged back on the tough rawhide reata like a wild bronco. It gave some more. His hand brushed the copper knife, his fingers closed over its hilt.

Inch by inch he worked the long, heavy blade over to a position where he could bring the coil of rawhide on his wrist against its edge. Then it was only a matter of hurried sawing, till the rope parted. With one hand free, it took only a moment to cut the rest of his bonds.

The faint roar of gunshots came to Red Mask's ears as he sat up and glanced at the doorway of the temple.

"Sounds like the fightin' is quite a ways off," he told himself. "The skunk must be chasin' Gray Eagle clean down the side of the butte."

Reaching over the edge of the altar, Red Mask secured the poke of gold from its hiding place. He owed it to Jim Trent's mother to save the treasure, now that he had found it.

Then he was once more on the floor of the temple, and to his joy he saw that his prized six-guns had been left behind by the excited outlaws when they made their wild dash out of the temple. Evidently, they had thought it impossible for their captive to escape.

He grabbed up the big .45s, holstering one and gripping the other ready for instant use.

With the poke of gold tucked safely under his arm, the caballero ran to the door and down the wide stone steps. There was no one in sight. Evidently, the outlaw gang and whoever it was they were chasing had gone down the trail.

"I'll make a run fer it. Mebbe I can get ter the bottom afore them skunks start back ter finish me," Red Mask muttered as he darted toward the head of the trail.

But he had taken scarcely half a dozen strides before he heard sounds that filled him with alarm. The raucous yelling of many voices—wild, savage voices that he knew did not belong to the border crooks.

"Gosh, there's a regular battle comin' off, down there somewheres, an' it's movin' this way," panted the still running caballero.

Determined to find out what was happening, Red Mask sped on across the tiny mesa till he reached a point on the rim from which he could view the upper portion of the trail.

The sight that met his gaze as he halted on the edge of the cliff, brought a cry of amazement from the caballero.

El Hiena and his henchmen were coming back up the trail, stopping every few feet to fire their six-guns downward, then hurrying on toward the top of the butte. Who their pursuers were, Red Mask was unable to see, but he instantly made a shrewd guess that the Indian descendants of the ancient sun worshipers were swarming up the trail, filled with a fanatical zeal to destroy the defilers of their temple.

Doubtless, then, it was one of their number, instead of Gray Eagle, who had scouted up to the temple and discovered the outlaws, then rushed down to the valley to give the alarm to his tribesmen.

As he watched the desperate upward retreat of the outlaws, Red Mask suddenly realized the deadly peril he was about to be caught in, himself. The gang would make for the cover of the temple, where they could stand off the Indians, who were probably armed only with bows

and arrows and spears. But what would the caballero's fate be, if he were caught on that barren butte top by a horde of furious savages?

"I got ter beat them crooks to it," Red Mask gritted. "It's a dog-gone slim chance, but there ain't no other."

About to turn away from the rim rock, he remembered the poke of gold he carried under his arm. It must be saved. He dared not risk taking it with him on such a perilous venture as he was about to undertake. But where could he hide it?

Glancing downward from the dizzy height on which he stood, the caballero's keen eyes noted a clump of scrubby mesquite almost directly below him, at the foot of the steep butte. A lightning-blasted tree stood in the center of the thicket, a landmark easy to find.

Without hesitation, Red Mask gripped the buckskin bag of nuggets in his right hand, swung it forward and let go. For a moment, he stood watching the heavy poke drop through space until it smashed into the thicket close beside the blasted tree.

"Them ornery crooks won't get it, even if I don't ever leave Bandit Butte alive," the caballero muttered grimly.

Whirling back from the rim rock, Red Mask started on a run toward the door of the old temple just as an evil face popped up out of the trail at the edge of the mesa.

The caballero halted in his tracks. No time, now, to seek cover. He had no sooner disposed of the gold than it was time to begin using lead. Lead and gold! It seemed that some evil force always drew the one metal after the other.

Whipping up his long Colt, Señor Red Mask blazed a hot slug at the surprised crook who came stumbling

over the mesa rim, blazing gun in hand. The fight was on!

## CHAPTER VIII.

### SKY-HIGH BATTLE.

**B**UTCH MINGO happened to be the cutthroat who receipted for Señor Red Mask's bullet. It only nicked him in the left arm. But it goaded the gringo gunman's vicious temper to the point of insanity.

*Wham!* Mingo's six-gun roared and blazed as he triggered a shot.

*Zip!* A shining silver button was ripped from Red Mask's black velvet jacket and went sailing back over the edge of the cliff.

Dark eyes blazing through the slits in his scarlet silk mask, the caballero threw down for another shot. He had to stop that hombre quick or be stopped himself.

*Brang! Bang!* The double report almost blended in one.

Both fighters had pulled triggers at the same instant. Outlaw lead crossed justice bullet in mid-air.

Red Mask reeled back, partly stunned for a moment. A sharp pain seemed to split his head. He opened his eyes wide, but could see nothing. The awful thought flashed through his mind that he had been blinded.

Lifting a faltering hand to his face, he discovered that his mask had been knocked out of place, blindfolding him. He adjusted it over his eyes, and, to his joy, found that he could see as well as ever. A tiny trickle of crimson from his left temple showed where Mingo's bullet had grazed his head.

The gringo gunman was sprawled on the ground. Running over to his fallen foe, the caballero saw that he was lifeless. A dark-crimson spot on the outlaw's gray flannel

shirt front, steadily widening, told the grisly story.

One of Butch Mingo's booted feet rested on a stunted sagebrush. Red Mask hastily plucked a couple of the green twigs and placed them crossed on the dead crook's chest.

It was the "bad man's brand" of old Mexican-border days—now the grim mark of Señor Red Mask.

Before he could rise to his feet, Red Mask heard startled yells from the head of the trail.

"Hey-y-y! Red Mask ees free!" shrieked the surprised El Hiena, scrambling over the rim of the mesa behind his men.

"He's killed Butch!" cried a wild-eyed ruffian.

"*Bueno*—a good riddance!" snarled the Mexican knifer, Nogales, who had hated the dead gringo.

Señor Red Mask threw himself into a gunman's crouch. His pearl-handled .45s gleamed in the last golden rays of the setting sun. It was a show-down, a battle to the death high on the bald summit of Bandit Butte.

"Keel heem, hombres!" El Hiena screeched at his three remaining henchmen.

The words were smothered in a wild din of savage voices, the thud and shuffle of many feet rushing up the trail.

"Gosh, I ain't got a chance," Red Mask muttered between clenched teeth. "Them locoed Indians will swarm over the rim in another minute."

The crooks also realized their danger. Their only chance to stand off the Indians was to get inside the thick stone walls of the old temple. And Señor Red Mask stood between them and their haven.

El Hiena cracked his long bull whip in a frenzy of rage and terror. The other three cutthroats mouthed

vile oaths as they made a concerted rush at their lone enemy.

*Brang! Bang-bang!* Six-guns bellowed and blazed in the dimming light.

A keen-bladed cuchillo whizzed through the air.

Crouching low, his lithe body half-turned, Señor Red Mask met the charge of his murderous foes. Whistling bullets ripped his clothes, raked his flesh. The slithering knife sliced a silver-braided edge of his wide, curving sombrero brim.

But the frantic crooks made the mistake of firing wildly as they ran. Within ten yards of their intended victim, he was still on his feet, apparently little the worse for the encounter. And now he was going into action.

*Crash! Bam!* The gleaming Colts of Señor Red Mask bounced and roared.

Out of the orange-red flames that leaped from their smoking muzzles, a deadly hail of hot lead hurtled.

Nogales, the knifer, was the first to go down, clawing at a ghastly hole in his chest. The hombre nearest to him was equally out of luck. The slug that tagged him between the eyes put an end forever to his evil career.

The third crook would surely have met the same fate as his companions in crime but for the fact that he turned his back and ran, regardless of there being no place on the butte where he could safely hide.

Leaping forward through a swirling cloud of acrid powder smoke, the caballero was just in time to see El Hiena scurrying across the little mesa as fast as his short, spindling legs would carry his thickset body.

"He's aimin' ter hole up in the temple, but I got a diff'rent idea," Red Mask snapped to himself.

One of the hot-barreled .45s in his

hands stabbed forward, crashed once, twice, three times.

The first bullet knocked the fleeing bandit chief's old gray slouch hat askew. The second cut a run-over heel from one of his dirty cowhide boots. The third brought a howl of pain from the panic-stricken Hyena, and caused him to stop short in his tracks.

Clapping a huge hand to his face, where a hot slug had scorched a furrow across his shaggy-bearded cheek, El Hiena turned to face the pursuing caballero.

"I figured he'd change his mind an' wait fer me, with a little six-gun persuasion," Red Mask muttered grimly as he ran forward. To the waiting bandit, he shouted: "Now you will pay for killing Jim Trent! Draw those six-guns an' fight, you skunk!"

But the cowardly Hyena had no intention of swapping lead with such a deadly marksman as Señor Red Mask. To the disgust of the latter, he raised his great hairy arms high above his hideously ugly head.

"You will not fight, you filthy coward?" snapped the disappointed caballero.

El Hiena cringed like a whipped cur. "Eet ees better that the señor join weeth me to fight those Indians who weel very soon come to keel us," he whined hopefully.

Red Mask's dark eyes glared angrily at the four-flushing crook. "I would not fight beside a murderer like you if all the Indians in the world came to kill me," he declared hotly.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before a mob of wild-eyed, howling Indians, armed with bows and arrows, spears, and long knives, suddenly swarmed over the edge of the mesa. They were led by a gray-bearded old man who wore a loose

white robe, while his followers were half-naked.

"Gosh, there must be fifty hombres in that bunch!" Red Mask told himself with a sinking heart. "An' they're sure on the prod."

Guns in hand, he stood waiting, while the Indians came charging across the little mesa. After all, what could he do? There was no place to hide.

