

STREET & SMITH'S

# WILD WEST★

WEEKLY

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FEB. 22, 1936

10¢

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

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**"HUNGRY and RUSTY"**  
NOVELETTE

By SAMUEL H. NICKELS





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Cover Picture—Scene from

"Buzzards of the Chisholm Trail". Painted by H. W. Scott

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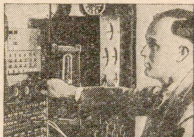
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**SEND ONLY \$1.00 DEPOSIT on each tire ordered.**

(\$4.00 on each Truck Tire). We ship balance C. O. D. Deduct 8 per cent if cash order in full with order. If all order promptly we may substitute brands if necessary. **ALL TIRES BRAND NEW - GUARANTEED - HEAVY GAUGE CIRCULAR MOLDED.** Guard against price advances. Order Now. We agree to replace at half price any tire failing to give 9 months' service. **YORK TIRE & RUBBER CO., Dept. 3142** 3555-59 Cottage Grove Ave. Chicago, Ill.

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

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**FREE BOOKLET**  
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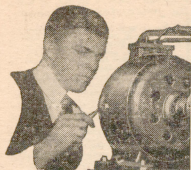
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Are you dissatisfied with your job? Are you out of a job because you lack specialized training for a live industry? Is your future uncertain? Then let me show you an amazing, easy way to get into Electricity, where TRAINED MEN are needed... Where hundreds of Coyne Graduates are drawing Good Pay every week. Coyne has been training ambitious fellows for the Electrical Industry since 1899... at Coyne you do not need previous experience or a lot of book learning.

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Here is YOUR life opportunity. Every day brings news of new developments in this fascinating, big-pay field, with more jobs and a greater future for the trained man than ever before. If you are ambitious to get ahead, I want to help you. MAIL THE COUPON BELOW and I'll tell you about my finance plan, which has enabled thousands to get Coyne Training with very little money. Get training first, then take 18 months to complete small monthly tuition payments starting FIVE MONTHS after you begin your training, or 2 months after your required training period is over.



H. C. Lewis

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The great Coyne Shops are famous the world over for their unusual Learn-by-Doing method of practical, individual instruction. There is no book study, no reciting—you learn quickly and thoroughly by doing actual jobs under the personal guidance of trained instructors, on a great outlay of machinery and equipment assembled strictly for training purposes. That is why, in 12 short weeks, we are able to take fellows without previous experience or a lot of book learning, and train them for jobs leading to good pay.

### MANY EARN WHILE LEARNING

If you need part-time work to help pay living expenses while at school, tell us your problems and we may be able to help you as we have hundreds of other students. Then, after you graduate, our Free Employment Department will give you life-time employment service. Every Coyne graduate also receives a Life Scholarship, with free technical and business service and privilege of review at any time without additional tuition charge.



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### JOBS - PAY - FUTURE

"I owe my electrical success to your 12-week shop course," says R. B. Umberger of Tennessee. "Two weeks after leaving school I took a wiring job," reports E. O. Berndt of Illinois, "and the profits from this one job alone more than paid for the entire course." A. C. Hoeftle of Ohio says "Received several raises in pay, due to the training I received at Coyne." And I could quote from hundreds of similar letters from successful Coyne-trained men. What they have done, you should be able to do!

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...writes George Bailey



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Use coupon or send name and address on penny postcard

# NEVER TOOK A LESSON FROM A TEACHER

—yet Bob is the envy of his music-loving friends

You, too, can learn to play any instrument this amazingly simple way. No expensive teacher. No tiresome exercises or practicing. You learn at home, in your spare time. Yet almost before you know it you are playing real tunes! Then watch the invitations roll in—see how popular you become. Yet the cost is only a few cents a day.

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# Old Leg Trouble

## HEALED WHILE WORKING

Congestion from VARICOSE VEINS, SWELLING, MILK LEG, or injuries cause itching, leg rash and most old leg aches. Viscose Home Method relieves pain, heals many sores or no cost for trial. Mention your trouble for a **FREE BOOK**

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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., 416-A7 Page Bldg., Marshall, Mich.

**BRONCHITIS** After suffering more than 30 years from chronic Bronchitis I compounded a remarkable preparation which quickly relieved my tormenting bronchial spasms. It goes right to the seat of the trouble. Speedily checks constant coughing, difficult breathing. **FREE** particulars. **REV. J. J. RICHARDS, 100 Second Street, North Baltimore, Ohio**

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Why put up with years of needless discomfort and worry? Try a Brooks Automatic Air Cushion. This marvelous appliance permits the opening to close, yet holds reducible rupture securely, comfortably—day and night. Thousands report amazing results. Light, neat-fitting. No hard pads, metal girdle or parts to chafe or gouge. Patented in U. S. and 13 foreign countries. Try one 10 DAYS WITHOUT A PENNY'S RISK. You'll be delighted. Free Book on Rupture and convincing facts mailed postpaid in plain envelope. **BROOKS COMPANY, 188A State St., Marshall, Mich.**



# The Story of 2 MEN who NEEDED CASH



## THIS MAN DOUBTED:

He said: "Yes, I am broke. I am really terribly hard up. I haven't a cent of extra money for anything. I wish I knew where to get some. I haven't a bit of faith in anything. I am a failure and my luck is terrible."

## RUN A LOCAL COFFEE AGENCY

*Wonderful Opportunity to make \$60.00 in a week*

I'll help you start at once and back you up to the limit. Here's a bona fide cash-getting idea you may never have heard of before—a unique and utterly different way of getting the cash you need. With my plans I have "saved the day" for hundreds who were at their wits' end. Not just another clock punching job...

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If you are tired of slaving for small pay, here's your chance to break away and make big money. You can even start in your spare time—see the business grow—have cash in your pocket—be independent. Think of the joy of being a successful business person in your own locality with big, year 'round earnings of your own. You don't have the usual money risks of a business man.



**STARTED PENNILESS**  
6½ Months Later  
Was Worth \$1,200

"Only six and a half months ago I started with

your company without a penny to my name, and today (I just obtained my balance) I am worth a little more than \$1,200.00. I can hardly believe it myself—such a success in so short a time! But it's the truth. Many a day I made from \$15.00 to \$30.00 clear profit. Your Happy Hunter, Hans Coorides, Nebr.

no back-breaking labor. Even spare time nets up to \$3.00 in a day... full time up to \$20.00 in a week. Good opportunities open. You don't require any previous experience and you don't risk any of your own money. Think of being prosperous again. Just send me your name for free facts.

There is no limit to your possibilities. Earnings begin at once, the very first day.

## LOOK AT THESE UNUSUAL EARNINGS

I have a flood of glowing letters from prosperous, successful men and women telling of unusual earnings they have made with my plans. L. P. Boyne, La., made \$61.50 in a week. Mrs. H. H. Husick, Nebr., made \$41.75 the first week. Steve Witt, Mo., made \$21.50 in a day. Albert Recker, Mich., \$100.00 in a week. George W. Creed, Ohio, \$95.00 in a week. Exceptional earnings like these are positive proof of the amazing earning possibilities of my offer.

## SEND NO MONEY—SEND NAME

I send everything you need. You positively don't risk a penny of your money. There is nothing complicated or puzzling about my money-making methods. You will be the judge and decide for yourself if the earning possibilities are satisfactory. Just give me a chance to explain the facts. It costs you nothing to find out. Send name on coupon or penny postcard.

DO IT NOW!



**NEW FORDS**  
Given as a Bonus



## THIS MAN ACTED:

He said: "Yes, I need money. I am tired of penny pinching. Your generous offer sounds good to me. It costs nothing to investigate—I have everything to gain. I am going to send my name and find out just what you have to offer me."

## A FEW WEEKS LATER



Now look at these two men as they meet on the street. One is a success and the other is a failure. One had the courage to try; the other had no faith—he was a doubter—he is still in hard luck. The man in the car is a success because he was willing to listen to reason. He was not afraid to send in his name and get the facts. When he saw my public announcement stating I would give a brand new Ford Tudor Sedan to producers as a bonus in addition to cash earnings, he believed in my sincerity. Why don't you, too investigate?

## TEAR OUT—MAIL NOW

Albert Mills, President  
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Cincinnati, Ohio

Rush me free facts. Tell me how I can start at once and make up to \$50.00 in a week with a permanent Office Agency of my own. Also send me your Ford Automobile offer. This will not obligate me.

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Send Underwood No. 5 (F.O.B. Chicago) at once for 10-days trial. If I am not perfectly satisfied I can return it express collect. If I keep it I will pay \$3.00 a month until I have paid \$49.00 (term price) in full.

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**What This New Field Offers You**

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MORE SPEED  
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**USERS REPORT**  
**3 to 7 MILES MORE PER GALLON**  
**MOTORIST SAVES \$180 a YEAR**

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"On my Dodge 5 I am getting 6 more miles per gal. with more power and pickup, which is all anyone could ask."—Lee D. Esty, Calif.

"I have twelve VACU-MATICs on cars now, and they all show an increase in mileage. The car owners are very well pleased."—Fred Taylor, Okla.

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"I have been placing VACU-MATICs on expert mechanic's cars. All are well pleased."—J. W. Donahue, W. Va.

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The self-starter—four wheel brakes—knee action—stream-lining . . . and now VACU-MATIC! The sensational money-saving invention! With it, engineers have achieved a practical means of balancing air and gasoline automatically for all speeds.

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VACU-MATIC proves itself on every car. It is guaranteed to give worthwhile gas savings, quicker pick-up, and more power or it costs you nothing. You can instantly tell the difference in added power and motor performance — you quickly notice the cash savings on gasoline.

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VACU-MATIC is constructed of six parts, assembled and fused into one unit, correctly adjusted and *sent to the factory*. Nothing to regulate. Any motorist can attach VACU-MATIC in ten minutes. Once in, its only reminder is the surge of instant power and speed it gives to the motor and the savings it affords your pocketbook.

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# WHY MEN GO



## Science Finds Easy Way to Remove Germ In Superficial Layers of Scalp and Stimulate Dormant Roots to Promote Hair Growth

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Now an important discovery enables people who have dandruff, falling hair, thin hair and baldness to easily remove the congested, thin outer layer of scalp skin. This permits opened pores and follicles to absorb air, sunshine and a blood-stimulating compound to activate the smothered, dormant hair roots in promoting hair growth as nature intended. It is all explained in a new treatise called "HOW HAIR GROWS," showing anatomy of your hair and tells what to do. This treatise is now being mailed FREE to all who write for it. Send no money, just name and address to Dermolav Lab., Desk 727-A, No. 1769 Broadway, New York, N. Y., and you get it by return mail free and postpaid. If pleased, tell your friends about it.

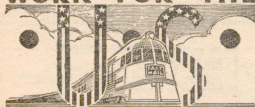
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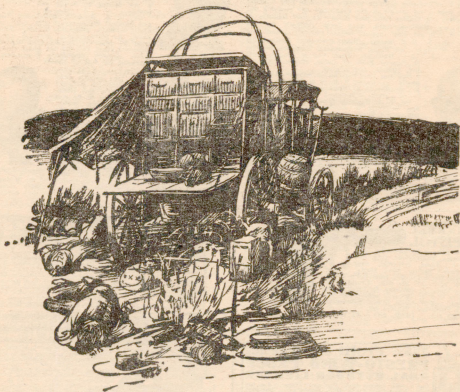
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# Buzzards of the Chisholm Trail

A "Hungry and Rusty" Novelette

By Samuel H. Nickels

Author of "Tested With Smoking Guns," etc.



## CHAPTER I.

STAMPEDE OF THE Z BAR L.

**M**OTIONLESS in the feeble starlight near the old Chisholm Trail, "Hungry" Hawkins and "Rusty" Bolivar gripped their carbines and waited. The eyes of both Texas Rangers were riveted on the narrow pass which they could

barely see in the thick gloom just below them.

Rusty was beginning to fidget impatiently. He rested the scarred butt of his rifle on the ground and shifted his chap-clad bowed legs to a more comfortable position.

He muttered something and glared at his lanky, homely faced partner who slouched beside him.





Hungry's lantern jaws were moving slowly as he munched at the huge chew of Bullwhackers' Delight which bulged his cheek.

*Bang!* The flat, muffled bark of a gun suddenly sounded from far out in the darkness.

Both Rangers lunged quickly to their feet.

*Bang! Bang-bang-bang! Bra-a-am!* A sullen roar of blasting weapons came echoing out of the night.

"Come on, yuh long-legged pelican!" Rusty yelped. "We've hit the

trail too high up, an' them trail thieves have jumped thet Z Bar L herd while we've been settin' here waitin' fer 'em! Run!"

Hungry was already bounding through the scattered brush to where their wiry cow horses stood ground-anchored behind some mesquites. Without touching the stirrups, the Rangers hit their saddles in flying leaps and went spurring at a dead run down the trail.

The crash of gunfire had died to scattering shots as Hungry and Rusty guided their straining horses across a dry wash and up the opposite bank to the flats beyond.

Suddenly from the darkness in front of them came the low rumble of flying hoofs and the faint yells of spurring riders. Two more thudding shots sounded from somewhere

to the left and another cracked viciously from almost straight in front of them.

A moment later, Hungry and Rusty topped a slight rise. Just beyond them, they caught the red glow of a dying camp fire in the thick gloom and headed their panting horses straight toward it.

As they sped rapidly closer, they shoved their carbines into saddle scabbards and jerked Colts from their holsters. With the long-barreled .45s poised for lightning use, they rocketed through the choking dust to the fire and pulled to a rearing halt.

A short distance beyond them stood an old canvas-topped chuck wagon. Hungry glanced quickly toward it and lowered his gun.

"Look!" Rusty suddenly snarled, pointing to a sprawled form near them. "It's a dead man! Yeah, an' there's another over there by one of them beds! See 'em?"

Scowling grimly, Hungry rode around the fire to where unrolled beds covered the ground close to the wagon. Almost against one of the wagon wheels, lay the first body. A second lay just beyond it, and he found a third puncher crumpled across the wagon tongue with a bullet through his head.

"This is the Z Bar L wagon!" Hungry snapped grimly, his usual drawing voice now harsh with cold deadliness. "An' them murdered punchers was Z Bar L hands!"

"An' all thet's left of thet big trail herd thet was bedded down here is a cloud of dust!" Rusty gritted, glaring around them. "Even the remuda was stampeded. Nothin' left to tell the tale but dead men."

Without replying, Hungry turned back to where a fog of fine dust still hung in the still air. There he found the trampled body of another

puncher who had gone down to a horrible death beneath the thundering hoofs of the stampeded cattle.

A deadly greenish glint was blazing in the lanky Ranger's slitted eyes when he came back to the fire. He pulled a battered plug of tobacco from his hip pocket and grimly gnawed off a huge chew.

"We told that trail boss he was shovin' this herd too fast," Rusty snarled angrily. "Eight or nine miles on this grass was plenty fast to be goin'. He kept makin' all of twelve to fifteen miles a day, an' it left his steers nervous an' spooky when he bedded 'em. Them kind of cattle stampedes easy when robbers jumps 'em."

Hungry nodded quietly. "Yeah," he said, "but I figure we got a pretty good idea what robbers done the stampedin'."

Rusty grunted and scowled down at the fire. He and his lanky partner had already recognized the work of the "Scar-face" Saxon band of trail robbers.

Scar-face and his murderous crew of ruffians haunted nearly a hundred miles of the Chisholm Trail. They followed every moving herd like a pack of buzzards, watching for a chance to steal any cattle they could get in their clutches.

Small outfits scarcely dared to drive steers through that locality. Herds would be stampeded and scattered in the night, and not a single cowboy would be left alive to tell the tale.

"Yeah, this is bound to be thet Scar-face hombre an' his band o' skunks thet we was sent to catch," Hungry drawled after a moment's thoughts. "They always scatter cattle to blazes an' gone in the bresh after one o' their killin' raids. When danger o' pursuit has died down,

they round up the stuff, burn the brands over an' sell it."

"Yeah!" Rusty gritted, glaring. "Well, this'll be one herd they won't gather an' sell! We'll be seein' to thet, an' we'll——"

*Bang!* The vicious bark of a gun suddenly crashed from the darkness behind them, and a whizzing bullet kicked up a spurt of ashes and live coals from the fire at their feet.

*Bang-bang!* With hands stabbing toward their holsters, Hungry and Rusty ducked and leaped backward away from the firelight as two more bullets hummed like angry hornets between them and splintered through the chuck box of the wagon.

Ducking from side to side to spoil the aim of the unseen marksmen, they rushed around the wagon. There they whirled and crouched to locate the hombres.

*Bang! Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang!* Just then a stabbing streak of flame split the darkness beyond the dusty bed-ground and Hungry and Rusty both fired.

When another bullet whined above their heads and still another tore up the ground beside them, Hungry suddenly stopped shooting and lowered his guns.

"Hold on!" he barked softly to Rusty. "Save yore ca'tridges! I think thet's just one lone hombre out thar. Wait!"

Hungry crouched until another lurid blaze of the hombre's gun flashed toward them. Then he grunted a warning to Rusty and slipped away.

His hunched figure melted in the darkness as he moved away from the wagon and began circling with the silent wariness of a stalking Apache in the direction of the marksman. Crouched against the wagon wheel, Rusty waited.

Slipping back and forth from bush

to bush and from gully to gully, Hungry managed to reach a patch of tall zacaton. There he waited until another crack of the hombre's gun gave him his direction, then he crept on.

Now down on hands and knees, Hungry worked his way under cover of the tall grass until the gun thundered almost in front of him. Instantly he stopped and pulled his feet under him.

The lanky Ranger carefully parted the grass and stared until he heard the faint oily click of a rifle lever. By the winking blaze of another shot, he finally caught the dim outlines of the head and shoulders of the marksman.

Without wasting one second, Hungry made a flying leap. He hit the hombre with his left shoulder, knocked him sprawling and was on top of him almost before the man knew what was happening.

"Hands up, feller!" Hungry snapped, jabbing a gun against his head. "Reach while yore all in one piece!"

"D-d-don't shoot, boss!" came a panting voice that was almost choked by fear. "D-d-don't shoot! I give up, suh! I surrenders peaceable, suh! Please, suh, point that gun in some other direction 'fore it goes off!"

With a grunt of astonishment, Hungry leaned closer for a better look at his prisoner. When he recognized the coal-black face of the hulking colored man, he slowly lowered the hammer of his .45 and released his grip on the fellow's throat.

"You!" he barked grimly. "Why, yore Moonshine! You was cookin' fer thet Z Bar L wagon! We seen yuh with 'em yesterday."

"Yas, suh, Mr. Outlaw!" the colored man said quickly. "Leastwise, I was the cook ontill——"

*Bang-Br-a-m!* The sudden rattle of guns and the pound of flying hoofs drowned the frightened cook's voice, and Hungry whirled toward the wagon.

He was just in time to see the dim forms of several riders go down on their horses' sides and close in on Rusty from the darkness beyond the wagon.

"Come on, Moonshine!" Hungry barked, bounding away. "I ain't no outlaw, but them jaspers over thar is! Grab yore rifle an' foller me!"

## CHAPTER II.

### THE CABIN IN THE CANYON.

WITHOUT a backward glance, the lanky cowboy Ranger jumped the gully in front of him and went racing through the tall zacaton. But before he was even half-way to the wagon, he saw the band of riders suddenly wheel away and spur out of sight in the darkness as swiftly as they had come.

"Rusty!" Hungry called as he sped on.

No answer.

With "Moonshine's" big feet hitting the ground behind him, Hungry rushed at a dead run past the fire to the wagon. Rusty was nowhere to be seen.

"Gone!" Hungry almost groaned. "I don't savvy thet play. Others they killed were left layin' whar they fell, but it looks like Rusty was packed off."

With eyes darting to right and left, Hungry searched under the wagon and around it. He called again, then rushed to where he and Rusty had left their horses.

"Wait a minute, suh!" Moonshine called worriedly. "Where is you goin' suh? You is one o' them Rangers what stopped at the wagon yester-

day! You is Mistah Hungry Hawkins."

"I thought it was time yuh was recognizin' me," Hungry replied impatiently. "Grab one o' these hosses! We got to try savin' thet leetle pard of mine—if he ain't already killed."

Hungry found his and Rusty's well-trained cow ponies standing ground-hitched in the darkness some distance beyond the dying fire. He was certain that the robber gang had failed to notice the animals, or both would have been taken away.

As Hungry jumped into his saddle, Moonshine hastily shifted his big rifle to his left hand and floundered awkwardly astride Rusty's horse. With Hungry leading the way, both rode swiftly in the direction the killers had gone.

For a short distance they rocketed at a dead run through stirrup-high brush. Hungry leaned down in his saddle, but it was impossible to see any tracks in the feeble starlight.

As they sped through the fringe of stunted cedars beyond, Moonshine told Hungry how the trail robbers had jumped them. The way it had been worked made Hungry more certain than ever that it had been the work of Scar-face Saxon and his gang.

Armed with sawed-off shotguns so that there would be no missing their targets in the darkness, the outlaws had charged without warning from the darkness. They were on the bed ground and among the cattle before the unsuspecting cowboys of the Z Bar L knew what was happening, and they downed punchers right and left with their blazing sawed-offs as they stampeded the cattle in every direction.

Hungry frowned grimly as the big colored man finished. "How come



they didn't kill *you* when they was murderin' everybody else?"

"'Cause I dived under the wagon at the first pop of a gun, suh," Moonshine explained. "I grabbed this old Winchestah forty-some-odd as I went out on the other side, an' I never stopped until I was safe in the bresh. When I see yo'-all come, I think it's two robbers come back, an' I starts shootin'. I——"

Hungry suddenly hissed a warning and jerked erect in his saddle. The lanky Ranger had just caught the faint whinny of a horse from somewhere far out in the darkness, and he pulled to a quick halt.

In scarcely a moment, he heard it again. The sound came from so far away that it could barely be heard, and was borne to him by a rising wind that had just blown up from their left.

Hungry's mount threw up its head and its ears shot forward alertly. Hungry instantly spurred forward and went streaking in the direction of the sound.

"Come on, Moonshine!" he barked over his shoulder. "Them hombres we're huntin' must 'a' passed close to thet hoss. More'n likely, it's either seen 'em or heerd 'em or it wouldn't be whinnyin'. Ride fast!"

"I'm comin', Mistah Hungry!" Moonshine panted, gripping his long rifle in his left hand and hanging to the saddle horn with his right. "Don't run off an' leave me, suh! I'm comin' as fast as I kin, suh!"

On across a little rise, limbs whipping him across the face and arms as he raced through the cedars, Hungry led the way without slackening the speed of his horse. Soon he turned up a rocky slope toward some broken hills.

Suddenly the lanky Ranger pulled to a slower gait, and he leaned forward alertly in his saddle. He was

almost to a dark canyon that loomed against the starry sky line when he reined over beside a clump of trees and came to a quick halt.

Moonshine rode up beside him and dropped his rifle across his arm. He blinked worriedly in every direction and mopped the sweat from his face.

"Did you see somethin', Mistah Hungry?" he whispered hoarsely.

Hungry shook his head and spat a stream of tobacco juice against the rock beside him. He waited a moment, then swung noiselessly to the ground.

"You wait hyar until I git back," he whispered to the colored man. "My hoss acts like we're close to somethin'. I'm goin' to slip on ahead an' have a look around."

"Wait, Mistah Hungry!" Moonshine said quickly, rolling his eyes wildly. "Don't yo'-all go traipsin' off an' leave me. Let me go 'long, too! Wait!"

But Hungry vanished from sight around the nearest rock and was gone before Moonshine could scramble from his horse. Hungry heard him stamping in the brush, but the lanky Ranger did not even pause or look back.

Moving along as silently as an Apache, Hungry slipped swiftly among the rocks and stunted trees until he reached the mouth of the canyon. There he slowed down and crept warily on.

Suddenly he halted, and his right hand slid to a gun butt. There, just in front of him and barring the passage into the canyon, he saw a stout barricade of brush and cedar pickets.

"Uh-huh!" he muttered grimly. "I'm bettin' I've walked right on Scar-face Saxon's hide-out. Waal, I'll not go back to Moonshine until I've had a look around an' made a try at locatin' Rusty."

Hungry frowned as he hurriedly examined his twin .45s to make certain every chamber was fully loaded. He still could not understand why the outlaws had carried Rusty away when others the ruffians killed were always left lying where they fell.

"Thar's somethin' queer back o' this," Hungry muttered, biting off a fresh chew of tobacco. "Waal, whatever it is, I'm shore goin' to find it out. I hope Rusty ain't killed or bad hurt. If he is——"

Hungry did not finish, but his slitted eyes were smoldering with cold, killing fury as he crept warily toward the barricade. He was gripping a cocked Colt in each hand.

At one side of the canyon he found a wide gate of peeled poles. He started to push it open, but stopped when he found a thin wire fastened near the bottom.

"Uh-huh!" he grunted, moving back. "Got an alarm fixed up in case somebody tries comin' in, have they? Waal, I've seen them tricks worked before. I'll go in another way."

Turning swiftly aside, Hungry climbed over the fence some distance from the gate. He crouched for a moment behind a stump to look around him, then moved watchfully on.

Suddenly out of the darkness in front of him came the low sound of a voice. As Hungry jerked to a quick halt and dropped to one knee, he heard another voice, then a door closed noisily.

With guns cocked and poised for swift use, Hungry peered in the direction of the sounds and waited. In scarcely a moment, he saw a match flare up inside a window, then the steady, yellow gleam of a candle showed him the inside of a cabin among some piñons a short distance away.

Hungry was just starting to creep forward when he heard the door slam again. This time, he saw several struggling hombres move into the candlelight.

With a deadly greenish glint blazing in his slitted eyes, Hungry lunged erect. There in the midst of that bunch of heavily armed ruffians, Hungry saw his scrappy little partner.

One side of Rusty's face was a crimson smear and his hands were lashed together behind him, but he was struggling desperately to shake off two swearing hombres who gripped his arms.

Taking advantage of the noise, Hungry crouched over and started on a run for the window. He was nearly to the cabin when he heard a low growl and a huge dog rose from the weeds in front of him.

Hungry darted one quick look at the window and ducked aside as the savage brute lunged at his throat. He started to shoot the animal, but quickly realized that a single shot might cause the hombres inside to murder Rusty instantly.

As the snarling dog whirled back and came at him again, Hungry hurriedly slammed his guns into his holsters. Like a flash, he jerked the long-bladed bowie from his boot and braced himself.

### CHAPTER III.

#### HUNGRY IN TROUBLE.

**H**UNGRY caught one glimpse of gaping jaws and gleaming teeth as the dog once more flew at his throat. Leaning to meet it, he threw up his left arm to guard his face and slashed at the brute with his knife.

There came a sharp rip of cloth as the snarling animal tore Hungry's shirt from shoulder to elbow, and he

felt a stinging pain along his arm. The dog hit the ground beside him and grabbed at his leg.

Hungry dodged swiftly back, then in. As the vicious dog's teeth ripped the flange of his chaps, he managed to get a grip on its throat and fell on top of it.

Instantly they went rolling over and over among the weeds. Again and again, Hungry could feel the raging brute's hot breath on his face, but he clung desperately to its throat and avoided its slashing teeth.

For a moment, it almost tore free. Hungry tried to rise on one knee, but slipped, and the dog got on top of him.

Suddenly the lanky Ranger clamped his legs around its heaving body. Still gripping its throat, he drove his bowie to the hilt behind its shoulder.

He struck again and again. At the third plunge of the razor-edged blade, he felt the savage brute's body jerk and begin to quiver. He struck once more, and it went limp.

Still Hungry kept his hold on its throat. He waited until it slumped down on top of him and began kicking, then he rolled it off and rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Huh!" he grunted, panting. "It's a good thing I had this bowie. Thet brute must be part wolf. I never——"

A bellowed oath from inside the cabin brought Hungry around with a jerk. He jumped hastily across the huge dog's twitching body to get away from the light and hurried to the window.

"Yeah!" came a rasping voice. "What I want to know is if thar's any more Rangers hangin' around hyar? Talk up, yuh blasted runt! I'm bettin' yuh ain't playin' a lone hand!"

That deadly greenish glint was again smoldering in Hungry's slitted eyes as he moved quickly to a crack in the cabin wall. He wiped his bowie blade on the leg of his chaps and shoved it back in his boot as he stooped to peer inside.

There on the floor beside the table, he again saw Rusty. In spite of his bound hands, the little Ranger was propped up on one elbow, and he was glaring defiantly at a stocky, wide-shouldered hombre who stood over him.

Hungry counted nine others in the room. There were gringos, half-breeds, and a couple of Mexicans, all tough-looking hombres, and all armed with Colts that sagged their crisscrossed cartridge belts in thong-tied holsters.