Nor could he bring himself to shoot down those poor, ignorant natives who had been aroused to fanatical fury by the defiling of their sacred temple. And even if he killed a dozen, two dozen, of them, the rest would overcome him by sheer force of numbers.

But El Hiena had no such scruples about killing Mexican Indians. In a panic of terror, he whipped out the six-guns which he had refused to draw against Red Mask. Blazing away point-blank in the faces of the onrushing natives, the bandit leader sent several of them tumbling to the ground.

It was like trying to stop a forest fire with a canteen of water. With savage cries of rage, the Indians swept onward in an irresistible wave. They could easily have riddled the trembling outlaw's body with spears and arrows, but they held back their weapons, simply rushing over him and beating him down.

"They're savin' him alive fer a sacrifice to their gods," muttered Red Mask, thinking at the same time that he would be next.

But the caballero's wits were still working. He suddenly saw in this attack on El Hiena, a break for himself. If he could get around the Indians while their attention was on the bandit, he might reach the trail and escape.

Holstering his guns, Red Mask darted to the left, and started to

circle the milling mob that was for the moment intent on capturing El Hiena. He was almost to the rear of them when he collided with a husky Indian who had unexpectedly stepped in his path. The surprised native let out a yell of alarm and grabbed for the fugitive.

*Smack!* Red Mask lashed out with a looping left fist that knocked the Indian off his feet.

But the damage was done. Attracted by the ruckus, several rage-maddened natives leaped at the caballero. They were between him and his goal.

*Biff! Spat!* Red Mask's busy fists crashed rights and lefts into the brown faces that thrust angrily before him.

With a knock-out punch in each range-hardened hand, he mowed down the unskilled Indians like ripe grain before the sickle. But as fast as one went down, another took his place. It seemed there was no end to their numbers.

Panting and sweating, the caballero fought on with the fury of desperation. Given anything like odds of ten or fifteen to one, he would have pounded his way through to victory. But against a mob, a whole tribe——

*Crash!* A hard object, rock or club, struck Red Mask on the back of his head.

Only the massive sombrero he wore save him from a crushed skull. Stars swirled before his eyes. He staggered. His foes swarmed toward him.

Then a familiar voice seemed to come to him from a great distance. A firm hand on his arm steadied him. He shook his head to clear his reeling brain.

"Gray Eagle!" exclaimed the caballero, as his eyes focused clearly

on the powerful bronzed figure at his side.

"The guns, señor—quick!" cried the faithful Indian. "Fire over their heads to scare them back!"

The twin .45s in Red Mask's holsters leaped to his hands. Thundering and blazing before the frightened eyes of the natives, they opened a pathway through which the two hard-pressed amigos bounded.

Before the surprised Indians recovered their wits, Red Mask and Gray Eagle were leaping over the mesa rim, into the steep trail that led down the side of Bandit Butte. In the dim light of falling dusk, there was little danger of pursuit.

The evening stars were gleaming in the dark velvet sky like fairy lanterns, when two horsemen rode out of the shadow of Bandit Butte.

The *charro*-clad rider of the black horse glanced upward to where a fire blazed on the gloomy flat top of the butte. Many dark figures seemed to be dancing by the flickering light.

"It looks as if El Hiena will have plenty of company to-night, amigo," Señor Red Mask murmured to his companion on the buckskin pony.

Gray Eagle nodded, his somber eyes gazing up at the weird spectacle.

"*Si, señor*, that is true," he agreed. "But when the sun rises to-morrow

he will have only the company of the dead."

The caballero shivered slightly, although there was no chill in the night air. He was thinking of that ghostly skeleton company which slept its age-long sleep in the black pit of the ancient temple.

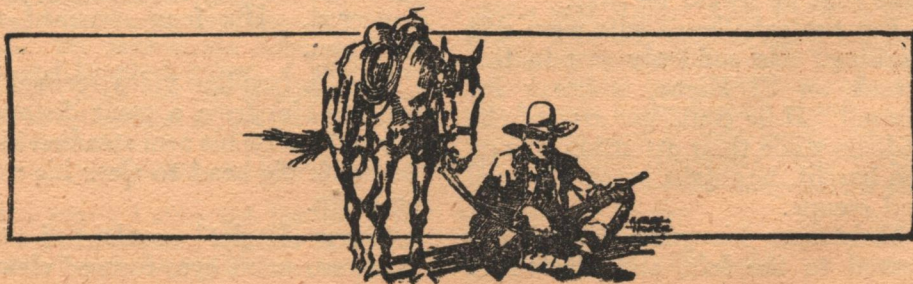
"But for you, amigo, I, too, would be with those skeletons," Red Mask said soberly. "You have told me that it was you who shot the arrow which stopped that torture, and who lured the bandits away from the temple. For that I give you a thousand thanks."

"But it was not I who brought the Indians up the trail, señor," Gray Eagle added dryly. "They were going to the temple for their sunset worship when the outlaws chased me. Those guns made them very angry. They went up to kill. Gray Eagle went with them. That is all."

Señor Red Mask reached down to touch the saddle pocket in which a poke of golden nuggets rode securely.

"It was plenty, amigo," he said happily. "All's well that ends well."

But it ain't ended yet, Señor Red Mask, we're afraid! Somehow or another, we got a hunch that we ain't heard the last of El Hiena. It don't seem possible that that ornery crook kin git out o' the jam he's in with them Injuns, but—waal, read the next story 'bout Senor Red Mask in next week's issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly an' see what happens.



# A Frontier Woman's Courage

A MAN named Ireland was the terror of southwestern Nebraska for a long time, and the mention of his name was enough to strike fear into the scattered settlements. Fire, robbery, the looting of homes, and even murder, were left on his trail every time he made a raid.

When it was known that he was abroad, terror seized the settlers, for many a humble dwelling was turned into a house of mourning through his merciless deeds.

At last, the climax came when a little baby was injured fatally when the desperado was looting a house on the Platte in the hunt for money.

He smashed the home-made furniture, tore up the cherished finery of the settler's wife, and threw kitchen utensils and other articles outside during his hurried search. The baby was struck by some heavy object, and when the settler saw his helpless infant knocked senseless by the ruffian, he became a raging fighter.

Seizing an iron bar that was used to barricade the door at night, he made for the villain who ran out and dashed into the timber. The wood was soon surrounded by the angry settlers, who were now too enraged to feel any fear.

Several women were present, watching eagerly, and ready if necessary to take part in the fray. Among these was Mary Simpson, who was standing near the horse her husband had ridden to the scene, while he was searching the woods with the other men.

Suddenly, she saw a bearded man leap from the underbrush and start running rapidly for the other side of the clearing in which she was standing. Knowing it would be use-

less to wait for her husband to come back, as this would give Ireland time to escape, Mrs. Simpson sprang into the saddle and gave chase.

She saw the outlaw leap onto his waiting horse, which galloped off before he was in the saddle.

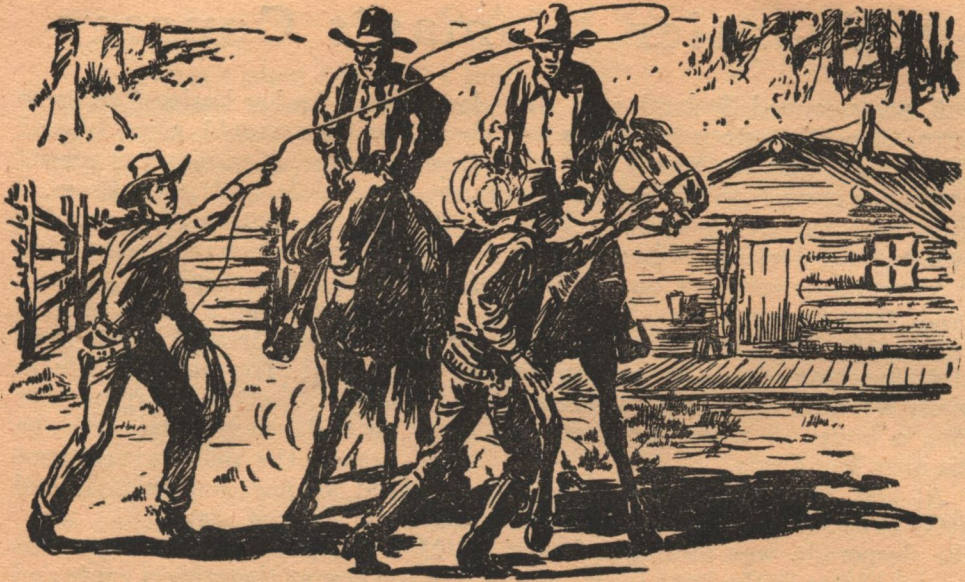
In order to avoid a tangle of trees and underbrush, Ireland had to keep to the north. His pursuer rode in a westerly direction, urging her horse on a slanting course. As she drew nearer, the man turned once and fired at her, but missed, and the chase did not stop.

Mrs. Simpson was as expert as any cowboy at throwing a rope, and her knowledge came in quite handy in this emergency. Loosening the lariat, she whirled it in long curves above her head, and just as Ireland had reached the open prairie, where he would be safe, the noose went sailing out after him.

Down it settled, steadily and surely, until it tightened with a deadly jerk about the desperado's neck. The brave woman stopped her horse, and the man was dragged from the saddle.

At this moment, the pursuing settlers arrived on the scene. They could have strung him up then and there, for his crimes were many, but they held him for the hangman, and he paid the full penalty for his misdeeds.

For many years, the name of Mary Simpson was familiar throughout southwestern Nebraska, and even to this day, the story of her courageous act in chasing and roping a criminal, is told and retold to the young folks along the Platte, so that they may never forget the brave deeds of their frontier ancestors.



# Kid Roper Tames A Grizzly

By Charles M. Martin

Author of "Horse Thief!" etc.