As the stocky ruffian beside Rusty turned toward the light, Hungry nodded grimly and slipped his .45s from their holsters. Hungry knew instantly that he was now looking at Scar-face Saxon, the deadliest killer that ever haunted the Chisholm Trail. There was no mistaking that villainous face. One look at the puckered knife scar which reached from the edge of the fellow's hair in front of his left ear clear down across his bristly cheek to the point of his chin was enough.

Hungry's lantern jaw clamped down on his chew of tobacco when he saw Saxon's steel-gray eyes begin to glitter wickedly. As the ruffian's thin lips curled back from his yellowed teeth in a murderous snarl, Hungry leveled one of his guns through the crack.

"Yuh'd better start onlimberin' thet tongue o' yores, runt!" Scar-face growled, glaring. "When I spotted thet badge on yore shirt thar in the light o' thet fire, I figured thar might be more Rangers snoopin' about somewhar. Thet's

why I brung yuh hyar alive. Yo're goin' to talk, if I got to make yuh. Savvy?"

"Yuh'd make me, would yuh?" Rusty yelled defiantly. "You an' who else, yuh brockle-faced polecat? You an' who else?"

Scar-face Saxon's right hand snapped to the ivory-butted Colt at his hip, and he half drew the weapon from his holster. Hungry steadied for a lightning shot and waited for the hombre to raise his weapon.

Suddenly a wicked leer twisted Saxon's villainous face. He let go of his gun and nodded savagely to his men.

"Stick a brandin' iron in the stove," he snarled. "Git it red-hot an' yank off thet blasted Ranger's boots. I think a leetle foot warmin' will onlimer thet tongue o' hisn fer 'im. Hurry!"

As Hungry's eyes swiveled toward the sheet-iron stove where a fire was already burning, a calculating glint crept into his eyes, and he lowered his .45. He glanced at several sawed-off shotguns which stood in the corner beyond it, then he darted a measuring look at the window close beside them.

"Maybe I kin make it," he muttered, his eyes going back to Saxon and his murderous crew. "If I kin jump in thet winder an' hold 'em back with my .45s until I kin grab one o' them sawed-offs, maybe I kin mow 'em down an' save Rusty. It's worth a try."

With a glance behind him, Hungry turned and crept swiftly around the cabin. As he rounded the last corner, he paused and raised both guns.

He was quickly beside the open window. He heard sounds of a terrific struggle and saw four of the ruffians trying to pull off Rusty's boots.

Hungry darted one quick look at the corner where the shotguns stood, and crouched. When he saw the rest of the outlaws turn to help tear off Rusty's boots, he rose to climb into the cabin.

*Thud!* A flying form suddenly leaped from the darkness behind him and hit the lanky Ranger a terrific blow between the shoulders, smashing him down across the window sill.

Partially dazed, Hungry threw himself backward and tried to use his guns. Before he could turn, the weapons were knocked from his hands, and he was hurled to the ground.

As he began struggling and fighting with every ounce of his strength to tear free, there came a roar of yells and oaths, and the hombres from the cabin came piling on him from the window.

Down beneath their trampling feet, Hungry rolled back and forth, over and over, trying hard to reach one of the guns that had been knocked from his hands, or to snatch a weapon from one of the ruffians.

"Stay with 'em, Hungry!" Rusty shrilled from inside the cabin. "I know thet's you from the size of the rookus! Stay with 'em!"

Hungry needed no urging. He was already battling with the silent deadliness of a cornered wolf, and he was using every trick he had ever known to break away and get his big hands on a gun.

Suddenly he thought of the bowie in his boot leg. Like all cowboys, he hated the thought of using such a weapon, but there was no choice.

Like a flash, he doubled up and grabbed the bowie's buckhorn handle. One sweep of the razor-edged blade brought a howl of pain from one of the hombres on top of him.

"Look out, men!" came a wild yell.



"Dodge! He's got a knife! Shoot 'im, 'fore he carves somebody's in-nards out! Watch 'im!"

Slashing right and left as the crowd scrambled out of the way, Hungry lunged to his feet. Without a pause he made a flying leap in an effort to get through the window and reach the shotguns.

Instantly a thrown gun caught him on the back of the head, and he slumped against the side of the house. Before he could struggle to his feet, flailing guns clubbed him down and his hands were lashed together behind him.

"Thet's the ticket!" came a shout of satisfaction from Saxon. "Drag 'im in the house, men. Thet's two snoopin' Rangers we've collected to-night! Now we'll——"

The outlaw leader's voice ended in a sudden bellowed oath as he happened to glance through the window. Snarling angrily, he climbed hastily into the cabin and rushed across the room.

"Is somethin' gone wrong, Scar?" one of the outlaws called sharply.

"Wrong?" Saxon howled. "Thet runt Ranger has escaped on us! We forgot thet only his hands was tied, an' he's got out through this other winder on us! Scatter an' hunt 'im down! Quick! Don't let 'im git away!"

With angry yells, the gang rushed around the house to the opposite window. There, guns cocked and ready, they scattered to hunt the little Ranger down.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE GUN TRAP.

**B**UT Rusty had wasted no time when he crawled through that open window and fell to the ground. With his hands lashed behind him, he knew he would have to get as far

away as possible before the ruffians missed him. When he had dodged the hombres, he could manage in some way to free himself, then come back to rescue Hungry.

"Dog-gone them blasted pole-cats!" he gritted as he bow-legged swiftly past the corner of the house and headed for the opposite side of the canyon. "I hope they don't kill Hungry before I kin git back. I can't do nothin' with my hands tied. But I'll shore do somethin' when I git loose!"

Rusty had barely got clear of the cabin when he heard the yells of Saxon's killers behind him. Muttering, he dodged on through the brush.

"Maybe I kin keep 'em so busy chasin' me thet they won't have time to bump Hungry off ontill I kin do somethin' about it," he panted. "I'll lead 'em down the canyon, then I kin maybe double back an' reach Hungry 'fore they do. It's my only chance."

Listening closely to the sounds of his pursuers, Rusty twisted and turned. He managed to keep just ahead of them until he was well down the canyon.

*Bang!* A gun barked viciously from somewhere behind him, but he heard no hum of the bullet.

Instantly there came oaths from several different directions. Rusty gave a grunt of satisfaction when he realized that one of the hombres had fired a gun by accident.

"Huh!" he panted. "I'm glad that happened. The rest of them pole-cats will think I've been sighted, an' it'll keep 'em huntin' fer me."

Just then, Rusty almost ran into the brush-and-picket fence that closed the canyon. Without wasting a second, he lowered his head and scrambled through like a prairie dog diving into his hole.

He stopped for a moment to catch his breath. But when he heard shouts and the thud of feet behind him, he bounded up and rushed on.

Rusty was soon threading his way among the masses of broken rock and stunted trees along the slope outside. He could no longer hear any sound of his pursuers.

A short distance in front of him, Moonshine was waiting worriedly for Hungry to come back. The powerful colored man was gripping his cocked rifle and crouching back against a huge rock.

"I wish Mistah Hungry had took me with 'im," Moonshine muttered, staring about him in the darkness. "Somethin' tells me this ain't no place fer folks like me to be messin' around. I hope he gits back soon."

Just then a pack of coyotes began yapping shrilly from farther down the slope. Moonshine batted his eyes and fingered the trigger of his rifle.

A moment later, a lone wolf howled dismally from somewhere far to his left. With a muttered remark, Moonshine leaned back against the rock and balanced his heavy gun across his left arm.

"I wonder what's keepin' Mistah Hungry?" he muttered. "If he's found them outlaws, I hopes he seen 'em first."

*Whoo! Whoo! Whoo! Whoo-ahh!* came a sudden mournful hoot of a big owl almost behind him.

Moonshine jerked up his rifle as the big bird sailed past him and vanished in the gloom beyond. With a grunt, he lowered the gun and glanced toward the horses.

Suddenly he stiffened. He stared at a big jack rabbit which hopped into view from the brush a few steps away and sat up on its haunches to sniff the air.

"Huh!" Moonshine grunted. "I thought that was Mistah Hungry comin'."

At that instant, one of the horses snorted sharply and jerked up its head. As both animals suddenly whirled to stare at something they could hear out in the darkness, Moonshine jerked around and stood gripping his rifle.

"That may be Mistah Hungry now," he muttered, dropping to one knee in an effort to see what had alarmed the horses. "Oh, Mistah Hungry! Is that you comin', Mistah Hungry?"

As Moonshine's voice reached him, Rusty jerked to a quick halt and leaped behind a rock. Crouching instantly, he wrenched to free his hands.

"I asks you who is that?" Moonshine called again, and Rusty heard his rifle hammer click back. "Whoever yuh are, you better start talkin'! Is that you, Mistah Hungry? This is Moonshine."

At this, Rusty's mouth popped open. He stared uncertainly, then rose to his feet.

"Moonshine?" he whispered thoughtfully, his slitted eyes darting to right and left. "Why—why that's the name of thet big cook we seen with the Z Bar L wagon yesterday. Yeah, an' he's callin' Hungry. I reckon he's all right."

Instantly the little Ranger pushed forward through the brush. In another moment, he recognized the dim forms of his and Hungry's horses in the starlight.

"Moonshine!" he called softly. "Moonshine, where are yuh?"

"Who's that callin' me?" the colored man said suspiciously, and he half-lifted his gun. "Step out where I kin see you. This gun is kind of easy on the trigger, an' I can't afford to take no chances."

The Ranger frowned impatiently. "This is Rusty, Moonshine," he snapped. "I'm Hungry's partner. Come here an' git me loose as quick as yuh kin. My hands is tied behind me."

With a gasp of relief, the colored man shot to his feet. Hastily lowering the hammer of his rifle, he shuffled hurriedly to meet Rusty.

"Turn around, Mistah Rusty, so's I kin reach yore hands," he said quickly. "Lemme see how you's tied? I'll have you loose in a couple of shakes."

Working with fingers and teeth, he quickly loosened the knots on Rusty's wrists. With a grunt of satisfaction, Rusty shook off the loosened cords, then jumped to the nearest horse and jerked a short carbine from the saddle scabbard.

"Now!" he snapped, levering a cartridge into the weapon's barrel and glaring around. "Now I'm set fer business again. Come on, Moonshine! Them polecats have captured Hungry, an' we've got to git to 'im before they murder 'im. Let's go!"

"I'm ready, Mistah Rusty!" Moonshine said quickly. "All I asks is that you don't go traipsin' off an' leave me by myself. I doesn't mind stickin' with you to help fight outlaws, but I shore ain't cravin' to stand here alone all night."

With his carbine balanced across his left arm, Rusty led the way swiftly back toward the canyon. Moonshine was close at his heels, his own rifle cocked and gripped in both hands and his eyes darting to right and left as he shuffled along.

They were just turning into the canyon when a sudden snarled oath from almost in front of them brought Rusty to a quick halt. Leaping back, he grabbed Moonshine's arm

and pulled him down beside him against a huge boulder.

"Shhh!" Rusty hissed softly. "No shootin' unless I start it. Take yore finger offn your rifle trigger before yuh let thet cannon off by accident. Quiet now!"

Almost before Rusty finished speaking, a hurrying figure loomed above them in the feeble starlight. As the hombre stumbled past their hiding place, there came a sharp call from a short distance away, and more hombres turned along the slope behind them.

When the angry ruffians had passed, Rusty sprang erect and led the way swiftly on. Soon they crept from the rocks toward the fence.

Rusty paused to listen, then he jumped forward and lifted the bar that held the gate. As he pushed it open, he felt a slight jerk at the bottom and saw the slender wire that Hungry had already noticed. He instantly tried to hold the gate, but it was too late.

*Bra-a-m!* There came a blinding flash almost in his face as the thundering blast of a big shotgun almost burst his eardrums and split the air around him with a withering hail of buckshot and slugs.

## CHAPTER V.

WITH SIX-GUN AND SAWED-OFF.

RUSTY reeled back. A cloud of buzzing splinters whizzed about his head and stung his face as the gate instantly sagged in his hand.

"Moonshine!" he barked quickly. "Moonshine, where are yuh? Are yuh hit?"

The colored man shuddered and rolled his eyes. "I ain't had time to examine myself yit, Mistah Rusty," he stammered uncertainly. "I don't hardly know, but two bars o' that

old gate was blown in two right slap-dab under my nose."

As a sudden burst of angry yells sounded from behind them, Rusty grabbed Moonshine's arm and jerked him through the broken gate. They could now hear the pound of booted feet as they ducked back along the fence away from the canyon trail.

"Run, Moonshine!" Rusty hissed softly. "Don't stop fer nobody nor nothin'. Keep right behind me! I got to reach that cabin 'fore them jaspers do—if it kin be done."

With Moonshine panting along at his heels, Rusty rushed through the loose rocks and brush. Below and behind them on the trail, they could now hear the hombres who were angrily hunting them.

As Rusty rounded the first bend of the canyon wall, he saw the gleam of candlelight from the cabin window and turned straight toward it. From below them and only a short distance away, came yells of the outlaws, and Rusty knew the hombres had heard him and his companion.

"Run, Moonshine, run!" Rusty called sharply. "If yuh kin make it to that cabin before I do, dive through a winder, an' git Hungry loose! If he ain't already killed, yuh'll find him a prisoner. Run!"

*Bang!* The sudden wicked bark of a gun sounded from square in front of them, and a whizzing bullet fanned Rusty's cheek. As a second shot stabbed the darkness with a livid streak of red flame, Rusty caught sight of a bulky figure that rose in his path.

Without slackening his speed, the scrappy little Ranger ducked a third shot and swapped ends with his stubby carbine. A driving blow of the weapon's steel-shod butt caught the outlaw in the pit of the stomach and crashed him to the trail so hard

he bounced. Rusty and Moonshine leaped over him and legged it to the cabin.

*Bang-bang-bang! Bra-a-m! Bang!* A crackling roar of guns sounded from behind them, and a hail of badly aimed bullets chugged into the log walls, shattering glass above their heads as they dived through the window and rolled on the dusty floor.

Rusty was on his feet like a flash. As he made a flying jump toward the candle, he darted one quick look about the room.

"Hungry ain't here!" he yelped. "He's been took away, or maybe he's layin' dead outside. Git to a winder an' start that rifle workin', Moonshine! We got to keep them skunks out of here!"

With bullets cutting the air about him, Rusty slapped the candle from the table. Now in inky darkness, he jumped back to the window and threw his carbine to his shoulder.

*Wham! Wham!* Moonshine's big rifle jarred the walls as streaks of fire blazed from the weapon's gaping muzzle.

"That's the ticket, Moonshine!" Rusty barked. "Keep shootin'! Them jaspers out there may down us, but they'll always remember that they been in a fight!"

Just then, a lurid blaze of gunfire stabbed the darkness beyond the window, and a hail of bullets whizzed past Rusty's head. Rusty instantly levered three quick shots at the last rifle flash and ducked to the floor as another storm of lead split the air above him.

Bullets were now splintering through the chinking in the walls on every side. Again on one knee by the window, Rusty was firing carefully at the unseen marksmen who surrounded them.

Suddenly the shooting stopped.



Rusty and Moonshine could hear muffled voices calling guardedly back and forth.

"Hey, you Rangers in thar!" came a loud call. "We're givin' yuh a chance to surrender peaceable. We've already got one o' yuh, an' we'll git you, too! Give up an' we'll let yuh live!"

Rusty stared through the window in an effort to locate the speaker. He was starting to shout an angry reply when Moonshine nudged him.

"Mistah Rusty," the colored man whispered shakily, "I'm plumb out o' ca'tridges—what few I had was in my gun. What must I do now?"

Rusty glared. Suddenly he remembered having seen the shotguns in the corner beyond the stove.

"Aire yuh goin' to give up?" came an impatient shout from outside as Rusty leaned his rifle against the window and rushed across the room. "This is yore last chance! Surrender peaceable an' we'll let yuh live!"

Rusty scooted back with his arms full of the sawed-off shotguns, and he laid them on the floor. He handed one to Moonshine and selected another for himself.

"Make them things count, Moonshine!" he whispered. "Don't shoot unless yuh see somethin' to shoot at. All I want to do is hold 'em off until I have a chance to look for Hungry."

At that instant, there came a rush of feet toward the cabin. Rusty's sawed-off jarred the walls as he let drive with both barrels in the direction of the sound and raked the yard with a hail of buckshot and slugs.

"Owww! Look out, men!" came a howl. "Git back! They're still alive, an' they've got our sawed-offs!"

Rusty recognized Scar-face Saxon's voice and scowled angrily. He

glared for a moment and tried to locate the murderous ruffian.

Suddenly he turned to Moonshine and stooped beside him. "Keep yore eyes an' ears open now," he whispered sharply. "If they try chargin' us, shoot! I'm goin' to look fer Hungry."

Bullets from outside were again whizzing through the cabin as he snatched up another shotgun and turned away from the window. With the weapon cocked and ready, he began searching in every corner of the cabin.

"Hungry!" he called. "Hungry, can yuh hear me? Where are yuh?"

A bullet hit the coffeepot on the stove beside him and sent it clattering to the floor. Another ball slapped through the stovepipe, and a third tugged at the sleeve of the little Ranger's tattered shirt.

"Hungry ain't in here," he muttered when he had looked behind the stove and beneath the opposite window. "Them skunks have got him hid somewhere else. I'll——"

A sudden low call from beyond the window brought Rusty around with a jerk, his sawed-off lifted for a quick shot. As the sound reached him again, he scowled and jumped closer.

"Rusty!" came a muffled voice. "Rusty, can yuh hyar me?"

"It's Hungry!" Rusty ejaculated, then he called, "Hungry, where are yuh? Answer me, quick!"

"Out hyar in the bresh!" Hungry replied guardedly, his voice almost drowned by the roar of guns behind and in front of the cabin. "I'm tied hand an' foot. Them jaspers left me under that winder when they went chasin' you, an' I crawled over hyar. See kin yuh reach me an' git me loose fore they spot yuh! Yuh'll have to hurry!"

Bullets were splintering the panels!

in the front door as Rusty bounded across the room. He grabbed Moonshine by the arm and rushed with him back to the window.

"My pard's layin' somewhere in thet brush," he whispered hastily. "Foller me, an' keep yore shotgun ready! I got to git him loose as quick as I kin. Careful now! Let's go!"

Balancing his shotgun in his left hand, Rusty scrambled over the window sill and dropped to the ground. With Moonshine close at his heels, they crouched low and scurried toward the brush.

Rusty almost fell over his lanky partner before he saw him. He barked a quick warning to Moonshine and stooped hastily to help free Hungry's wrists and ankles.

"Dog-gone it!" Rusty snapped, as Moonshine crouched behind him. "It's sure lucky we found yuh when we did! We——"

*Spat!* Something hit Moonshine from behind before he could use his big shotgun, and he went down with a muffled grunt across Hungry's legs.

*Wham-wham!* Rusty's sawed-off blasted in a thundering roar that sprayed the brush beyond with flying buckshot as a hurtling form hit him from the darkness.

The shotgun flew in one direction as he and one of the ruffians went to the ground in a clawing tangle of threshing arms and legs.

## CHAPTER VI.

### MOONSHINE HAS A FIGHT.

**I**NSTANTLY Rusty began fighting with every ounce of his wiry strength to tear free. Others of the robber crew came running around the cabin, and all dived into the fray.

Moonshine gave a howl of fear and scrambled to his knees, one big

hand clawing to reach a long knife he had hidden inside his boot. Before he could jerk the weapon from its hiding place, an outlaw jabbed the smoke-blackened muzzle of a cocked .45 against the side of his head.

"Hands up!" the ruffian snarled. "You're one hombre I ain't tellin' twice!"

"Don't shoot, boss! Don't shoot!" Moonshine cried hastily. "Man, my hands is now up!"

Behind him, little Rusty fought on. Heaving and twisting with the fury of a trapped bobcat, he rolled with four of the outlaws on top of him until all were almost buried in the thick brush.

"Dog-gone yuh!" he mumbled, spitting out a mouthful of twigs and dirt. "If yuh lick me, it'll take yuh all to do it! Stay with 'em, Moonshine! We'll——"

Rusty's voice ended in a muffled grunt as his face was again chugged into the dirt. Two of the hombres got a grip on his flailing arms, and he was soon pinned down.

Both he and Moonshine were quickly tied up and dragged over to where Hungry lay. Rusty was still wrenching to break the cords that held his wrists.

"Waal," Scar-face Saxon sneered, glaring down at them. "Now we've got *two* Rangers—two Rangers an' the Z Bar L cook. I reckon we might as well go ahead an' shoot the cook. We don't need him."

"Hold on there, boss!" Moonshine said hastily, his eyes rolling. "Don't never shoot a good cook! Just let me go on percolatin' around here, an' I'll do all the cookin' for you, suh!"

Saxon slid his right-hand Colt half out of his holster. He scowled thoughtfully at the colored man, then growled an oath and glanced at his ruffians.

"We *could* use a good cook," he growled, fingering his gun.

"Yes, suh, boss!" Moonshine said quickly. "An' I'm the best cook you ever——"

A warning grunt from Hungry silenced him. Hungry rose awkwardly on one elbow and stared up at the circle of faces around them.

"Waal," he drawled grimly, "yuh've got us fer the time bein', Saxon. Now what do yuh think yo're goin' to do with us?"

With a gritted oath, Scar-face Saxon jerked his gun and flipped back the weapon's hammer. For a split second, it looked as if he meant to put a bullet through the lanky Ranger's head.

Suddenly a leering grimace twisted his brutal face. He slowly lowered his gun and shoved it in his holster.

"Put 'em all in the cave!" he snarled to his men. "I reckon I ought to just go ahead an' shoot 'em, but plain shootin' would be too easy a way out fer a blasted, snoopin' Ranger. I got another plan fer bumpin' 'em off. Bring 'em on!"

As Saxon turned away, his men grabbed the three prisoners and followed him around the corner of the house. A short distance beyond, they clumped through some stunted piñons to the mouth of a cave that opened in the jutting cliff which formed the canyon wall.

By the light of a match which Saxon shielded with his sombrero, one of the ruffians kicked open a heavy door that was hidden just inside the cave mouth. The two Rangers and Moonshine were dragged through the opening and tossed to the ground.

"All right, men!" Saxon grunted, glaring savagely. "We'll not bother to question these hombres as to whether thar's more Rangers hangin' around or not. If they did talk,

I wouldn't believe nothin' they said. We'll fasten 'em in hyar an' do some scoutin' ourselves."

As the outlaw leader's match burned his fingers, he growled an oath and struck another. With a gritted remark, he kicked Hungry soundly and motioned his men away.

That deadly greenish glint again blazed in Hungry's slitted eyes as the fellow stepped back. He started to speak, but stopped and pressed his lips together grimly.

"Yuh don't like thet kickin', do yuh, Ranger?" Saxon sneered brutally. "Waal, thet ain't nothin' to what's goin' to happen to all three o' yuh when I git back."

With a parting kick at Rusty, Saxon clumped away after his men. The two Rangers heard the door slam, then came a rattle of chain and the click of a lock.

"Gone!" Rusty gritted softly when the sound of footsteps died away outside. "Dog-gone thet polecat! We'll pay him fer them kicks! We'll pay him an' his bunch with hot lead! Come on an' let's be gettin' loose from here!"

Hungry was already heaving and wrenching to break the stout cords that held his wrists. Close beside him, Rusty and Moonshine were also struggling desperately.

Back and forth, tugging and twisting, they worked until all were panting from their efforts. Suddenly Rusty stopped and rose hastily on one elbow.

"Moonshine!" he barked softly. "Hey, be still a minute an' listen! I thought I seen yuh tryin' to pull somethin' from inside yore boot while we was fightin' them hombres. Have yuh got a bowie hid there? Quick!"

The colored man blinked the sweat out of his eyes and wrinkled

his forehead. "I did have one, Mistah Rusty," he whispered. "I don't know if I lost it or not. Wait a second until I roll over on my back. Maybe I kin see it still there."

The two Rangers heard him flouncing around in the darkness. He squirmed for a moment, then came a grunt of satisfaction.

"I've got it, Mistah Rusty!" he called hastily. "But I can't reach it."

Rusty instantly scooted toward him. As he bumped into Moonshine, he rolled quickly on one side.

"I'll do the reachin', Moonshine!" he whispered. "Dog-gone, felle! If nothin' goes wrong, we're as good as loose!"

When the colored man flounced over, Rusty began groping swiftly with his bound hands. He felt carefully until he located Moonshine's boot, then slid his hands down inside it.

Rusty quickly located the heavy bowie, but he had to work carefully with his cramped fingers to keep from dropping it. At last he drew it from its hiding place.

"All right, Moonshine!" he whispered, clutching it ready. "Now try to git yore hands over here while I cut yuh loose. Go slow!"

"Boss, you be keerful with that sticker!" the colored man warned hastily. "Just you hold it still while I saws my wrists against it. You might miss the ropes an' slice me with it. Hold on!"

Moonshine floundered around and felt gingerly for the big knife. He muttered worriedly as he located it and began slowly pressing his thick wrists against its keen edge.

"Be shore you don't move none, Mistah Rusty," he cautioned again. "Man, was my hands to slip now, I'd be plumb ruint. I——"

A hissed warning from Hungry si-

lenced Moonshine instantly, and all hastily raised their heads. As they did so, they heard a faint sound in the direction of the cave mouth.

"Steady, over thar!" Hungry whispered. "Work fast! I'm bettin' Scar-face Saxon has left some o' his gang to stand guard. If he has, thet may be who we heard."

As another faint noise reached them, Moonshine gritted his teeth and raked his wrists along the blade. The tightly drawn cords parted instantly, and he snatched the knife from Rusty's hands. One quick rake severed the rope about his ankles, and he turned to free Rusty.

"Hold still, Mistah Rusty!" he whispered. "I'll——"

Before he could reach Rusty's wrists, there came an angry snarl from almost beside them and a match flared up in the darkness. Moonshine hastily jerked his hand behind him to hide the bowie and gaped at the villainous face of a half-breed who glared down at him over the match flame.

"So!" the half-breed purred wickedly, a gleaming knife suddenly appearing in his right hand. "You would try to make the escape, no? Eet ees good that I am left to guard you!"

Watching Moonshine like a cat playing with a mouse, the fellow moved warily back. Still holding his knife ready and keeping his beady eyes on the colored man, he held his match to a bit of candle which stood in a miner's candlestick on the damp wall.

"I do not theenk Señor Saxon care mooch eef I keel you," the hombre leered, a murderous grimace twisting his saddle-colored face. "I weel tell heem that you try to make the escape, an' I cut your heart out. I weel do eet now!"

"Look out, Moonshine!" Hungry



shouted. "Look out! He's goin' to knife yuh!"

Still holding his bowie behind him, Moonshine lunged to his feet. The look of terror left his black face and was replaced by a fighting scowl when he saw that the half-breed's broad belt held an array of wicked knives.

"Look out!" Hungry yelled again, as the breed glared and started toward Moonshine with the knife poised for a slashing stroke. "Watch 'im, Moonshine! He's goin' to kill yuh!"

"I'm watchin' him, Mistah Hungry!" Moonshine called back. "Boss, when he comes messin' around me with cuttin' tools, he's talkin' my language. Just you waits until I gits a slice at 'im. I'll carve me a pound o' dog meat offn his brisket!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE HIDDEN GUARD.

AS the breed lunged in with up-raised knife, Moonshine crouched and pulled his bowie from behind him. He slashed with every ounce of his strength as the fellow tried a vicious stab at his throat.

Leaping back with the quickness of a cat, the breed barely dodged the bowie which swished within an inch of his chest. With lips curled back from his even teeth in a snarl of murderous fury, he ducked back and forth, then leaped in.

Again and again, he avoided Moonshine's bowie strokes, but his stabbing knife point touched the colored man's arm lightly in two places.

"Watch yoreself, Moonshine!" Hungry shouted. "Don't let 'im git to yuh! Grab thet wrist if yuh kin! Watch out!"

"I'm watchin', Mistah Hungry!" Moonshine called, his face beaded with sweat from his efforts to reach his slippery antagonist. "I been missin', but I'll reach 'im d'rec'y. An' when I does, just watch what happens!"

Rusty had been watching silently, but his slitted eyes had missed nothing. Suddenly he saw the half-breed leap back away from one of Moonshine's sweeping strokes, and both hands went to the knife he was using.

Rusty rose hastily on one elbow as the fellow crouched catlike almost beside him. Like a flash he saw what the hombre meant to do.

The kill-crazy breed had swapped ends with the knife, and was now holding the keen weapon by the point between thumb and fingers. With an angry grunt, Rusty rolled toward him.

"Look out, Moonshine!" Hungry yelled. "He's goin' to throw thet knife through yuh. Look out!"