A BIG buckskin bronc was snorting angrily in the center of the breaking pen on the B Bar C as he strained against a long rope fastened to the snubbing post. "Kid Roper" was mounted on a wiry little roping horse that answered every pressure of his rider's knees.

The buckskin charged without warning, reared high with front feet chopping as the tall Kid kned the sorrel to the right. A rope snaked out from the rider's hand to snare one of the striking hoofs, and the buckskin was pulled down in the middle of his attack.

Another flip of the wrist shook the small noose from the front hoofs to be caught in the rider's right hand.

Old "Blue Ridge" Corbin leaned against the poles of the pen with indolent content while his faded blue eyes watched the Kid in the corral. "Kid Roper" they called him on the southwestern Texas border, and Blue Ridge never tired of watching this tall son of his when he was rope-breaking a half-wild horse.

Other horse tamers used a heavy saddle cinched tight, and a stout hackamore, straight bit, or Spanish curb. The Kid used a pair of snaky ropes that seemed to answer every

twitch of his calloused fingers, and the horses he broke were in demand by every cattle spread within fifty miles of Yoakum County.

The buckskin whirled savagely and lashed out with his heels as his hammer head went down between his knees, and again that small loop shot out to snare one of the lashing heels to pull the squalling buckskin down.

Over and over again the tall Kid roped the wild horse to stop a charge, and flipped the rope loose as he guided the little sorrel with a pressure of his knees.

Not once did he throw the buckskin, and old Blue Ridge Corbin shifted the quid in his mouth to voice a word of praise:

"Never saw the beat of you with hosses, Kid. Ropin', ridin', or gentlin' them, it's all one to you-all. Reckon you must have got hoss savvy from yore old grandpop from back in Tennessee."

Kid Roper grinned and flipped both ropes to free the buckskin. He was nearly six feet tall and slender as a lath. His face was serious for a boy of nineteen, but there was a twinkle in his blue eyes when he answered his father.

"Shucks, pa, it jest takes a mite of patience, is all. They ain't no mortal sense in man-handlin' a hoss what's goin' to be used for cattle work. Time I gits through with a hoss, he learns to respect a rope without bein' afraid of it. We got company, pa."

Blue Ridge Corbin turned slowly on his worn heels when the Kid jerked his head toward two men who sat their horses on the outside of the breaking pen behind him. He looked frail beside the two bearded strangers who had been watching Kid Roper work. But the Corbins

of Tennessee had always been noted for their hospitality.

"Give yuh howdy, gents," Blue Ridge said cordially. "Light off an' rest yore saddles a spell. Them hosses of yorn look plumb tuckered out."

"That brand burnt on the corral posts reads B Bar C, so you must be Blue Ridge Corbin," one of the strangers answered gruffly. "I'm Grizzly Thompson, an' my pard is Bull Mendoza. That spell you anything?"

Corbin shrugged his thin shoulders. "A gent's business is his own yere in Texas," he answered quietly. "Better slide down an' grain yore hosses, while ma throws us a bait together. Flannel cakes an' blackstrap 'lasses with a li'l sow-belly on the side. The old woman is the best cook in these yere parts!"

"Good idea," Thompson agreed. "Tell her to hustle that grub up so me an' Bull kin lope along. Nice little hoss spread you got back yere in the hills."

"Tol'able," Blue Ridge answered. "Now, you take back in Tennessee where I was borned—timber an' grass the year around, an' plenty of water. That's the reason me an' ma likes Longhorn. There she is yonder callin' us tuh grub."

The Kid was watching the two men while his father did the talking, and he frowned when they slid from their horses and trailed the reins before following his father.

He led the two weary horses to a low shed and loosened the tight cinches before giving the hungry animals a double ration of grain. Then he dusted off his worn overalls and high-heeled it across the yard to the little cabin under the cottonwoods which grew by a running spring.

The two strangers were already

wolfing their food when he entered the kitchen and took a chair. His mother put a warning finger to her lips as she shook her head slowly.

"Howdy, ma!" The Kid grinned. "Them flannel cakes shore smell good. You reckon you cooked enough?"

Old Blue Ridge dropped his knife when Grizzly Thompson answered gruffly: "She kin cook you some more when me an' Bull has loaded up. We ain't ate since yesterday."

"Shore," the Kid drawled. "Eat hearty, gents. I uncinched yore saddles an' give them broncs of yours a good feed of grain before I come in. Looks like you been makin' a long, hard ride."

"Grizzly" Thompson pushed back his plate and wiped his bearded lips with the back of his hand. He glared at the tall youth for a moment and lurched to his feet as he kicked the chair behind him.

"Nice of you tuh oncinch them cayuses," he growled. "Saves me an' Bull the trouble. Now all we got tuh do is throw them henskins on a pair of fresh hosses an' light a shuck."

The boy's blue eyes lighted up at the suggestion of a sale. The B Bar C raised horses and broke them to work, and Kid Roper was proud of the saddle stock that had been built up from bands of wild horses that he and his father had snared, back in the mountains. Some of them were part Arabian from the stock turned loose by the old Spanish Conquistadores, when Texas was still a wilderness.

"Got jest th' kind of hosses you need," he said eagerly. "Tall an' heavy enough to carry a big man, an' stocky in the barrel to climb the mountings all day. Sound in wind an' limb an' cheap at sixty dollars

a head. Fifty, if you want to leave yore animals for a trade!"

"Let's git out there an' look 'em over," Grizzly Thompson answered. "C'mon, Bull."

Old Blue Ridge Corbin exchanged glances with his wife as he followed the two men from the cabin. Kid Roper was already halfway to a pole corral that held a dozen broken horses, and he reached for a rope and snared a tall gray before the two strangers had reached the pen.

Blue Ridge fastened a hackamore to the gray while the Kid roped a stocky sorrel and led it to the shed where the trail-weary horses were eating.

The two men changed saddles, slipped the bridles on, mounted, and trotted the fresh broncs around the big yard. Grizzly Thompson was grinning when he reined up close to the two Corbins while "Bull" Mendoza sat his horse a length away.

"These will do," Grizzly said to Blue Ridge. "She's an even trade, ol'-timer, so me an' Bull will be hittin' th' breeze."

"You knows hossflesh," Blue Ridge answered with a smile. "Like the Kid said, you kin have 'em for fifty a head an' leave yore hosses tuh trade. Roper will make out the bills of sale."

"Make it pronto, Kid," Thompson growled. "Me an' Bull is in somewhat of a rush."

"Right away," Kid Roper answered. "Jest give pa the hundred dollars, an' I'll make out the papers. It's jest business, gents."

"Guess mebbe me an' Bull don't need no papers," Thompson answered. "Adios, gents!"

Kid Roper glanced at the six-guns on the leather-clad legs of the two men and rubbed a calloused

palm along the leg of his blue overalls. Neither he nor his father wore a gun, but the Kid automatically built a loop in the coiled rope in his hand.

"Wait up a spell," he said in a choked voice. "You owes me an' pa a hundred."

Grizzly Thompson slapped his right leg with a smooth movement that palmed his six-gun and drew it at the same time. His lips split in a wide grin as he covered the two Corbins. Old Blue Ridge was crouching forward, but he stopped suddenly when he saw the gun.

"'Pears like you don't know me an' Bull." Thompson chuckled. "We takes what we wants an' backs up our augerments with hot lead or cold steel. Uncoil yoreself, ol' man, before I salivates you pronto!"

"I'll git you for this if it takes me all my borned days," Blue Ridge whispered tensely. "The Kid is a borned Texan, but I come from Tennessee, where a man don't never forgit a meanness. So you better pay for them hosses, an' do it dad-burned quick!"

"Pay fer nothin'," Thompson growled. "Let's git goin', Bull!"

Blue Ridge Corbin leaped at the bridle reins like a catamount as the big man turned the horse. The gun in Thompson's hand roared like thunder. Blue Ridge jerked back, staggering.

Kid Roper flicked his wrist before his father fell to the ground. The tall sorrel reared as the gun exploded, and the Kid hip-leaned against the rope as the noose fell over Thompson's head and pinned his arms to his side.

He was jerked from the saddle like a sack of wheat. The heavy gun flew from his hand when he bounced on his shoulders.

Bull Mendoza spurred his horse

forward as his right hand drew his gun. Kid Roper dug his heels into the dirt and tried to dodge as the half-breed brought his arm down in a sweeping blow, and the gun grazed the Kid's temple and crashed down on his arm.

He went to his knees as Bull Mendoza left the saddle with arms spread out, and the two rolled over and over in the dust. Grizzly Thompson lurched to his feet and leaped forward as the Kid came to his feet.

Thompson started a punch from his hip that exploded under Kid Roper's chin to hurl him flat on his back. From a far distance he heard a sneering voice:

"Give him the boots, Grizzly. Teach him respect for his betters!"

The Kid heard Thompson laugh deep in his massive chest. Thick arms snatched him from his knees, and the breath was forced from his lungs when Grizzly Thompson crushed him to his chest.

Lights turned to dots that swam before his eyes, and the Kid sagged to the ground like a coiling rope when Thompson opened his powerful arms. Another dazzling flash seared his brain when Thompson's heavy boot mashed his lips against his hard white teeth, and Kid Roper fell forward in the dirt as a curtain of darkness blotted out consciousness.

## II.

Kid Roper opened his eyes on a world that was spinning madly about him. A wet cloth was on his battered face, and he tried to get to his feet while his arms instinctively covered his head.

He stopped struggling to listen when the soft voice of his mother came to him through the fog. Then

he pulled the rag from his face and sat up.

"Where they at?" he growled savagely. "Where's that Grizzly Thompson an' his pard?"

"They've been gone fifteen minutes, son," his mother sobbed. "At first, I thought you was dead, an' yore pa ain't moved since they shot him. See can you get up, son!"

Kid Roper turned his head, stared at the huddled body of his father near the pole corral. Then he pushed himself erect and staggered over with the help of his tiny mother. The fog left his brain as his fingers felt Blue Ridge's heart beating strongly. The .45 slug had struck old Blue Ridge high in the left shoulder. The old man opened his eyes and smiled wearily.

"I didn't have a hand gun," he whispered. "You better git the doc, Roper."

Kid Roper straightened up and gauged the distance to the house. Then he staggered to the shed and picked up his rope.

Saddling one of the weary horses, he fastened one end of the rope to a flat sled used to haul corn from a hillside field. The other end he dangled around his saddle horn and pulled the sled to where his father waited on the ground.

It took all his strength to pull the old man on the sled, and he was dripping with sweat when he finally laid old Blue Ridge on the low couch in the front room.

"I'll be back soon, ol'-timer," he panted, "soon as I catches me up a fresh hoss. Ma will look out for you till the doc comes."

In the pole corral he went through the motions of roping a big blue roan automatically. He stripped his saddle from the horse Grizzly Thompson had left and turned the wind-broke animal into the corral.

After saddling the roan, he coiled his rope and pulled himself into the saddle while his head swam dizzily. The blue roan bucked twice before the Kid's voice steadied him down, and then they were off across the valley like the wind.

Longhorn was eight miles from the B Bar C, and Kid Roper nearly fell from the saddle twice before he reached the little cow town. Doctor Burch's office was at the near end of the street going into town, and Kid Roper slid from the saddle and ground-hitched the tall roan with trailing reins.

The doctor came to meet him, when he saw the battered face through the window, and once inside the office he mixed some spirits of ammonia with water and handed it to the young Texan.

"Swallow that, Kid," he said gruffly. "It isn't liquor, and it will clear your head up some."

The Kid drank the mixture and took a deep breath. "You got to ride fast, doc," he said hoarsely. "Two rustlers had grub with us, an' then bought a coupla hosses. We had a li'l augerment when they tried to ride away without payin', an' pa was shot in the left shoulder."

"My horse is down at the livery," the doctor answered. "I'll get him right away."

"Take the roan," Kid Roper suggested quickly. "I'll git yore hoss an' come along slow. Yo're the one what has tuh hurry, doc. I'll jest take my rope fust."

Doctor Burch was still a young man and accustomed to the ways of the range. He grabbed his bag, swung up on the roan, and waved his hand. Kid Roper watched him gallop toward the long valley, and when he started for the livery barn, he slipped back to the alley and

made his way carefully to the big barn.

The hostler took one look at the battered face, after which he saddled the doctor's bay without a word. The tall boy ducked his head in the horse trough while he waited, and he grinned and shook himself as strength returned to his body.

"You see two strangers ride in on B Bar C hosses?" he asked the old hostler. "Big jiggers needin' a shave purty bad?"

"Sho did, Roper," the hostler answered eagerly. "Feller callin' himself Bull said as how he was goin' out to the Fish-hook to see an ol' pard. Heard him tell this other gent he'd be back, come supper time. You look like a mossyhorn bull done romped over yuh, Roper."

"Yeah," Kid Roper answered absently. "Got myself all tangled up with a bull an' a grizzly. I'd take it kindly if you didn't tell no one yuh seen me in town, for a while. Ol' Blue Ridge got shot up a mite, so I rode in tuh fetch Doc Burch. Evenin' to yuh, Sim."

The old hostler scratched his head and watched the tall cowboy ride up the alley to avoid the one street of Longhorn. A shrewd light was in his faded eyes as he muttered to himself:

"The Fish-hook outfit is halfway up the valley, an' I'm glad I tol' the Kid about that breed. 'Pears like he'd tote a gun after that ruckus, but I'd hate to be that Bull gent, if Roper sees him fust off!"

Kid Roper kept to the edge of the broad valley as he sent the bay toward the B Bar C at a slow lope. A fringe of cottonwoods marked a draw leading into a smaller valley which was the headquarters of the Fish-hook spread.

The tall cowboy rode up the draw

until he came to a little rise, where he reined in and narrowed his eyes to scan the green valley ahead. He nodded when his keen blue eyes spotted the bobbing Stetson of a jogging rider, after which he giggered the bay into the trailside brush and took the long rope from his saddle.

His fingers found the hondo and shook out a loop, while his eyes watched the approaching rider. Shifting the coils to his left hand, he let his right swing down at his side with the small loop turned back for a flipping cast. His eyes were slitted with determination while he waited for Bull Mendoza to reach his hiding place.

The half-breed was humming a song while his heavy body moved in rhythm to the movements of the tall roan. The small loop snaked forward as Kid Roper swung his right hand, and the song stopped short when the rope circled over the big man's head and pinned his arms to his side.

The Kid dallied the rope short before the roan could stop, and Bull Mendoza did a hoolihan and landed on his shoulders in the dirt. Roper slid from the saddle like a flash, kept the rope taut as he faced the breed with glinting eyes.

Mendoza rolled to his feet with a roar of rage as he tried to tear the rope loose.

"For thees I keel you! One time I let you live, but thees time you die!"

He made a sudden rush forward, and Kid Roper twitched the rope with a flip of his supple wrist. The oiled rope snaked forward like a thing alive, and a running half hitch caught the breed's right boot and jerked him to earth with a jolt.

The tall cowboy leaped forward and kicked the bottom of the open

holster with the toe of his boot while Mendoza floundered to get up. The heavy .45 sailed into the brush, and Roper stepped back and allowed the breed to get to his feet.

Again his wrist made a sudden flick to release Mendoza's boot, and he waited until the rustler clawed the rope from his arms.

"I'm goin' tuh whup yuh till yuh drop!" The words cracked from the cowboy's battered lips like pistol shots.

He was as tall as Mendoza, and fifty pounds lighter, but his muscles were tough and wiry from the hardest work on the range—riding the rough string.

Mendoza lowered his head and rushed like a bull, and the end of the rope leaped out to crack viciously under the lowered head. The breed screamed as his head jerked back, rubbed his throat where a crimson trickle was soaking his red neckerchief.

Again the rope flicked forward like a snake to cut the skin from his face just under the right eye, and he rushed at the tall cowboy with both thick arms swinging.

Kid Roper flicked the end of the rope and side-stepped as the breed rushed past. The small loop darted out to catch the boot heel, and the cowboy hip-leaned against the rope and threw Mendoza into a double somersault.

The loop leaped back into his hand when he jerked his wrist, and he waited until the big rustler got slowly to his feet.

Bull Mendoza was not bellowing now. His black eyes were merest slits of deadly hate as his right hand went to the back of his belt and grasped the handle of a knife hidden in a sheath under his sash. He sneered and held his hand for a mo-

ment, and then his arm slapped back for the throw.

Kid Roper was balancing on the soles of his boots with the rope in his right hand. Many times he had seen Mexicans cut the heads from chickens buried in the dirt with nothing but head and neck sticking above the ground.

His right hand shot forward in an underhand cast that twitched the rope through the air like the strike of a sidewinder, just as Bull Mendoza brought his arm down.

Kid Roper leaped aside as the knife whizzed toward him, and his eyes were deadly when his two hands plunged down toward his knees with all the weight of his body behind the sickening jerk. Bull Mendoza's head jerked back like an apple on a string, and he sagged back against the rope around his neck when a popping snap followed the hangman's jerk.

The tall cowboy let the heavy body fall without a change of expression on his tanned face, and then his wrist made a little twist that disengaged the rope and flipped it to his right hand.

Without looking at the body, he mounted the doctor's bay and rode back down the draw. The roan was grazing in the valley, and Kid Roper rode close and whirled his loop to snare the stolen horse. Then he rode on to the B Bar C with the roan on the end of his rope, and the outlaw's saddle to pay for his trouble.

His mother met him at the door of the cabin and looked long in his face before speaking. "You have any trouble, son?"

He shook his head slowly. "No trouble, ma," he answered softly.

"But you brought home that big roan," she insisted. "Did you kill a man, son?"

"Not a man," he answered evasively. "I met a hoss-stealin' side-winder back close to the Fish-hook, an' he tried tuh knife me with cold steel. All I did was flip my rope an' let him fall agin' it one time. Then I brung the roan along an' come on home. How's ol' Blue Ridge makin' out, ma?"

Mrs. Corbin sighed and shook her head sadly. "You got the mountain strain in yore blood, sonny," she whispered sobbingly. "We left Tennessee, 'count of the killin's, an' now you got blood on yore hands—you what was borned an' reared here in Taixas."

"Nary a drop, ma," he said gently. "I never touched that breed once with my maulies. I jest whupped him with my rope end till he reached for a knife, an' then I done like I said. What's doc say about pa?"

"Yore pa is right smart of a man in spite of his years," the old lady answered with pride. "Doc Burch says he will have to lay quiet for a spell of time—two, mebbe three, weeks. After that he'll be all right ag'in."

"Best not you fret about me," Roper said gently. "Reckon mebbe I better light out an' hide for a day or two, ma. Sher'ff might be lookin' for me, 'count of that ruckus up the valley draw."

Mrs. Corbin had been through two feuds back in Tennessee, and she nodded her head slowly as the tears coursed down her weathered cheeks. The tall cowboy took her in his arms and kissed her, laughed softly in her graying hair until the sobs stopped.

"That's better, honey," he whispered. "Tell ol' Blue Ridge not to fret himself none about me. I'll be right around clost where I kin watch the place."

WW—9A

The old lady handed him a saddle pack. "I seen you comin' down the valley with the roan," she explained. "Knowin' our folks like I do, I put you up a snack of victuals to take along. Take keer of yourself, sonny."

Kid Roper took the pack and ducked his head as he backed out of the kitchen door. Tying the doctor's bay to a post, he mounted the big blue roan and headed for the timber.