As Hungry spoke, the half-breed's muscular arm whipped back over his shoulder, and he threw with a chopping, downward stroke. His long knife split a glittering arc within an inch of Moonshine's throat as the colored man threw himself aside and lunged toward him.

Like a flash, the breed jerked a second knife from his sash. As he stepped over almost against Rusty and jerked back for another throw, the little Ranger twisted around.

*Thud!* In spite of his bound ankles, Rusty doubled up and kicked the hombre a terrific blow in the stomach that sent him sprawling almost on top of Hungry.

With a whoop of satisfaction, Moonshine kicked the knife from the fellow's hand and grabbed him by the hair.

"Don't kill 'im, Moonshine!" Hungry barked sternly as the angry colored man leaned over the hombre. "Tie his hands before he gits his breath. Quick!"

Muttering, Moonshine snatched off the fellow's narrow sash and lashed his hands securely behind him. When he had also tied his ankles tightly together, he stood up and mopped the sweat and dirt from his face.

"I don't see the sense in lettin' folks like him live," he complained. "He didn't fight fair. Did you see how he tried to fling them knives at me?"

"Yeah, an' he'd have throwed one through yuh if I hadn't took a hand an' kicked him down!" Rusty snapped. "Feller, don't yuh never try to match one of these breed knife fighters. Yuh got off lucky!"

Moonshine hastily cut the cords that held the two Rangers, and they rose to their feet. Hungry made certain that the sullen half-breed was safely tied, then he snatched up the hombre's knives.

"Hyar," he drawled, handing one to Rusty. "Usin' these stickers ain't just my idea o' fightin', but they're all we've got, an' we may need 'em. Stick it in yore belt an' come on!"

As they started down the passage that led to the door, the half-breed suddenly gave a mirthless laugh and rose on one elbow. His beady, black eyes gleamed wickedly in the light of the sputtering candle.

"So!" he sneered, glaring. "You would make eescape, no? Een that, señores, I thenk you weel soon find you are meestake."

Hungry and Rusty jerked around. "Yuh what?" Rusty snapped. "Whaddy yuh mean we'll find we're mistook?"

Hungry's face hardened. "Git to

thet door an' see what he means!" he snapped grimly. "He's up to somethin'! Hurry!"

A jeering laugh followed them as they rushed down the passage to the heavy door. Rusty was first to reach it, and he tried to shove it open.

"Locked!" he snarled. "Come on an' let's see kin we bust it open!"

Hungry butted his shoulder against the heavy door again and again. Moonshine and Rusty joined him, but their added efforts failed to move it.

"Come on back an' search thet breed!" Rusty gritted. "He's got the key to this! If he ain't, he knows durn well where it is!"

Hungry took time to examine the door. He pushed Moonshine out of the way and tried to shove a hand through a narrow crack behind a thick beam which was set against the wall of the cave.

"I'm afraid we'll have to bust it down with somethin'," he muttered. "But we'll try thet half-breed first. Maybe we kin make him tell us how to git it open. Come on!"

With Moonshine shuffling worriedly along behind them, they hurried swiftly back along the passage. As they reached the place where they had left their prisoner, Hungry gave a startled grunt.

"He's gone!" Rusty ejaculated. "Look! Look there, will yuh? There's pieces o' thet sash we had 'im tied with, an' they've been cut with a knife."

Frowning, Hungry jumped forward. There in the light of the guttering candle he found pieces of the sash, and they had been cleanly cut with a sharp knife. He jerked erect and darted a quick look around them, but the hombre was nowhere in sight.

Suddenly Hungry grabbed the

candle and rushed across the cave. He searched for a moment along the wall, then nodded grimly.

"I savvy what happened," he called, frowning. "We took the knives thet hombre had on him, but we forgot to go git the one he throwed at Moonshine. He rolled to it an' cut hisself loose!"

"Then come on with thet light!" Rusty yelled, glaring around them. "We got to grab thet slippery polecat before he gits out of here! Hurry!"

Hungry nodded and darted a swift glance along the passage toward the door. He then looked thoughtfully at the dark hole behind them which led on under the cliff.

"Thet hombre is hidin' farther back in this cave," he drawled quietly. "Spread out so's he can't git past us, an' we'll hunt 'im down. Watch out fer his knife. He's got it, an' he's liable to throw it through one of our throats!"

Holding the light high above his head and watching closely, Hungry led the way on toward the back of the cave. With knife ready, Rusty kept close beside him, and Moonshine followed close at their heels.

"White folks, I shore don't like to be messin' around in here!" the colored man grumbled, warily clutching his knife. "I think we'd better git——"

Before Moonshine could finish, something swished past his head and knocked the candle from Hungry's fingers. As the light winked out, Hungry jerked up his knife and leaped back against the damp wall.

Instantly a horrible laugh echoed savagely along the narrow passage. Moonshine let out a muttered grunt as the laugh sounded again from straight above him, and he lashed out frantically with his bowie.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### EYES IN THE DARKNESS.

THE two cowboy Rangers jerked around and tried to locate the sound. At first it seemed to come from directly in front of them. When they whirled in that direction it seemed to come from somewhere else.

"Git back to thet door!" Hungry barked softly to Rusty. "Don't stop until yuh reach it. Be keeful, an' don't let thet breed past yuh!"

Again came that hateful laugh. This time, it seemed to come from close beside them.

"Ha!" came a sneering voice from the darkness. "You may be as careful as you weesh, señores! Eet weel do you no good. Thees cave, eet have many secrets wheech only we of Señor Saxon's men know. You cannot find me, an' you cannot get out. You are like the rats een the trap, an' soon you weel die!"

"We got to git him!" Hungry whispered, leaning closer. "Hurry on to thet door like I told yuh. I'm goin' to git thet coyote."

As Rusty crept swiftly away and went groping along the wall in the direction of the door, Hungry shifted his knife to his left hand and pulled a match from his pocket with his right.

"Mistah Hungry," Moonshine whispered hoarsely behind him. "Mistah Hungry, where are you?"

"Shhh!" Hungry hissed softly. "Git over against the wall an' wait here till I come back. I got to locate thet breed, an' I got to do it quickly! Pull yoreself together. It's too late now fer yuh to think o' bein' skeered!"

Moonshine muttered and rolled his eyes. "Boss, it ain't never too late fer *me* to git skeered," he stammered. "D-don't yuh go runnin' off

an' leave me. I—— Lawsy, what's that?"

It was Hungry striking a match on his boot heel. The lanky Ranger raked again, and as the match flared up, he hurled it in front of him and leaped back with ready knife.

When nothing happened, he struck a second match and held it to the candle. He stared keenly in every direction, then turned to Moonshine.

The colored man's face was glistening with sweat, but he was holding his bowie poised for lighting use.

"I'll try not to be gone long, Moonshine," Hungry whispered. "Be keerful an' keep yore ears open ontill I git back. Don't try to foller me."

The lanky Ranger turned and slipped away before Moonshine could stammer an objection. Holding the light above his head and watching closely to right and left, Hungry stepped through a narrow opening in the wall and disappeared.

Before Hungry had gone a dozen steps in this new direction, he suddenly stopped and stared around him. There on all sides he saw a maze of narrow passages. The walls seemed to be honeycombed with them.

"Huh!" he grunted. "I'd better see if I kin mark a trail through hyar. If I don't, I'll never be able to find my way back. Maybe——"

The lanky Ranger stiffened as a faint sound reached him. As he jerked the candle higher and leaned forward, he thought he saw something move just inside the nearest passage.

With knife gripped ready, Hungry kept the light above his head and rushed to see what it was. As he did so, there came another taunting laugh from somewhere close.

"Eet ees no use, Ranger!" came a sneering voice. "You cannot find me. Thees cave ees why Scar-face Saxon an' hees band haf never been caught. Shereefs an' other Rangers haf try eet many times, but always we have manage to feex them. The bones of many are steel here."

Hungry's thin lips came together in a grim line as he tried to locate that hateful voice. At times, it seemed to come from above him. Again it came from behind, then almost beneath his feet.

A deadly greenish glint smoldered in his slitted eyes as he thought of other Rangers who had been sent out to run down the Scar-face Saxon gang. Hungry could now understand why none had ever returned.

That cave was honeycombed with secret passages, and it was a death trap to those unlucky enough to allow themselves to be lured inside. The outlaws who evidently knew every turn, could murder them easily and their bodies would never be found.

As all this flashed through Hungry's head, he was keenly watching in every direction for another glimpse of the half-breed. He knew that he would have to catch the fellow and get the key to that thick door, or find some way to break it down.

Hungry started to move farther along the passage when a faint sound from almost straight behind him brought him around with a jerk. Instantly he spotted two tiny dots of greenish flame in a dark hole high above his head.

As he moved hastily back across the passage and held his candle higher, those two dots flashed and glowed. They seemed to vanish for a moment, then they appeared again.



"Eyes!" Hungry ejaculated softly. "It's thet half-breed's eyes! They're shinin' like a cat's in this candle light, an' he's watchin' every move I make!"

Swiftly, Hungry scanned the wall below those staring orbs. As he did so, he saw a sloping shelf of rock that led upward to the vaulted roof of the cavern.

"Uh-huh!" he grunted. "So thet's how thet hombre got up thar. Waal, I'm goin' right after 'im! I've got to do it!"

Again shifting the candle to his left hand, Hungry hunched over and started across the passage. He was nearly to the opposite wall when that hideous laugh rattled wickedly from above.

"You cannot catch me, Ranger," came that jeering voice. "Another Ranger thought eet could be done. That was a long time ago. Look behind you an' you weel see what happen to heem!"

Hungry halted and stared warily upward for a moment. He then darted a look behind him.

There just a few steps away lay what at first appeared to be only some chunks of rock that had tumbled from the uneven walls. But when Hungry held his candle higher, his lips came together in a grim line, and he moved hastily toward it.

There close against the wall he found the rag-clothed skeleton of a man. On the front of the tattered shirt which only partly hid the fleshless ribs, Hungry saw a tarnished badge of the Texas Rangers.

As another snarling laugh pealed from the rocks above him, Hungry's homely, lantern-jawed face went livid with cold, killing fury. He darted one swift, measuring glance at the sloping ledge that led up along the uneven wall, and gripped his knife.

WW-3B

"Ha!" came the breed's jeering voice. "So you haf about decide to reach me, haf you, Señor Ranger? Unteel now, I haf been making the sport weeth you an' waiting unteel Señor Saxon come back. Try to reach me, an' soon I weel keel you. I weel keel you all!"

Without replying, Hungry calmly set the candle on the rock and reached in his pocket for his battered plug of tobacco. His big hand was as steady as the walls around him as he bit off a huge chew and tongued it into his cheek.

As he shoved the plug back in his pocket, he glanced back in the direction he had left the Z Bar L cook.

"Hey, Moonshine!" he shouted. "Moonshine, Kin yuh hyar me?"

A faint, muffled reply boomed hollowly from the direction of the other passage.

"I want yuh to foller thet passage to the door an' stay thar with Rusty," Hungry called back. "Git to 'im, an' if I don't join yuh soon, tell 'im to find some way o' bustin' down thet door. Hurry!"

As another jeering laugh pealed from the darkness above him, Hungry spat a stream of tobacco juice to one side and picked up the candle. Bracing himself, he shoved one foot in a crack of the wall and glanced upward.

"Git ready to run, hombre!" he called grimly. "Me an' you is goin' to lock horns in about another minute, an' I got a hunch somebody's goin' to git bad hurt!"

Holding his knife gripped between his teeth, the lanky Ranger pulled himself up on the ledge. There he held the candle above his head and began climbing warily upward toward the place where he had last seen the half-breed's gleaming eyes.

## CHAPTER IX.

## LOST IN THE DARKNESS.

HUNGRY kept his body pressed close against the wall to partly guard against a thrown knife reaching him from above. He still held his own knife gripped between his teeth so he could use his right hand in climbing.

"Geet back, Ranger!" came a muffled voice from a short distance away. "Thees ees your last warning! I can see you, but you cannot find me!"

"No?" Hungry drawled. "Waal, now ain't thet just too bad? How come yuh think I won't find yuh, hombre?"

Hungry asked that last question purposely. As long as he could keep the fellow talking, he could tell about where he was hidden.

"I know you cannot find me, Ranger!" the hombre purred savagely. "You saw those bones down there. That Ranger thought he could catch one of our mens, an' he ees now dead. A bullet dropped heem from the place you are now standing. My knife ees just as sure!"

Hungry had just reached a level spot on the ledge. As the breed finished speaking, the lanky Ranger found a narrow opening in the wall just beside him and slipped warily into it.

One quick look showed him that he had entered a huge chamber high above the floor of the cave. The light gleamed weirdly against the vaulted roof as he crouched behind a stone column.

"Señor," came a wicked snarl from near him, "I haf warn you twice! Now eet ees time to die!"

Like a flash, Hungry shoved the point of his miner's candlestick in a crack of the rock and ducked back

away from the light. He was crouched behind another column of damp stone and watching like a cornered wolf when he thought he saw a slight movement in the shadows beyond the place where he had been standing.

With knife gripped ready, Hungry crouched out of sight and slipped to another pillar. From there he crept to a ledge and crawled along behind it until he was closer.

He had just stopped for another look when he saw a dim form glide from the shadows and drop behind a jagged rock just a few short steps away.

"Huh!" Hungry whispered softly. "Thet coyote's gittin' around whar he kin see my light. Waal, he's goin' to find out soon thet I ain't thar."

Just then, the half-breed's head came slowly up and Hungry saw him peer stealthily toward the candle. Instantly there came a hiss of anger and the fellow came backing warily toward Hungry's hiding place.

The hombre's eyes were darting snakily to right and left as he backed stealthily on. Hungry rose noiselessly from behind him as he reached the ledge.

"Yo're lookin' in the wrong direction, breed!" Hungry snapped harshly. "Drop thet knife! Drop it, 'fore I drive this one through yuh!"

With a hiss like an angry cat, the half-breed ducked and whirled. There was a dull glint of candlelight on steel as his knife arm whipped forward in a stabbing thrust.

But Hungry was expecting such a move, and he darted aside as the blade shot toward him. Before the fellow could strike again, the lanky Ranger was over the low edge and facing him, knee to knee.

"Ha!" the breed snarled, darting back. "You haf treeck me! But eet weel do you no good. For that, I weel cut out your heart, Señor Ranger!"

"Yeah?" Hungry drawled, his own knife poised ready. "Waal, maybe yuh will, an' again maybe you won't. Feller, I got my knife trainin' in the same place thet yuh got yores. Come on an' let's git this over, onless yuh're willin' to surrender peaceable!"

"Surrender!" the hombre hissed savagely. "Never weel I surrender! Take theest!"

Leaping in, he dropped low and slashed upward at Hungry's stomach. Darting aside, he struck again and again, but the lanky Ranger was always just out of reach of the hombre's blows.

"I'm still givin' yuh a chance to surrender, feller!" Hungry reminded him grimly. "I always take my prisoners alive—whar it kin be done."

With another snarl, the breed slashed at his throat. Hungry merely stepped back and moved aside.

For a time, the tall cowboy Ranger contented himself with merely keeping away from the swishing blade. He kept his left arm behind him and guarded with the side of his own heavy knife.

Suddenly the half-breed reached inside Hungry's guard and cut his shoulder with a treacherous back-hand stroke. Hungry's homely face hardened sternly, and he clamped his teeth on his chew of tobacco.

"Waal, yuh've asked fer it, breed!" he drawled grimly. "Hyar it is!"

Like a flash, the tall Ranger leaped in. He met the snarling breed hilt to hilt and sparks flew

from the glittering steel as they instantly locked blades.

Back and forth, wrenching and twisting, they fought clear past the end of the ledge. There they tore free, and the breed began circling like a maddened cougar.

Suddenly he darted in and drove his long knife straight at Hungry's heart. But Hungry saw the blow coming and swerved slightly aside.

*Click!* Again their blades clashed wickedly. But this time they did not lock.

Lunging in, Hungry twisted free. He slashed upward at the half-breed's hairy wrist, and the hombre's knife tinkled to the ground as he leaped back with a screech of pain and fury.

Hungry tried to grab him, but the hombre darted from under his arm and leaped behind the nearest mass of rock. The lanky Ranger was after him like a shot, but the fellow vanished in the darkness before he could reach him.

"Gone!" Hungry panted, spitting a brown stream against the wall beside him. "Waal, at least I got his sticker away from him this time. I'll take it with me to make shore he don't come back an' pick it up. I'll git——"

Hungry gave a grunt of satisfaction as he stooped for the fellow's knife. There on the rock floor beside it were several dots of crimson.

"Huh! I figured I'd nicked 'im!" he muttered. "I must've hacked 'im deeper than I thought. Now maybe I kin manage to track 'im!"

Hungry hurriedly shoved the extra knife inside his belt and snatched the candle from the wall. Holding the light above his head, he turned swiftly to where he had last seen the hombre.

There he found more dots of crim-

son, and he followed them slowly across the stone floor to the other side of the cavern. At that point, the hombre had turned along the wall.

By following the line of crimson drops, Hungry was led through a maze of passages and down through narrow holes until he was far away from the place where they had been fighting. At times, he thought he could hear the faint scuff of the fellow's moccasined feet just in front of him.

"I'll git 'im yit!" Hungry muttered grimly. "I'll shore track 'im down, if he don't soon find a way to tie up thet wrist."

Just then the light flickered and almost went out. As Hungry paused to shield the flame with his hand, he suddenly noticed that the candle was burned clear down in its holder.

A worried look crept into the lanky Ranger's eyes when he realized what would happen when he no longer had the light. He would never be able to find his way back through that maze of passages.

"Waal, it's too late to turn back now," he muttered as he hurried on. "I'll have to speed up an'——"

Before Hungry could finish what he meant to say, the light suddenly sputtered and began to die. He jerked to a quick stop, but it slowly winked out and he stood in inky darkness.

"Gone!" he snapped, hurling the now useless candlestick aside. "An' I ain't got a single danged match left to——"

As a stealthy shuffle of moccasined feet reached him from the darkness, Hungry's thin lips came together in a grim line. Knife gripped ready in his right hand and his left on the wall, the lanky Ranger

hunched over and went groping blindly in the direction of the sound.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE BATTLE TO THE DEATH.

**S**TUMBLING, often falling to his knees, Hungry hurried on. The shuffle of moccasins finally died away in front of him, and he could hear only the sound of his own heavy breathing.

"Thet breed must have eyes like a cat," he muttered, after pausing to listen. "I figure he's been through hyar enough times to know whar he's goin'. Waal, I'll never nail him or git out by standin' hyar."

Hungry had gone only a short distance when he suddenly jerked to a quick halt and stood listening. A low rumbling sound boomed hollowly through the cave, and he thought he felt a draft of warm air against his face.

"Huh!" he ejaculated, stumbling hurriedly on. "Thet breeze is comin' from somewhar outside! Yeah, an' thet noise is cattle bawlin'! I wonder where I'm at?"

Just then, Hungry caught the faint glimmer of starlight from straight in front of him. The air grew warmer, and the rumbling sound grew into a frantic bellow of driven cattle as he stepped through a narrow opening to a shelf of rock on the canyon wall.

"I'm just in time," Hungry snapped when he saw the dim forms of spurring riders hazing cattle past the cliff. "Them is most likely a few o' them stampeded Z Bar L steers Saxon an' his gang have managed to pick up while they was scoutin' fer other Rangers."

Keeping a close watch on the hombres, Hungry began hurriedly climbing down from the ledge. He



was nearly to a clump of piñons below when he heard a shout and saw one of the riders turn back across the canyon toward him.

"I wonder what thet hombre is up to?" Hungry muttered as he dropped to the ground. "Uh-huh! I think I savvy! Hyar's the main entrance to thet cave! I'll have to hurry an'——"

*Spat!* Something hit the lanky Ranger from behind and spun him half around. He staggered and went to one knee as the treacherous half-breed leaped on him from behind a rock.

Hungry took one smashing blow on his shoulder as he lunged again to his feet. Tearing free, he drove his left fist against the fellow's jaw and staggered him back. A right swing stretched the breed unconscious in a patch of weeds just as the oncoming rider leaped from his saddle behind him.

"Hands up, you!" the fellow snarled, covering Hungry with a pair of cocked .45s. "Seems as I got hyar just in time, Ranger."

"Yeah?" Hungry snapped, whirling to face him. "Waal, yuh arrove just in time to git yoreself nabbed, hombre! Look behind you!"

With a startled oath, the hombre turned his head. As he did so, Hungry's bony fist crashed against his bristly jaw like the pop of a bullwhip, and he fell almost on top of the unlucky half-breed.

*Bang-bang!* He jerked the triggers of both guns as he went down, but his whizzing bullets merely split the air above Hungry's head and knocked dust from the top of the cliff.

Hungry tore the guns from the man's hands before he could fire again, and a chopping blow across the skull stretched him on the

ground as a chorus of hoarse yells sounded from the direction of the cattle.

Hungry snatched the hombre's cartridge-filled belts and leaped back into the mouth of the cave as a clatter of iron-shod hoofs sounded from beyond the piñons, and he went running at top speed for the door.

"Rusty!" he called sharply. "Oh, Rusty!"

"Here we aire, Mistah Hungry!" Moonshine shouted excitedly. "How did——"

"What the blue blazes an' tarnation!" came a yelp from Rusty. "Yuh long-legged pelican, how'd yuh git out there?"

Without taking time to reply, Hungry fumbled hurriedly at the door. When he had located the heavy lock, he shoved a gun muzzle against it and blew it to pieces with a single shot.

As he hurled open the door, there came a bellowed oath and a rush of feet behind him. With his guns now only partly loaded, Hungry jumped back against the wall and crouched down.

"Git ready, pard!" he barked to Rusty. "Hyar they come. Yuh'll have to use yore knife, onless yuh kin capture yuh a gun. Git behind the door, Moonshine! Maybe——"

*Bang!* The thundering crash of a gun stabbed the darkness with a streak of red flame and a bullet hit the wall above Hungry's head.

Hungry's left-hand Colt roared as a dark form loomed above him, and a dying ruffian rolled clear inside the door.

"Grab thet one's guns!" Hungry yelled. "Git 'em an' git set!"

"I done got 'em!" Rusty yelled back. "Feller, do yuh think I'm settin' here asleep?"

*Bang-bang-bang-bang! Crash!* The crackling roar of guns drowned the sound of Rusty's voice as bullets tore chunks of rock from the walls and ripped flying splinters from the door.

"Git in thar an' down 'em, men!" came a bull voice that both Rangers instantly recognized as Scar-face Saxon's. "Don't give 'em time to reload! Rush 'em an' blast 'em down!"

Over against the wall and crouched low to keep Rusty from hitting him from behind, Hungry fired carefully at the flashes of the outlaw's guns. His last shot dropped a charging hombre almost beside him.

Now flat on his stomach in the doorway, Rusty was holding his triggers back and shooting as fast as his short thumbs could work Colt hammers.

A bullet hit the wall beside Hungry and filled the lanky Ranger's knee with slivers of hot lead. Another burned him along the left arm and thudded into the door behind him.

Rusty was hit in three places when his hot guns suddenly clicked on empty cylinders. Dropping the useless weapons, he crawled forward and twisted a partly loaded pair from the hands of a dead outlaw who had fallen in front of him.

Suddenly Hungry dropped and rolled over close to Rusty. "Stop shootin'!" he whispered, and he snatched a handful of cartridges from his belt. "Hyar! Take these an' reload! Quick!"

Rusty had barely time to reload one gun when there came a rush of feet and another bellow from Scar-face Saxon.

"They've stopped shootin', men!"

Saxon howled. "We've got 'em down at last! Go git 'em!"

As one of the charging outlaws stumbled over Rusty, the little Ranger rolled over and fired upward. Instantly both Rangers and the few remaining outlaws were fighting hand to hand.

A bullet plowed a groove along Hungry's neck as he jammed his right-hand gun against a struggling form and pulled the trigger. Rusty downed another and clinched with a third.

Suddenly the shooting stopped, and a single pair of feet went pounding swiftly out of the cave. Hungry fired two quick shots in the direction of the sound and heard a scream of agony.

"Rusty!" Hungry called when he heard sounds of a struggle near him. "Rusty, aire yuh hurt? Whar aire yuh?"

"Here I am!" Rusty panted from behind him. "Wait till I strike a match. I want to see what I've got."

As the light flared up, Hungry found his scrappy little partner seated on top of Scar-face Saxon's unconscious form. Rusty grinned crookedly as he climbed off his battered victim.

"Where's Moonshine?" he barked, holding the match above his head. "Yuh reckon he's killed?"

"N-n-no, suh, Mistah Rusty, I ain't killed yit," came an uncertain voice from behind the door. "No, suh, but a whole flock o' them bullets had my name an' address on 'em. Is the fightin' over, suh?"

Moonshine's big face appeared around the door. He rolled his eyes at the sprawled forms about him and mopped the sweat from his face.

"Huh!" he grunted, scowling.

"Them hombres was shore ambitious with them guns fer about a minute. Are you shore you is got 'em all?"

Hungry smiled grimly. "One or two may have got away on us," he drawled. "But we got the main ones."

"Yeah, an' the mainest one is waitin' right here to be tied," Rusty snapped. "An' just as soon as they

crack his neck with a good rope, yuh kin tell folks thet this section o' the Chisholm Trail is at last safe fer trail herds."

It'd take some rustlers who were a hull lot smarter than thet outfit o' killers ter git away from Hungry an' Rusty. Them two young Rangers are plumb pizen ter gents like them. Watch fer another Hungry an' Rusty story in an early issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



### A FAKE BAD MAN

THERE was a certain code among the cow-punchers, that every man should mind his own business. Bad and good, all mixed up together, and no questions asked. The only requirement for a job was that the applicant should "know cows."

If he possessed that one quality, and could be depended upon in danger or emergency, nothing else mattered. That is why outlaws were often found working on ranches, doing their cowboy duties, without being asked where they came from, or what their real names were.

The Tom Browns and the Bill Smiths would pop up at unexpected times and being well known as top hands—although no one would appear ever to have seen them before—they would be hired without hesitation.

The only kind that got the cowboy really mad was the fake bad man, or the one who boasted of his skill, when he could do nothing. These fellows were generally laughed out of camp.

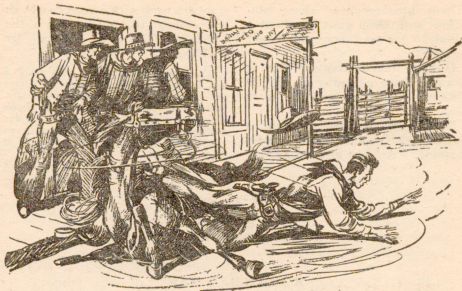
There was one swaggerer who

called himself Captain Jack. With his long hair streaming in the breeze, he rode one day into the camp of a leathery old buffalo hunter named Fitzgerald. He was no sooner settled than he began to bluff about the wonderful deeds he had done, and others still more wonderful that he was going to do.

The boys stood it for a while, but Captain Jack stayed just a bit too long. Their patience gave out. One of the waddies grabbed him suddenly, two others hog tied him, while "Old Man" Fitzgerald straddled him and clipped his curly locks close to the scalp. During this operation, the "bad" man bellowed like a calf bawling for its ma.

When it was over, the old man threw the clipped curls to the wind with a snort of contempt. Turning to the shorn hero, he drawled, "Now, young fella, you kin call yore-self the Bald Eagle."

While the cowboys were roaring with laughter, the boaster forked his cayuse and departed without any flourishes. He was never seen in that camp again.



# Hoss Thieves In Tamarack

By George C. Henderson

Author of "Six-gun Neighbors," etc.

**I**T was late afternoon in Tamarack town when "Silent Jim" Withrow, Triple W ranch owner, broke the silence that always characterized him. He began to utter bellows of defiance that could be heard all over town.

Loungers, loitering in front of the general store, stared as if they could not believe their ears. Huge, thick-necked "Bull" Marvin, who had been complaining to Silent because of non-delivery of a band of horses, pulled in his horns and gaped. Silent Jim was breaking his silence with a vengeance, raising a regular hullabaloo.

"I'm speakin' my piece!" bellowed Silent Jim. "I'm on the prod, and it's my turn to roar. Stand back and give me room!"

Slouching there beside his red roan mustang, Silent leaned slightly forward on his long legs and glowered a challenge at the loafers around the store. His scowl took in round-headed, beefy Bull Marvin, horse trader, who was here to buy some of Silent's cayuses.

Silent Jim was very tall. His jaw was lean and hard, his gray eyes as cold as ice and his tanned hawk features stern with anger.

Although he owned a ranch, he



wore faded, patched range clothes, a floppy slouch hat, worn batwings, and boots that were scuffed and run over at the heel. A single business-like Colt .45 nestled snugly against his right thigh in a basket-weave holster.