High above the valley, he dismounted and hunkered down on his heels, cowboy fashion, and ate his cold supper. Then he smoked several quirlies while the sun sank behind the hills, after which he tightened the latigo, swung up in the saddle, and headed for town.

### III.

Yellow lights were gleaming along the dusty street when Kid Roper rode out of the mountain valley. He could see the polished longhorns gleaming above the door of the saloon, with the windows of the sheriff's office shining on the opposite side of the street several doors down.

The big blue roan stopped in front of the swinging batwing doors where his rider could look over the top. The Kid's blue eyes glinted coldly when he saw the huge bulk of Grizzly Thompson standing at the long bar.

Thompson was drinking heavily and talking loudly. Lean Texan cowboys averted their eyes as they talked among themselves, and Thompson finished his glass and let out a yell like a Comanche Indian. He banged his glass on the bar as he squared his shoulders and stared contemptuously about him.

"The name is Grizzly Thompson, gents," he announced. "Grizzly by

name an' by nature, an' they ain't nothin' stands in the way of a grizzly when he comes down the trails. I aim tuh stay a spell in yore midst till I settles up uh li'le job I got in mind. They's been murder done yere in Longhorn tuh-day!"

"Sher'ff's office is right down th' street," the bartender volunteered. "Who got murdered, stranger?"

"The best pard a man ever had," Thompson answered loudly. "Bull Mendoza was his name, an' he was rope-drug behind a runnin' hoss up near the Fish-hook spread. I read the sign plain, an' I taken up fer him!"

"You mean that half-breed what rode out of town right after you an' him got here?" the bartender asked.

"That's him, but you be careful how yo're namin' names," Grizzly Thompson answered sharply. "Bull was right smart of a man, an' I taken up fer him. You happen to know a tall jigger named Corbin?"

"Broncstomper, yuh mean?" the bartender asked. "Tall kid about nineteen?"

"The same," Thompson answered. "Six foot tall an' big enough to hold a gun in his fist if he packs the sand tuh carry one. When I see that jigger, I'm lookin' at him through smoke, an' over the sights of my gun."

"That's Kid Roper, an' he don't pack a gun much," the bartender answered. "Never heard of Roper havin' trouble, onless some gent crowded him. An' so far he's always took care of hisself. Better let him alone, stranger!"

"Mebbe so yo're a friend of his," Thompson sneered. "You like tuh buy chips in this ruckus?"

The bartender shrugged and turned away. "Not tuh-night," he

answered shortly. "Kid Roper ain't never asked for help that I've heard."

"I bought a coupla B Bar C hosses from him an' got a bill of sale," Thompson shouted. "This Corbin gent murdered my pard, took them papers offen his corpse, an' stole a tall gray back ag'in."

Men scattered from the center of the room as Kid Roper crouched low on the neck of the roan and spurred through the swinging doors. Roper's right hand shot out as Grizzly Thompson slapped down for his gun, and the small noose caught the rustler's wrist and flipped the gun back over the bar. Another flip of the wrist and Kid Roper had the rope in his hand.

"Yo're a liar!" he snapped.

The tall roan stood motionless as his rider snapped the insult. Grizzly Thompson stepped back and reached inside his shirt for a shoulder hide-out. Kid Roper snapped his hand forward, dropped the small loop over the big man's head, and reined the roan back into a sitting position as the loop tightened around the muscular arms.

Grizzly Thompson was jerked forward suddenly to scrape his face on the rough planking, the rope holding his arms at his sides. Kid Roper wheeled his horse and spurred out through the swinging doors as he dropped the rope. He slid from the saddle and trailed the reins before Thompson could get to his feet.

"Git on yore hind laigs, polecat!"

It had all happened so quickly that the watching cowboys could only stand by and gape. Kid Roper leaped back into the saloon to grab the rope end as he shouted at Thompson, who was trying to find his feet.

He staggered erect just as the tall cowboy flipped the noose back to

his right hand and regarded him with a faint smile on his battered features. Thompson weaved back and forth as he struggled for breath, and he screamed when the noose shot out again like a striking snake to circle his thick neck.

Kid Roper was holding the rope in both hands, ready to make the hangman's jerk down between his knees.

"Stand hitched before I break yore neck like I did for yore hoss-stealin' pard," he growled savagely. "He tried tuh knife me, an' all I did was jerk my hands down with that knot behind his ear. Self-defense, but his neck popped like a whip-cracker!"

"Take him off," Grizzly Thompson moaned. "I'll git out of town an' never come back."

"This gent an' his pard rode out to th' Bar B C jest about noon," the tall cowboy explained to the crowd. "Had dinner with us an' said they wanted to buy a couple o' hosses. Picked out two of the best me an' ol' Blue Ridge had on the spread. Laughed at me when I asked for the money. An' this yere Grizzly done shot ol' Blue Ridge in the shoulder. Then he dang near caved my ribs with them arms of his, an' put the boots to my face when I was on the ground. I'm waitin' for yuh tuh say as how I'm a liar, Grizzly!"

"I'll pay for the hosses," the big man shouted, as the rope jerked just a trifle. "It was Bull's doin's from the beginning!"

"Did you git a bill of sale or didn't yuh?" Kid Roper demanded hoarsely, and his blue eyes were cold as ice.

"I'll pay," the rustler shouted pleadingly. Again the rope twitched against the left ear. "No!" he shouted. "We didn't git no papers!"

Kid Roper sighed as he shook his shoulders lightly. Then his right wrist twitched down and up, and the noose snapped above the rustler's head and flipped back to Kid Roper's hand. The tall cowboy called over his shoulder without taking his eyes from Grizzly:

"Come an' git him, sher'ff. I reckon you done heard his confession. I set out to tame me a Grizzly, an' you better take him away before I breaks his neck for what he done to ol' Blue Ridge!"

A square-shouldered man left his position in the swinging doors and came forward with a heavy six-gun in one hand, a pair of shining handcuffs in the other. His gray mustaches twitched with contempt as he ironed the cringing prisoner and jerked him toward the door.

"Doc Burch jest rode in an' told me the whole yarn," he answered Kid Roper. "Yuh done tamed yoreself a Grizzly, Kid!"

The crowd surged forward when a cowboy growled a threat. "Let's git a rope an' cut off this jasper's wind!"

"Stand hitched," the sheriff shouted. "Don't none of you gents git notions about a necktie party. This feller an' his pard is wanted by four different sher'ffs what couldn't catch 'em with guns, an' then he comes yere tuh Longhorn an' let's a yearlin' tame him down with nothin' but a grass rope."

"Yuh mean you ain't goin' tuh hold me?"

"Not none," the sheriff answered gruffly. "I'm obliged to you special, Roper. Now you better light a shuck for the B Bar C, 'cause doc-says yore ma an' ol' Blue Ridge is waitin' to hear how you tamed a Grizzly. Reckon we'll clip his claws jest tuh make shore he stays tamed. Be seein' yuh, Kid!"



## Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is offered in order to preserve the old cowboy songs and frontier ballads that have come down to us by word of mouth from our grandfathers. It is also intended to help you folks who enjoy collecting Western songs.

If you want to find the words to some cowboy song, write and tell us about it. We'll do our best to find it for you and publish it in the magazine. If you know any of the old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

We do not send out copies of songs to individual readers. All we can do is tell you in what issue of Wild West Weekly you will find the one you want.

Send all communications, with your name and address printed clearly, to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

**M**OVE up thar, yuh gals an' hombres! Move up thar on the bench, buckaroos an' cowgals! Hyar's an old friend of the Song Corral droppin' in ter say howdy! And he's got some plumb good cowboy song stuff fer us—like he always has.

Yes, yuh guessed it! Right the very first time! It's none other than ol' John Lomax, that rootin'-tootin'

hombre from Texas, carryin' his little black song bag!

Howdy, John! Come in an' set down! Take the weight off yore dawgs! That's better! Now what yuh got fer us ter-night?

A story on the line o' talk the broncbusters hand out when they're toppin' off the ornery ones, huh? Fine! Let's have it, John!

Here goes:

**"TALL TALK" TO A BUCKING  
BRONCHO**

By John A. Lomax

When my father first settled in the beautiful Bosque River valley, fifty miles north of Waco, Texas, Captain Sam Fossett owned about a thousand mustang mares, descended from old Spanish stock. They were as wild as coyotes and, when first roped, as vicious as mountain lions.

They usually grazed in one big herd in the valley on either side of Northington Branch, a small stream running into the Bosque River from the near-by mountains. When frightened by the approach of any one, they fled into the foothills, their long tails and manes streaming in the wind.

As outriders for the herd, several imported, thoroughbred, Kentucky stallions kept constant guard against danger, as well as quickly driving back into the herd any mare that seemed to wish to stray away.

In the spring of the year, these stallions sometimes fought among themselves, the fights resulting in the breaking up of the big herd into several smaller ones, each one with a stallion at its head as leader and guard.

From such herds as Captain Fossett's came the wonderful cow ponies used in the round-up and on the trail. Likewise, from the same breed come the best polo ponies of to-day.

The surplus young horses, three and four years old, were sold off each season. But before delivering them to their new owners, every horse had to be "broke," that is it had to be trained to carry a saddle and a rider and be "bridlewise."

This was the job for Captain Fossett's crew of cowboys. To break

and tame one horse is a man's job; when the numbers run into hundreds, the work resembles one of the labors of Hercules.

The Fossett corral was near my father's ranch. On Sunday mornings, I was usually sitting on the top of that high corral fence watching a show such as you can't see to-day in Tom Mix's wild and woolly buckaroo exhibitions.

The corral fence, twelve feet or more in height, was built in a circle so as to lessen the danger of the crowded and frantic horses hurting themselves. There were no corners into which they might jam.

Round and round this circular pen the horses would run, keeping as far as possible from the men who stood near the middle of the pen, ready to rope out one of them for breaking.