Young Jim Withrow was so tall that when he bent forward and stabbed a long finger at Bull's chest, he resembled a leaning tower.

"I'll tell yuh why I ain't delivered them broncs!" he shouted. "Horse thieves is stealin' me blind. I've sent two bunches of ponies to Tamarack, an' neither one of 'em ever got here. Robbers run 'em off. Does that answer yore question, Bull Marvin?"

Bull Marvin was built like a truck horse. His huge fists were large in proportion to his thick body, and his heavy, flat-nosed features were as expressionless as those of a Comanche brave. Yet Bull took a step backward from the wrathful young cattleman and started to stammer an apology.

"Well, see here. Don't git proddy," he blurted. "I didn't aim to rile yuh. If the broncs was stole, yuh couldn't deliver 'em. But why don't yuh round me up some more?"

Silent Jim ignored the question. He had a good reason for breaking his long silence and exploding with anger in this fashion.

Close beside Silent Jim, his ever-present shadow lurked—pudgy "Fat" Horn, foreman of the Triple W. Silent and Fat both were looking around at every face as if to fix the identity of each in their minds.

Silent knew most of these people. But there were always newcomers in Tamarack. Indians from Big Grizzly, trappers from the high country—Yaquis who had drifted

across the border, strange cowboys, women.

One glance at the faces of the spectators showed that Silent's outburst was causing a sensation. He was noted for not talking. Often he would come into town and never say a word to anybody, merely greeting acquaintances with a nod and a lift of his hand.

Only twice in fifteen years had Silent done anything so startling—once when he saved the post office from the Trino outlaws; again when he shot it out in the middle of the street with Rance Lawson. Those two battles had marked him as the deadliest marksman in the Big Grizzly country. Yet he went about his business as an ordinary horse hunter and wouldn't even answer the letter they sent to him, offering to make him sheriff.

A grizzled gunman, whose face was one mass of wrinkles, came spurring up to see what the racket was about. The star on his vest said "Sheriff." His name was John Albertson.

"What's this I hear about hoss thieves?" demanded the sheriff.

"What's it to you?" roared Silent Jim. "Yore posses are a bunch of whisky soaks. My mustangers is wuth a hundred of 'em. I'll fight my own battles an' run down them thieves myself."

"Then why ain't yuh doin' it?" retorted Sheriff Albertson angrily.

"I am!" yipped Silent. "That's what I'm here fer. The hoss thieves has headquarters right here in Tamarack. I'm hot on their trail, an' I'm warrin' women an' children to stay clear of me unless they wants to git hit by flyin' bullets."

Silent turned and seemed to slip into the saddle merely by lifting one long leg high over his horse's back.

He really didn't do it like that, but it looked that way.

Sheriff Albertson swung his own horse in front of Silent's red roan. Bull Marvin also yanked his bronc around to block the boss mustanger's path.

"I don't want no trouble from you, Silent," warned the sheriff.

Albertson was a good man, but he was just a little jealous of Silent's reputation. He knew that Silent Jim could have his job any time he wanted to run for the office.

"There won't be no trouble," growled Silent. "I'll jist find that rustler leader an' plug him, that's all. Won't be no trouble for me. It's a pleasure."

"Funny geezer, eh?" sneered Bull Marvin. "Yo're jist doin' this to run a whizzer on me because yuh couldn't deliver them brones like yuh agreed. I've been here with my crew two days, waitin' to take them hosses yuh was supposed to bring. Yo're costin' me plenty, holdin' me up like this. If yuh don't git out o' here an' bring me in another bunch of range ponies, I'll quit dealin' with yuh. I'll take my business somewhere else."

"Take it an' go to blazes!" rapped out Silent Jim. "You'll git yore hosses if yuh keep yore trap shut. You an' the sheriff both better keep yore snoots out o' this. You can't watch me forever, an' I'm stayin' right here in Tamarack until I nail the boss of that hoss-thief gang."

Silent Jim prodded his horse past Bull and the sheriff and cantered away toward the loading pens at the lower end of town. Fat Horn rode beside him.

The crowd around the general store broke into an excited gabbling. Some of the more venturesome followed Silent and his foreman. But

Sheriff Albertson and Bull Marvin were not among them.

Silent and Fat did not act like men on the prod. They ground-anchored their brones, climbed on the high fence of the loading pens, and sat there smoking while they watched a crew load bawling long-horns into a string of cattle cars.

"How many follered us?" asked Silent, who had his back turned toward town.

"Six fellers," answered Fat. "Two Mexes, an Injun, an' three Americanos."

"Do yuh know any of 'em?" pursued Silent, still speaking in a low voice.

"I recognize two of the cowboys," replied Fat. "One is Tom Pike, that works fer the 7 Bar. The other's a boomer cow-punch called Limpy McGorn. None of 'em act suspicious. Now what's the big idea, Silent? Why can't yuh let me in on this?"

Silent hopped down off the fence and sauntered over to his bronc. Fat, striding at his side, repeated his question.

"Never mind," grunted Silent. "You'll find out soon enough if it don't turn out to be a wild-geese chase. I want you to leave me here."

Both men were in the saddle now. Silent had given a searching glance to all six of the gents who had followed them from the general store. He knew he would not forget any of those faces.

"You ride on, Fat," he ordered. "Leave me by myself."

"But if there's a fight," protested Fat Horn, "you'll need help."

"You heard me," growled Silent. "Act as if yo're not payin' any attention to me. But stay close enough so's yuh kin watch me from a distance an' see what happens."

Grumbling and muttering under his breath, Fat Horn rode uptown.

Silent rode slowly around the big area of loading pens, but nothing happened. Over toward town, he could see little groups of men gathered in clusters, looking in his direction. Fat was nowhere in sight, but he knew the faithful Triple W foreman was on the job.

Silent jerked impatiently on the bridle reins. The spirited roan threw its head up, rattling the bit chains and snorting through its nostrils.

There was a dull, sickening thud of a bullet plugging into flesh. A rifle cracked sharply. The handsome roan pitched forward on its knees, throwing Silent from the saddle.

Rolling over in the dust, Silent Jim Withrow leaped to his feet, with a six-gun in his hand. His dead horse did not even quiver. The slug aimed at Silent had hit it squarely in the forehead.

## II.

The ghastly silence after the killing of Jim Withrow's handsome roan lasted for only a second. It was followed by yells from the spectators who had been hoping to see a fight. Some darted for cover. Others rushed forward on the heels of Sheriff John Albertson's galloping horse.

One glance around had convinced Silent Jim of the hopelessness of spotting the dry-gulcher. The shot might have come from any one of a dozen places—from the low hills, from patches of brush on the plain, or from one of the houses in town.

Silent's eyes were misty, and there was a lump in his throat as he dropped down beside the carcass of his favorite bronc. Death had been quick and merciful at least for the speedy roan.

"Blast the murderin' coyotes!" burst out Silent Jim as the sheriff

dismounted beside him. "Look what they done to my red hoss! The speediest bronc in the Big Grizzly country. I'll never find another fast enough to run down wild mustangs like Red Boy done."

"You brought it on yoreself," grumbled Sheriff Albertson. "You made yore boast, an' now yo're payin' fer it."

"That's right," agreed Bull Marvin. "Everybody thinks that yo're so wise because yuh keep yore trap shut. But you shore opened yore mouth an' rammed yore foot in it this time, boot, spur an' all. You've got to be careful about slingin' threats around where everybody kin hear yuh."

Silent glowered at the sheriff and Bull Marvin and glanced around at the crowd about him. Any of these men could have fired that shot, as far as he knew.

The sheriff spoke the truth. Silent had been foolhardy. He had only himself to blame for the loss of his red roan.

A hand fell on Silent's shoulder. It was Fat Horn's. Fat's plump face was grief-stricken. He had thought a lot of the red roan, too. His expression told Silent that Horn had learned nothing. Without a word, Fat turned away and began taking the rigging off the horse's carcass.

Sheriff Albertson suddenly came to life and was shouting orders at men whom he deputized.

"Look everywhere for that bush-whacker!" he ordered. "Jed, you take some fellers an' comb the hills. Jasper, you ride out on the plain. I'll take some men my self an' go through every house in town. As fer you, Jim Withrow, you'd better hit the grit. Git another hoss an' drift out o' town before there's more trouble. Yore reckless tricks won't do anybody any good."

Silent did not answer. He helped Fat remove the saddle from the dead horse, then carried it back uptown to the livery stable. He found Bull Marvin there waiting for him.

"What about them brones?" demanded Bull. "Did you mean it when you said you was drivin' another band o' hosses in here fer me?"

"Do yuh think I'm a liar?" flared Silent Jim.

"Take 'er easy, Silent!" warned Fat Horn, who was sticking to his boss like a bur. "Bull's a friend, yuh know."

"I was a friend," burst out Bull Marvin. "But I won't be fer long at this rate. If you can't deliver them hosses, let me go out with my drivers an' git 'em. There ain't no thieves takin' hoss herds away from me."

"Yore brones will be here, Bull," said Silent, in a quieter tone. "Go on back to the hotel an' git drunk. Yuh've got nothin' to worry about."

Silent Jim and Fat Horn emerged from the gloom of the livery stable and started uptown. Dusk had fallen. Lights began to glow in houses and saloons.

Fat was as jumpy as a one-armed man with the seven-year itch. He kept darting glances about him as if expecting a gun to fire in his face any minute.

"Don't yuh think we'd better ride an' jine the boys?" ventured Fat. "The next shot won't hit a hoss. It'll drill you dead center. Then the hull fight'll be over."

"Nothin' doin'!" snorted Silent. "Do yuh think I'm goin' to leave Tamarack when I know that dry-gulchin' hoss thief is here? I was only guessin' at it before. Now I know he's in town. You git away from me an' spy on me from a distance like I told you. I still think I kin lick that boss bronc rustler."

Fat started to amble off. "The boss has gone plumb loco," he muttered under his breath. "How kin he catch that hoss thief when he don't even know who he is."

Silent entered the Tamarack Bar, which was beginning to do business again. There were plenty of men in town who were more interested in drinking and gambling than in joining a sheriff's posse.

Loafers set down their whisky glasses and stared at the tall, long-legged mustanger. Even the gamblers ceased their games, expecting trouble.

Silent's eyes took in every face as he sauntered over to the chuckaluck lay-out and put a dollar down on the board. The dealer whirled the cage. Silent hardly heard him as he called out the numbers on the tumbling dice.

He lost the dollar and wagered another. Big kerosene lamps, swinging from chains overhead, did not furnish enough light to dispel the gloom of the big room entirely. A sort of dusk always hovered over the place.

Through a dirty window, Silent could see Fat Horn lounging just outside. A number of men entered the room. Three were of the original six who had followed him down to the corrals—"Limpy" McGorn and the two Mexicans. One of them had a scar across his chin.

"It's one of them three that I've got to watch," mused Silent. "They follered me to the loadin' pens, in the fust place. Then, instead of goin' off with the sheriff's posse, they trailed me in here. It might be an accident in the case of one of 'em, but not with all three."

Silent left the chuckaluck lay-out, a loser by three dollars, and sauntered over to watch a stud-poker game. He waited until he caught



Fat Horn glancing toward him, and passed his foreman a signal agreed upon. Fat vanished from sight.

From beneath the floppy brim of his big Stetson, Silent studied the three suspects. Limpy McGorn was at the bar, drinking. He walked with a hippety-hop gait, caused by a bum leg. He wore double guns, and had a mean look.

Silent had about decided that Limpy was the one, when he saw the scar-faced Mexican casting side-long glances at him. Now he remembered the fellow. A bronc had stepped on his face, causing that scar. He was called "Scar" Vasquez.

Suddenly turning around, Silent moved swiftly toward the rear door of the saloon. He wanted to look around to see if anybody was following him, but he dared not.

A drunk blocked his path, and he brushed the fellow aside. His hand closed over the doorknob, and in another instant, he was outside in the rubbish-strewn back yard. The rearing wall of the saloon building and thick growths of manzanita made it almost pitch dark.

Silent barely had time to turn when the door was pulled open noiselessly, and a steeple-crowned hat appeared. It was Scar Vasquez. Scar did not see Silent until the big mustanger grabbed him by both arms and held him in a grip of steel.

"I've got yuh!" growled Silent. "Don't fight, or I'll kill yuh!"

Scar seemed to go limp. It was a trick. The instant Silent eased up on his hold, the Mexican jerked loose and with lightning quickness drew his knife.

The slashing blade ripped the front of Silent's coat without touching his skin. The big cowboy leaped back. Like most American cow-punchers, he did not relish cold steel. He much preferred the gun.

Scar drew back his hand to throw the knife just as Silent's Colt popped out of its holster. Not a word was spoken by either man. There was no time for trick shooting, no chance in the darkness to knock that throwing knife from swarthy fingers.

Silent aimed the gun and fired. He ducked at the same instant. The thrown knife, aimed at his throat, buried itself in his coat at the top of his shoulder.

With a screech of pain, Scar Vasquez reeled backward, twisted half around, then fell on his face.

Silent heard hoofs clattering behind him, and he whirled, lifting his smoking gun. It was Fat Horn, mounted and leading another horse.

### III.

Jingling spurs clanked on gravel as Fat Horn leaped from his saddle. Inside the saloon sounded excited yells and the pounding of boot heels across the floor. The crowd had heard Vasquez scream and the blasts of the gun. In another minute, they would be out here.

The two mustangers moved so fast that they were mere blurs in the darkness. Silent picked up the groaning Mexican's body and fastened it to the saddle of the led horse. Scar was badly hit, but he as not dead.

Fat Horn, on the back of his own horse, got out of there just as the rear saloon door burst open. He drew the led horse along with him.

"Take Scar to Doc Rogers!" was Silent's last order before Fat vanished. "Wait fer me there!"

Guns bristled in the hands of the men who came pouring out into the alley. Shouts and threats tumbled from drunken lips. Some one kept yelling at the top of his voice to get the sheriff.

Silent Jim pulled the knife blade from the shoulder of his coat and dropped it to the ground before he stepped into the path of light which fell through the open doorway.

"What's all the fuss?" he demanded.

Bull Marvin thrust his thick-necked, bulky figure forward to block Silent's path.

"Well, of all the nerve!" he growled. "You askin' us what's happened! We heard a scream, a shot. You plugged somebody!"

Sheriff John Albertson came on the run with two deputies.