One Sunday, Ed Nichols, Frank Hornbuckle, and Bob Hanna each had ridden horse after horse after it had been roped, choked down, hog-tied, blindfolded, saddled, and finally turned out through the wide gate opening into the valley, to run and pitch until he was too tired to go farther.

As one of the riders would mount a fresh unbroken horse, the helpers would shout: "Ride him high, wide, and handsome, Bob!" "Hit him on the hairy side!" "Don't pull leather!" (Don't hold to the saddle horn.)

When the horse was well under way others would add, "Fan him, Bob, fan him!" meaning that Bob should pull off his heavy, six-gallon white Stetson and strike the horse's flanks, first on one side and then on the other. "Now hook your spurs in him and ride him, cowboy, ride him!"

Meanwhile, Bob, as he began his ride, would be having something to say for himself, perhaps to keep his

courage up. In between the wild jumps of the terrified horse, Bob would chant, keeping time as best he could to the frenzied plunges:

Born on the Colorado,  
Sired by an alligator,  
I'm a bold, bad man  
From Cripple Creek, Colorado.  
When I git back  
There'll be a tornado!

Git higher, git higher,  
The higher you git's  
Too low for me.  
I'm tellin' you,  
Flamdeoedledum!

Bob would shout a line while the horse was in the air, the end of each line coming at the end of each leap. Should the horse fail to stop for a rest at the end of the poem, Bob would repeat it or add more lines.

Sometimes when he was feeling particularly happy he might yell:

I'm wild and woolly  
An' full of fleas,  
Ain't never been curried  
Below the knees.

I'm a wild she-wolf  
From Bitter Creek,  
And it's my time  
To h-o-w-l! Whoop-i-e-e-ee.

Sometimes this talk was put in the form of a dialogue between the horse and the man. Horse and man talk as horse pitches:

HORSE: "I want ye!"  
MAN: "You cain't git me!"  
HORSE: "I want ye!"  
MAN: "You'll have to throw me first."  
HORSE: "I want ye!"  
MAN: "Ah, you done got me!"

Although it was a disgrace for a rider to pull leather or be thrown, now and then the best among the cowboy bronchobusters bit the dust. One Sunday Ed Nichols's horse pitched straight out the big gate, on across the valley, up the foothills, without a stop or pause for more than a mile.

When the winded horse finally slowed down, Ed was rolling in his saddle. The two outriders helped him down. Blood was pouring from his nose and oozing from his ears.

Recently, thirty years afterward, Ed said to me, "That was the worst jolting I ever got. Some of my rheumatism started that day and has never quit."

Frank Hornbuckle, long, angular, and wiry "afraid of nothing that wore hair" used to chant the longest war song as his plunging mount went up and down:

Wasp nests and yaller jackets,  
The higher you pitch, the sweeter my navy  
tastes.

Born on the Guadalupe,  
Ten miles below Duck Pond,  
Raised in the Rocky Mountains.  
Hang one spur where the collar works  
And the other where the 'crupper works.

Four rows of jaw teeth  
And holes punched for more;  
Steel ribs and iron backbone,  
And tail put on with screws,  
Double dew-clawed,  
Knock-kneed and bandy-shanked,  
Nine rows of teeth,  
And holes punched for more.

Frank, Bob, and Ed, three buckaroos and tail-twisters! Cool, versatile, agile, masters of the lore of the range and the tricks of wild horses! Men such as you tilted lances in the tournaments of the days of romance.

Your heroism and endurance was only seen amid the dust and heat of Texas cattle pens, where you were forced to indulge in "tall talk" to make the danger seem less real.

Shucks! Yuh ain't quittin' now, are yuh, John?

Waal, if yuh've got tuh go—  
But be shore an' come back an' see us ag'in, some time.

Reckon thet's all fer tuh-night, folks. So long till next week.



# Western Pen Pals

Conducted by SAM WILLS—Postmaster

Some day you're going out West yourself to the Western outdoors. It will be a nice thing to have friends out West when that time comes—friends who'll extend a hand o' welcome and put you onto things.

You can make these friends through this department of Wild West Weekly. The idea is to exchange information about different parts of the West—about ranches and camps, getting work, prospecting, and learning to rope and ride.

Letters are exchanged only between men and men, and between women and women. Let's get together and make this department a real help to readers of Wild West Weekly. I'll do my part by forwarding letters between parties likely to be interested in writing to one another. You do yours by always printing your whole name and address carefully on every letter you send to this department; and by giving the name and State of the Pen Pal you choose, as it appears in the magazine, as well as the date of the magazine in which you find him or her.

Address your letters to Sam Wills, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

**H**ERE'S one o' several received this week that I feel should be brought to yore attention. It says in part:

"I thank you sincerely for having forwarded the letters I sent you some time ago, but I must tell you to my regret that all have remained

unanswered so far. It seems to me that the least they could have done was to acknowledge my letters with a postal, even if they did not care to take me on as another Pen Pal. Surely every Pen Pal ought to consider that each one, individually, owes your magazine the duty of

keeping its reputation at its deserved height."

Now thet's plain talk, an' I hope my publishin' it will do some good. No promise should ever be given if one doesn't intend tuh live by it.

But thar's plenty o' letters in this week's mail, so let's dig right in.

## HOBBIES AN' SPECIAL INTERESTS

I jest reckon thet most o' the Pen Pals will turn tuh these letters first, an' they should if they're interested in collectin' or if they're ridin' some special hobby:

DEAR SAM: As I am especially interested in writing stories, I should like very much to get in touch with cowboys, writers, or artists in Western States like Texas and Arizona who could give me information and atmosphere. Besides that, I shall gladly answer letters of short-story writers anywhere in the world. I am a boy in my late teens.

M. C., OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of seventeen, fond of all sports and a great movie fan. As a hobby I collect snaps and postal cards and should like to find Pen Pals anywhere, but preferably in the South and West, who are similarly interested.

MISS BLUE EYES, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: Please get some Pen Pals for a girl of seventeen who desires to trade snaps and cowboy songs. Letters from anywhere are welcome.

BEATRICE, OF OKLAHOMA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to hear from Pen Pals anywhere in the world. I am a girl of eighteen and prefer to correspond with girls of my own age. I am fond of all sports, especially horseback riding and swimming, while drawing is my favorite indoor hobby.

NITA, OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a fourteen-year-old girl, and I should like to have Pen Pals of my own age from anywhere with whom I could exchange snaps and letters.

K. BRADSHAW, OF NEBRASKA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fifteen in search of Pen Pals from everywhere. My favorite hobbies are sports of all kinds,

writing letters, and collecting movie-star pictures. Indian girls would be especially welcome.

JEANNE, OF WASHINGTON.

DEAR SAM WILLS: Real Pen Pals are wanted from eighteen to thirty years old, who can write English and are interested as I am in nature study, Indian lore, travel, stamps, pets, game or fur farming. I am a man who has traveled extensively, and who is told that he can write good letters.

A. V. B., OF UTAH.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl, twenty-three years old and I would like to hear from Pen Pals, especially those who are interested in collecting samples of different kinds of rock found in the U. S. A. My hobbies are music, drawing, hiking, stamp collecting, and sports. I promise to answer all letters and will also exchange snaps.

CALIA VICTOR, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl in my early teens, a junior in high school. I wish you would get me some good Pen Pals, no matter in what part of the country they live, with whom I could exchange songs and pictures of movie stars.

HELEN B., OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of sixteen who would like to make friends with others who can tell me about the beauties and attractions of the places where they live. My hobbies are travel, music, tap dancing, and sports. I should be glad to exchange snaps, postal cards, stamps, books, and magazines.

TOBY, OF TENNESSEE.

## SEEKING PEN PALS ABROAD

Thet should be very welcome to foreigners, as they'll save a lot o' time. But be sure an' see thet yore letters bear sufficient postage, when yuh send replies to these:

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a girl of eighteen, working as a stenographer. I am interested in Pen Pals and would especially like to hear from some girls around my own age from across the seas.

DORIS OLSON, OF MINNESOTA.

DEAR SAM: Please help a fourteen-year-old girl to find some Pen Pals in foreign countries or among cowgirls here, no matter how old they may be.

ESTHER WAGNER, OF MONTANA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fifteen. On account of the fact that my health is not very good, I am not going to school, and so have lots of time to write letters. I should like to find Pen Pals in Africa or other countries.

R. DeFOE, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fourteen. I ride, rope, and shoot quite a bit, and I should like to find boys in England or other foreign countries who are similarly interested, so that we can exchange ideas.

PAUL COUCH, OF TEXAS.

### WANTIN' PEN PALS HERE

Here's quite a number o' folks from overseas who are askin' fer Pen Pals in our own country. I reckon they'll find quick an' plentiful response.

DEAR SAM WILLS: Having read so much about Western life in the United States, I would like to be brought in contact with some real Westerner who lives on a ranch and does a lot of hard riding. In exchange for what he can tell me, I shall gladly give him what information he may wish about my country and the kind of outdoor life we may lead here. I am a young man of thirty and prefer Pen Pals of about my own age.

STAFF, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: I am writing to you in the hope of obtaining a Pen Pal in your country. I am a boy, fifteen years old, keen on sports, and I shall be pleased to describe our games to any correspondent. I am also interested in engineering.

COOKE, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: I am taking this opportunity to ask you if you know of a fellow who would like to correspond with me and exchange snaps, et cetera. I am a boy of twenty-one, interested in all sports and willing to keep up the correspondence with any one of about my own age.

HENRY COTHEAD, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a lover of ranch life and everything concerning the West. I am also a lonely girl who would like to find Pen Pals among cowgirls and other Westerners. Will you try and obtain such Pen Pals for me?

AUDREY, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a boy of sixteen, and I should like to correspond with boys on ranches in California and Canada. Please secure some Pen Pals for me.

BERNARD O'NEILL, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fourteen, and I should like girls around that age to write to me. I am a lover of animals, especially horses and dogs, and am also fond of all sports. Kindly state further that I am a Girl Guide.

MARIAN CHATWOOD, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I would like to join the Pen Pals. I am a girl, fourteen years old, and I should like to find some correspondents around my own age who are interested, as I am, in outdoor life and sports. I am quite lonely since we recently have moved, and I have not many friends here.

OLIVE ADAMS, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonesome girl of nineteen, living miles away from my home and people. I am interested in all outdoor sports and love animals and birds. Kindly obtain some Pen Pals of my own age for me, and I promise to be a good correspondent. Will also exchange snaps.

REENE LEWIS, OF ENGLAND.

### WESTERNERS TUH THE FORE

This Pen Pal Corner jest wouldn't be complete without calls fer gals an' boys from the West. I hope they'll answer quickly an' tell the tenderfeet what they want tuh know about the West.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of eighteen and a good sport. I should like to get some cowboy Pen Pals from Montana and Texas and promise to answer all letters, also exchange snaps.

WRIGHT, OF ALABAMA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a girl, fourteen years old. My favorite hobbies are playing the piano and outdoor sports. I should like to have Pen Pals from any of the Western States, especially cowgirls, but promise to answer every letter I get, no matter where it comes from.

TOMBOY SUE, OF WEST VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of twelve, and I hope you can find some Pen Pals of my own age for me in Texas and Arizona. I shall answer all letters promptly.

THOMAS GRAHAM, OF KENTUCKY.

DEAR SAM: I have always wanted to get in touch with girls of the Western States and others, too. But the West seems to hold the greatest attraction. I am a girl, nineteen years of age, and live on a farm. I am fond of dancing, basket ball, and swimming, and just love having Pen Pals to correspond with. Will exchange snapshots.

A BELLE, OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of eighteen. As I intend going West in the near future, I should like to get in touch with cowgirls in Texas or Arizona who can and would be willing to give me full information as to their mode of living. My hobbies are outdoor sports, especially horseback riding, and I am also interested in movies. I should be very happy if I received some snaps depicting a cowgirl's life.

POLLY B., OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a young girl, greatly interested in all that the West stands for, and for that reason I should like to hear from cowgirls around seventeen years old, which is my own age. Will exchange photos and promise to answer all letters.

MYRTLE JOHNSON, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of seventeen, interested in obtaining Pen Pals in Western States. I should be especially glad if some cowboys from Arizona would answer this request. I promise to answer letters as soon as they are received.

JIM B., OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am just another fellow asking for your assistance in my efforts to find Western Pen Pals. Being a cowpoke myself, I should like to get my correspondents from among them, and I think we could get along very nicely together.

COWPOKE, OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM: How are chances for a European girl to get into your column? I would like to obtain permanent Pen Pals and no make-believes—plenty of them, from all over the world, but especially Westerners. My hobbies are riding a motor cycle and horseback riding. I have traveled quite a bit and can give loads of interesting information as well as reports on my adventures.

DUCHESS, OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl, fourteen years old. I should like very much to have some Pen Pals in Arizona and Texas, girls of my

own age who live on ranches. Will exchange information and pictures.

LUCILE MARTIN, OF MONTANA.

### ASKIN' FER ASSISTANCE

DEAR SAM: I am a husky chap of twenty, writing to ask for your assistance in my efforts to find a job. I was born and raised on a farm, but have lived in town for the last three years. My liking for outdoor life drives me to try to find a ranch job, and if any Pen Pal can help me get located, I sure would be glad to hear about it promptly.

HAROLD DORDEL, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM WILLS: Since I am a reader of the W. W. W., I think you will allow me to ask a favor of you. I want cowboys in New Mexico and Arizona to write to me—also some people who are interested in lion hunting. I have punched cattle in the Ozarks for the last ten years, but since the government bought a lot of cattle here there is nothing left for a man to do, and I should like to hear about chances for work in the West.

H. W. L., OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of nineteen and being out of a job, I come to you for help. Could you, through your Pen Pals in the West, find a ranch where I can obtain a job? I surely would appreciate it and having worked on a farm all my life, I know that I can make good.

A. DELESTINE, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: May I engage your help in my efforts to obtain a copy of the song "Bob Tail Cannon Ball"? I should gladly give any song from my collection in exchange for it. Perhaps one of your Pen Pals has the song and is willing to trade. Please let me hear promptly.

MRS. STERRETT, OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am trying to find my lost sister and brother, and I beg you to print my letter in the hope that some reader may give me information. My sister's name is Bruce Beatrice Raines—age, thirty-three; color of hair, black; color of eyes, dark-brown; complexion, olive. Weighs around one hundred and thirty pounds and has a scar on the jaw.

Her first husband's name was Dave Williams of Bristow, Oklahoma, her second

husband's name, Charles P. Raines, of Kansas City, Missouri. My sister had an accident in 1933 and was last heard from in New York, somewhere on forty-seventh Street.

My brother was last heard from in Sixty-fourth Street, New York. His name is Howard Slaughter. Age twenty-eight, hair and eyes, dark brown; complexion fair. Weighs around one hundred and sixty pounds. He is of mixed breed Cherokee, high cheek bones, keen nose. Has a scar on the forehead. He joined the navy in 1923 and may now be in some Southern State. His father's name was Sam, who was killed on December 10, 1920, between Bristow, Oklahoma and Kellyville.

If any one can give information about the whereabouts of my sister or brother, please notify me at once through the W. W. magazine.

HAZEL SUISSIE SLAUGHTER.

#### OTHER REQUESTS

Jest letters of a general order—Pen Pals being wanted here an' there, an' each one o' them should be quickly answered.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of eighteen, and I should like to get some Pen Pals. I have tried before, but failed. However, as I am not limiting my request as to age or residence, I hope that this time I shall be successful in getting a few good ones.

AMER TYDGAT, OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a girl of twenty-five, and I like to write letters. So I am now trying to find Pen Pals with whom I can correspond. I am not particular as to age or nationality of those who will write, as long as I get plenty of letters in reply to

this plea. I shall answer all letters promptly.

JOSEPHINE DEWARK, OF CONNECTICUT.

DEAR SAM: I am a widow living on a farm alone with an aged mother. I would like to have Pen Pals anywhere, Westerners included, and if there are lonesome ones among the readers of this request, tell them my recipe for loneliness, which is to plant a flower or watch the sun rise.

MRS. GASH, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: If you know of any Pen Pal who is dependable and likes to write long letters, put her in touch with me, no matter where she lives. I am a girl, but as to age and hobbies—well, that is a mystery to be solved only by writing to me. Who'll be the first to try to solve it?

MYSTERIOUS, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am writing in the hope of getting some Pen Pals from all over the world who are interested in exchanging information about the respective places we live in. I am a girl in my teens, and I promise to answer as many letters as I possibly can, but certainly every one that contains return postage.

LAVAY ARD, OF MISSISSIPPI.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of nineteen, hungry for Pen Pals from anywhere and of all ages. I have been quite ill recently, and the days seem long and empty. So I shall only be too glad to have letters to answer to.

TOOTS, OF LOUISIANA.

Thar now, folks, thet's as nice a bunch o' letters as I ever printed, an' no one should have much trouble in findin' the Pen Pal he prefers. Good luck tuh yuh—an' so long.





15¢

*Rich in Thrills  
of the Game!*

**STREET & SMITH'S**

# **SPORT**

**STORY MAGAZINE**

**TWICE A MONTH**

**AT ALL NEWS STANDS**



# The Wranglers Corner

All letters intended for The Wranglers Corner should be addressed to The Range Boss, Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

**H**I yuh, Sonny!" booms Buck Foster, as the young outlaw comes moseyin' inter the Corner fer this week's meetin' o' the 3W riders. "How yuh makin' out, nohow?"

Sonny Tabor smiles an' walks over ter shake hands with his Circle J pards—Billy West, Buck Foster, the chink, Sing Lo, and Joe Scott. A blind hombre could see thet he's plumb de-lighted ter meet up with 'em ag'in.

"Waal," he drawls, answerin' Buck's question, "everythin's about the same with me, Buck. Had another run-in with the law, this week, but——"

"Help me, Hannah!" Buck interrupts. "Tell me who the skunk was, an' I'll ride over ter see him an' beat the livin' daylights plumb out of him. Nobody kin pick on a

pard o' yores truly, Buck Foster, without——"

"Aw, that's all right, amigo," cuts in Sonny. "I shore 'preciate yore offer, but thet sheriff wasn't such a bad hombre. Him an' me got to understand each other plumb well afore I lit out of his county."

The rest o' the outfit—meanin' Circle J, Calamity Boggs, an' his sawed-off little pard, Shorty Stevens—laughs at thet. They all know thet Sonny's got a way with him when it comes ter sheriffs. They ask him ter tell him all about it, an' he does.

Meantime, we opens the mail sack an' dumps the letters out on the table. We shore wishes we could read the whole batch. But if we did, we'd be here till week after next—with more mail keepin' comin' in all the time.

When Sonny finishes tellin' the outfit about his run-in with the law—the same story thet the writin' hombre, Ward M. Stevens, has called "Sonny Tabor's Snowbound Trail"—we gits down ter business. Openin' the first letter, we reads as follows:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to the Wranglers Corner, although I have read your magazine for several years. I find it a very interesting magazine and only wish that it was larger.

It is amusing to read the Wranglers Corner and see the letters from the chronic kickers. They are like geese. They git so full of orneriness they have to explode.

I can find no fault with your characters as some do. I have no special favorites, since I think they are all good. Of course, there are some stories that I like better than others, but that does not mean that the others are rotten.

Some hombres sure have it in for Buck Foster, but I think he is great. It takes all kinds to make a magazine, just as it takes all kinds to make a world. If everybody was perfect, the world would be plumb uninteresting.

Buck has a heart of gold, he means well, and he makes mistakes. But he would lay down his life for his pards, and I wonder how many knockers would do that.

Some people, also, find fault with George Krumm. I'll admit that he's a pretty poor specimen, but he and Johnny in a story sure make a *real* story. I hope we have a lot more of them, soon.

If the loud-mouthed knockers don't like Buck and George, they don't have to read their stories. Let them figure that out and quit their yelping.

Yours for more and better stories,

A READER.

St. Joseph, Missouri.

Needless ter say, Buck Foster is plumb pleased with thet letter. He sets there, puffin' out his leathery cheeks, preenin' his droopin' mustache, an' lookin' like he's jest been elected president o' the Cattlemen's Association.

O' course, Joe Scott don't let *thet* sort o' thing last long.

"Thet's all right," he says, "comin'

from a gent what ain't never had ter live with Foster. If he'd spend jest one day with the locoed ol' coot, tryin' ter keep him from bein' killed, straightenin' him out every few minutes, pertectin' him——"

"Waugh!" Buck goes on the prod like a range bull.

In a couple o' minutes, the Corner is echoin' ter their insults an' taunts.

We let's 'em go it, fer a while, knowin' thet till they start ter run down, there ain't nothin' we kin do ter stop 'em. But pretty soon, Billy West an' us, tergether, gits 'em calmed down, an' we goes on with the readin'.

Here's the next letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading the 3W for a long time. So far, it has always been good. But one recent issue was rotten. The very idea of your putting women into your stories just because a lot of locoed hombres and gals asked you to!

Are you going loco, just because you have received a few letters from silly women?

Anybody who will deliberately spoil a fine magazine just to do a favor for a few women is a mangy, low-down, side-winding son of a polecat.

I dare you to print this letter, for that last means you, Range Boss. I want the other readers to know what I think of you.

I like all your characters, except Sonny Tabor. His stories are always the same—over and over again.

The Circle J outfit is the best of all, although I like Kid Wolf and many others, too.

Buck Foster is the best gun fighter who ever packed a gun. Anybody who doesn't agree with me, is invited to come and try to make me change my mind.

Yours till Buck cashes in,

L. C. CLENENGER.

Wright City, Oklahoma.

"Waal," we exclaims, "thet hombre shore has got it in fer *us*, ain't he? Dog-goned, though, if we know jest what he's talkin' about! Thet's the first we've heerd o' the magazine bein' sp'iled. We ain't changed our policy none—'bout gals in stories."

"An' imagine the skunk sayin' he don't like Sonny!" snorts Buck. "I'll be a horned toad if I don't think he said what he did about me, jest because he's plumb afraid o' me."

"He ain't thet loco," says Joe. "Nobody'd be afraid o' yuh, yuh stove-up ol' sage hound!"

"Am thet so?" shouts the veteran—an' they're at it ag'in. When they quiets down, we reads this one:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I like your W. W. W. magazine very much. I like Kid Wolf, the Oklahoma Kid, and the Circle J pards best, but I like all the others very much, too.

I am just getting to like the Bar U twins, for I have just become acquainted with them.

Yours till Buck Foster and Joe Scott quit quarreling,  
Huntsville, Texas. TOMMY GEE.

An' here's another:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my second letter to you, and I sure hope that it makes the grade and gets into print.

Lately, I have noticed that a lot of letters in the Wranglers Corner ask you to leave out the Circle J stories. I want to say that Circle J is the backbone of 3W. If it was not for the saddle pards, 3W would not be the great magazine it is. It was Circle J that started me reading your magazine.

I noticed also that one reader, not long ago, had some dirty cracks to make about the whole spread. I'd sure like to get my hands on him. But don't mind that kind, Boss, because they are way in the minority.

In closing his letter, the above mentioned reader said he extended the 3W waddies his sympathy. It seems to me that he should keep his sympathy to himself, because he'll surely need it—and plenty more.

Boss, just keep on putting in Circle J and running things as you always have. If you do, I am sure that W. W. W. will not suffer from a lack of readers.

Adios, Boss! MAX ROSNICK.  
Newark, New Jersey.

Thanks a heap, Max! It's shore a pleasure ter git letters like thet. It almost makes us fergit the others thet ain't got nothin' but complaints.

O' course, we don't mind complaints. In fact, we're glad ter git 'em—when they're the real McCoy an' not jest from some gent who figures thet by sayin' the worst things he kin think of, he kin git his letter printed. We're gittin' plumb expert at pickin' out thet kind!

Waal, here's another. Let's see what this one's got ter say:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I am dropping you a few lines to tell and ask you a few things.

I want to know why you never put Jim Hazel in, any more. He was as fine a ranger as there ever was, and I want to hear from him again.

Please put in more stories about Johnny Forty-five, Kid Wolf, and Circle J. They are my favorite characters.

I like your magazine very much, but I won't like it very much if you don't bring back Jim Hazel and leave out all dames.

Say, why don't you give the chink, Sing Lo, more to do in the Circle J stories? He is a plumb *bueno hombre*, even if he is a chink. He's got more sense than Buck Foster. Joe Scott is all right, and so is Billy West.

If you don't want to print this, it's O. K. with me. But at least you'll read it. So take the hint.

Yours if you bring back Jim Hazel,  
BILL SHERRICK.

Scottdale, Pennsylvania.

"Waal," we says, as we lays thet letter down, "let's hear from some more o' Jim Hazel's friends, an' we'll see. Now— How much time we got left."

A quick look at the clock shows us thet we got time fer one more. Liftin' a letter off the stack, we opens it an' starts readin'. Here's what we reads:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading W. W. W. for about three or four years, and I think it is one of the best Western magazines I have ever found. I don't know much about the West, but 3W seems to me to give the best picture of it.

As for my favorite characters, that's a hard question to answer. I like all the waddies—some more than others. Like peo-

ple, none of them is perfect and none entirely bad.

I notice, however, that whenever I get a new copy of 3W I look first to see if there is a story about either Sonny Tabor or Kid Wolf. If there is, I read it first. I suppose that proves that Sonny and the Kid are my favorites.

Silver Jack Steele runs a close second to them, however. Whenever I see that there is a story by William F. Bragg, I go for that. Which makes something of a problem when there is a Tabor or Wolf story in the same number.

I find, too, that I don't often read more than a few pages of a Circle J story without turning to something else. I've got nothing against the saddle pards—sometimes they are fine—but they just don't click with me, usually.

I did not like the stories about Tex Carnochen, of Bitter Creek, at all. I don't know what was wrong, but I just couldn't

get interested in them. I'd like to see a new series about Starr of Wyoming.

But I want to say a good word for the stories that aren't about the regular characters. Many of them are much better than the stories about the regulars—especially when they are written by Paul S. Powers or William A. Todd. And a lot of the short stories about nonregular waddies have struck me as being pretty good.

Well, I guess I've said enough. Give my best regards to all the gang, keeping a good-sized share for yourself. Maybe I'll be seeing you again. So long. AL TRASK.

Buffalo, New York.

An' thet winds up the meetin'. The waddies light out fer their home ranges, an' we locks up till the bunch comes ridin' in next week fer another meetin'.

THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

## Gun Buzzards

*Novelette*

By PHILIP F. DEERE

They're a plumb ornery outfit o' gun slingers an' whenever they ride the range, trouble o' some kind is shore ter start poppin' pronto.

## Kid Wolf On Hornet Range

*Novelette*

By WARD M. STEVENS

It's a right unhealthy place fer a gent o' the Kid's caliber—murderers not likin' his kind. But thet don't bother the Kid. He unlimbers his Peacemakers an' cleans up.

## Señor Red Mask At Trail's End

*Novelette*

By GUY L. MAYNARD

He sees to it thet when his trail does end, the trails of a lot of side-windin' killers ends at the same time—fer keeps.

Also stories of the Whistlin' Kid, by Emery Jackson; the Shootin' Fool, by Houston Irvine—and other characters.

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

15 CENTS A COPY

ORDER IN ADVANCE FROM YOUR NEWS DEALER

# Year After Year!



## The Standard of **QUALITY**

**WRIGLEY'S FOUR  
FAMOUS FLAVORS**

- SPEARMINT
- DOUBLE MINT
- JUICY FRUIT
- P. K.



NO MORE  
ENERGY?...

GET A LIFT  
WITH A CAMEL!

● Mrs. William LaVarre, the daring American girl explorer, whose long-distance treks through the South American jungles have taught her the vital necessity of keeping up her energy reserve, says: "We took 30,000 Camels with us on our last expedition. Any time I'm tired, I just stop and smoke a Camel. Smoking Camels steadily, I find, does not affect one's nerves."

**DIVER:** "I have smoked them for years," Frank Crilley says of Camels. "They taste better...and they never upset my nervous system."

**PRO FOOTBALL STAR...** "Cliff" Montgomery: "After a game, or any time I feel like it, I light a Camel and in a short time feel 100% again."

**LEAF-TOBACCO  
EXPERTS AGREE:**

"Camels are made from finer, more expensive tobaccos—Turkish and Domestic—than any other popular brand."



**Share This Refreshing Effect That has  
Meant so Much to Others!**

The key to physical and mental alertness is energy. Hence the importance of the fact that smoking a Camel actually "turns on your steam." Camel smokers agree upon the benefit and enjoyment they find in Camel's "energizing effect." Turn to Camels yourself! You'll find Camels delightfully mild. They never jangle your nerves, no matter how many you smoke!

**CIVIL ENGINEER.** Captain Eric Loch says: "Camels give me a 'lift' in energy when I am weary or feeling 'low.' Camels never jangle my nerves."

**CAMEL'S COSTLIER TOBACCOS. NEVER GET ON YOUR NERVES!**

Copyright, 1934,  
R. J. Reynolds  
Tobacco  
Company