"Oh, it's you again!" he moaned. "Gosh! I thought I'd got rid of you. I told yuh to hit the grit. Now what kind of a ruckus have yuh got into?"

"He shot somebody," put in Tom Pike, a freckle-faced 7 Bar puncher. "We heard a man yelp an' the roar of a gun. Where's the body? Make him tell what he's done with the carcass!"

In the night blackness, the indistinct shapes of men loomed like gigantic specters all around Silent. Back of them, tamarack and cedar limbs drooped to the ground, making it even more ghostly.

Eyes glittered in the reflected lamplight that slanted through the open doorway. It shone on the drawn guns and outlined faces that were beaded with sweat. The odor of whisky was strong in the air.

Some one set up a clamor for Silent's arrest. Others joined in the shout.

"Take his guns!"

"Put the cuffs on him!"

"Make the killer talk!"

A dozen voices took up the outcry.

Sheriff Albertson hesitated. After all, Silent Jim Withrow was a ranch owner, a tax payer, a reputable citi-

zen with plenty of friends. It would cost the sheriff votes if he made a mistake.

"Who'd you shoot at, Silent?" he demanded. "Better talk while you've got a chance. These drunken rowdies are just honin' fer trouble."

"I throwed lead into a stinkin' coyote," said Silent. "Plugged him, too, jist like I figure to plug them hoss thieves that's rustled my broncs."

A number of the men had been scouting around, looking for the body of the one they supposed Silent had shot. When they found nothing, Sheriff Albertson roared for the crowd to disperse, and he took Silent over to the jail with him.

"Are you runnin' me in?" demanded Silent Jim.

"I ought to," growled the sheriff, "but I ain't. But you'd better tell me what you're up to, so's I kin give yuh a hand. Looks like you've tangled with a wolf that's too big fer you to curry this time. Them hoss thieves has got all the breaks. They'll dry-gulch yuh, shore as Satan."

"Unless I git them fust," muttered Silent grimly.

"How kin yuh git 'em fust?" protested Sheriff Albertson. "Yuh don't even know who they are, do yuh?"

"No," admitted Silent reluctantly. "I ain't even got the slightest idea who's the boss of them mustang rustlers. But I aim to find out."

Silent got a horse at the livery stable, saddled up and rode out into the woods. But instead of leaving town, he circled around until he was directly behind Doc Rogers's frontier hospital.

Fat Horn was waiting for him in the shadows near the door of the big white building.

"Got Scar safe into doc's place,"

said Fat. "The old sawbones got the bullet out o' him. Says he'll pull through, all right."

"Did you stay in while the cuttin' was goin' on?" demanded Silent.

Fat Horn rubbed his plump face, which was still rather pale from the ordeal. The cowboy was not used to watching operations.

"I shore did," he gulped. "But I never want to do it again. I listened close, but Scar never said nothin'. Not even when he was kind of out of his head. Doc says he ought to return to consciousness in an hour or so. Looks like yore trick didn't git us very far, Silent. Scar's jist small fry. The big boss thief got away."

"That's fine," exulted Silent. "I knowed them brags I made would bring the enemy down on me. We got Scar, an' we're goin' to make him talk. When he does, we'll nab that hull hoss-thief gang. You stay here on guard. I've got some business with Bull Marvin uptown. Look fer me back in about an hour."

Silent tramped away into the timber, untied his bronc from a spruce sapling, mounted and loped uptown. He found Bull Marvin in front of the Tamarack Bar.

"Hello, Bull!" he said. "Don't leave town. I'm keepin' good my promise to deliver them brons in the mornin'. If them hoss thieves raid us, we're ready fer 'em."

Bull Marvin lowered his round, shaggy head and stroked his thick neck with a hairy paw.

"I'm glad to hear that, Silent," he rumbled. "I want to buy them hosses bad. Tell me which way they're comin', an' I'll send my crew along to help. I've got some salty lead slingers myself."

Silent looked at Bull Marvin thoughtfully for several minutes.

"That's right nice of yuh," he said. "Fat Horn knows which way them

fellers is comin'. You git ready over at the livery stable. I'll send Fat there to guide yuh. My men might need help if them cutthroats tackle 'em in Dead Man's Pass."

Bull Marvin agreed and rode away to round up his men.

Silent went back to Doc Rogers's hospital. Fat Horn was waiting just outside the place.

"Bull Marvin has offered to help us ketch them hoss thieves, Fat," said Silent. "His crew is saddlin' up over at the barn. You jine 'em an' guide 'em, so's they'll meet our men jist beyond Dead Man's Pass."

"But see here——" protested Fat. "Don't argue," growled Silent. "Git goin'!"

Silent looked at his big silver watch. It lacked some time yet of being an hour since Doc Rogers had said that Scar Vasquez would recover. Doc was peevish, and Silent did not want to crowd him.

For half an hour, the bronzed, long-legged mustanger scouted around outside the doc's home. All was quiet. Only the chirping of crickets broke in on the woodland stillness.

Silent had taken care that nobody could follow him here. But he knew that the boss horse thief was aware that he had shot Scar Vasquez, and they would be looking for Vasquez's body.

The sign on the door said "Office." Silent pushed in without knocking and walked down a hallway to where a bushy-whiskered man stood cleaning crimson-stained surgical instruments. This was crabby old Doc Rogers, the only sawbones in Tamarack.

"Well, what do you want?" snapped the doc, without turning around.

Silent explained in a few words

what had happened. Fat had told the doctor very little.

"What do you want to see Vasquez for now?" demanded the physician. "He's still slightly delirious."

"I want to sit by his bed and listen to what he says," explained Silent patiently. "Scar's only a hired hand. Some man higher up paid him to try to kill me. I want to stay right by his bedside until he mentions that jasper's name."

"All right," growled Doc Rogers impatiently. "Go ahead, but don't try no rough stuff. If yuh disturb my patient the least bit, I'll have you thrown in jail."

#### IV.

Silent Jim Withrow could hear Scar Vasquez groaning and raving in delirium in the darkened bedroom where he lay. Doc Rogers had closed the door so that the noise would not disturb him. The old doctor was hard-boiled. He had cut out more bullets than he cared to think about, and he could not work up much of a lather over a wounded Mex.

The big horse rancher gripped the doorknob, turned it and pushed the panel in noiselessly. The light from the hallway fell upon the tossing figure of a man lying on a white bed. The window curtains were blowing inward.

It was a moment before Silent saw that the screen to that big window had been knocked out. Something rustled in the darkness. A shadowy figure moved on the other side of the bed. Lamplight showed on a knife blade that flashed downward at Scar's writhing body.

Silent Jim's six-gun leaped from its holster. A stab of yellow flame spurted from the black muzzle when

he squeezed trigger. The darting target there in the blackness of the room was hard to hit. Silent shot again and again at the blobs of orange flame that bubbled from the skulker's double guns.

Back of him in the hallway, Silent heard Doc Rogers bawling excitedly. Scar Vasquez no longer moved. The hilt of a knife protruded from his chest.

The skulker made a dive through the window. Neither man had scored a hit yet. Silent rushed forward and leaped after him. The killer was just picking himself up from the ground. He turned and lifted one of his guns.

Silent's Colt roared first. Through a haze of drifting powder smoke, he saw the killer crumple up on the ground. One leap carried Silent to the gunman's side. He kicked a hog-leg out of one hand and stooped to pick up another that had fallen.

But the precaution was needless. The hombre was dead. It was another Mexican, a stranger to him.

Doc Rogers met Silent Jim as the mustanger rushed back into the place. He blocked the doorway into Scar's bedroom.

"No need to go in there now, Silent," he growled. "Scar's dead. Saved the cost of a hanging, I guess."

Alarm was written on Silent's lean, tanned face. From the direction of town, he could hear yells and the firing of alarm guns. A crowd would soon come rushing in here. There would be questions, delay.

He had hoped to get a confession from Scar Vasquez. At least, he had wanted to learn the name of the boss rustler. Now this hope seemed blasted.

"All right, doc," said Silent. "Looks kind of like I'm licked. Did Scar say anything at all?"



"He muttered a few words before he croaked," answered the doctor. "Kept sayin' 'Bull Marvin—*ladron*—Bull Marvin—*ladron*'."

"Was he conscious of what he was sayin'?" burst out Silent Jim. "It wasn't delirium?"

"No, he knew what he was sayin', all right," declared the doctor. "His eyes were clear just a moment before he passed out. They were blazing with hate, and he was trying his best to make me understand."

The yelling of the crowd sounded right outside now. In another minute, armed men would come pouring into the room. If the sheriff caught Silent in trouble for the third time, he would certainly throw him in jail.

"Do you know what that means, doc?" asked Silent. "Scar accused Bull Marvin of bein' a thief. '*Ladron*' means 'thief' in Spanish. Bull is the boss rustler. I've been a fool. I even sent Fat Horn to guide that thick-necked killer to my hoss herd. If they murder Fat, I'll never forgive myself!"

Boots thumped roughly on the porch outside. The shouts of the crowd had become a threatening rumble. Silent darted out of the back door of the doctor's house and ran over to his horse.

The darkness of the pine grove sheltered him as he swung into the saddle and raced away. Men yelled for him to halt. Bullets clattered harmlessly in the three branches, but Silent kept going.

He blamed himself bitterly for bungling this whole business. Now he remembered a dozen suspicious things about Bull Marvin. Bull had told him where to drive each one of those horse herds that had been stolen.

He could look back and see how Bull had laid traps for Silent's

Triple W mustangers, so he could run off the brones without any trouble at all. That was much better than paying for them.

Silent pounded along on and on through the night on his livery-stable horse. At times, the grades were so steep he had to slow to a walk. He saw ample sign that Bull Marvin's crew had passed this way. From the tracks, he judged that there were at least five or six riders.

It was past midnight when Silent sighted the camp fire of the horse-hunting outfit. The Triple W mustangers had halted the herd of wild cayuses on a grassy meadow just beyond Dead Man's Pass. They had not wanted to try to drive across the perilous pass in the darkness.

On one side of Silent Jim, as he rode along, steep granite cliffs towered. A steep cliff and a black crevasse were below him on his left.

Silent hugged the bank so that he could approach the camp unseen. Presently he tied his mustang in a side gorge and crept forward on foot.

He could see three men riding herd on the little band of mustangs. All the others were sprawled out on their blankets on the ground. The camp fire had died down until it was just a bed of coals. Chuck and hoodlum wagons stood close by. Silent counted eight dark blanket-covered shapes on the ground, and he knew that Bull Marvin's men also had hit the hay.

Everything seemed peaceable. The night herders sang softly as they circled the cavvy of ponies. Some of the men were snoring loudly.

Silent hunkered down behind the big wheel of the chuck wagon and waited. An hour passed. He was shivering with cold, and his muscles were cramped. Had he made another blunder? Perhaps Scar

Vasquez's accusation had been only delirious mumblings.

One of the blanket-covered forms stirred. Bull Marvin's huge figure appeared in the dying firelight. As if this was a signal, four other men arose noiselessly. It was a moment before Silent saw that they had knives in their hands.

Suddenly one of the horse thieves bent over a prone cowboy, knife lifted to strike. Silent had no time to draw. He could only tilt his holster and fire through it. The knifer jerked around, but did not fall.

The mountain stillness was abruptly rocked by the roar of blating six-guns. Silent Jim Withrow had only five loads left in his big Colt. He had to make each one of those tell. His second shot knocked a killer flat on his face.

Triple W cowboys were leaping out of their blankets, but they had no guns handy, and they were being slaughtered like sheep. With a bellow of rage, Silent Jim charged straight into the crowd of gun hawks.

A blow on his left arm stopped him short. He fired at a flash, and heard a man scream. Lights flashed before his eyes. He was beginning to feel weak, but he gritted his teeth and kept to his feet.

Behind him, he heard a crackling of brush. Turning, Silent saw Bull

Marvin charging down upon him. Bull's horse went down, throwing the horse trader to the ground. The round-headed, thick-necked jasper leaped to his feet just as Silent reached him.

"You played out yore string, yuh double-crossin' murderer!" yelled Silent. "You'll never steal no more hosses!"

The roar of their Colts drowned out his words. Silent's gun clicked empty. Bull Marvin was swaying drunkenly on his feet. One of his Colts fell to the ground, but he was still trying to lift the other to shoot.

Silent tried to charge him, but wound weakness seemed to glue his feet to the ground. A feeling of intense amazement swept over him when he saw Bull pitch forward on his face and lie still.

Half an hour later, Silent told the whole story to Sheriff Albertson. His bellowing and noise-making in town had been a trick to attract attention and draw the horse thieves into the open.

Later in town when they wanted Silent to make a speech, the Triple W boss only shook his head, lifted his hand and rode away without a word. Jim Withrow had become his old silent self again, and wild horses couldn't have dragged a speech out of him.





# The Laugh of the Gold Ghost

A "Risky McKee" Story

By William A. Todd

Author of "Earmarked For Death," etc.

**I**T was storm-racked midnight when "Risky" McKee stumbled onto the killers. Lightning was exploding over the rocky trail and forking into the inky depths of Echo Gulch.

The fir saplings which were suddenly revealed gave the aspect of Indians in feathers and leggings doing a war dance in the whooping wind. Then they were abruptly gone in the swirling rain, and thunder boomed through the mountains.

Risky's yellow slicker was scant protection, though he had buckled tight the collar and wadded bannanas around his throat. The wet seeped through and was trickling cold down his spine and ribs. The

saddle was soggy. His toes were swimming in his high-heeled boots. The tan hat which he had pulled down hard to keep from blowing away seemed to hold ten full gallons in the upcurling brim.

He would have taken refuge in a cave, if only to save his thoroughbred roan. But the Texas norther was behind, driving the drenched animal on to the warmer comfort of mash and straw bedding in a sourdough's barn.

Risky, counting the miles, kept his eyes peeled for rock slides and uprooted trees. And that is how he spied the killers in a flash of lightning.

They were climbing the trail—

four of them, with heads bowed against the hissing rain, dark phantomlike horsemen, glistening with wet.

Their swift picture could easily have been a trick played upon his tired eyes by the relentless storm. But Risky wasn't sure. And whenever he wasn't sure of his cards and couldn't calculate his chances, he always played safe, like the dyed-in-the-hide gambler he was.

So now the puncher swung his dark roan off the narrow trail and into a patch of buckbrush. He waited, hand inside his slicker upon the butt of a six-gun that was carefully wrapped in a dry piece of rubber poncho.

There was a lull in the bombardment from the heavens, and Risky had no way of noticing the approach of the four riders. He leaned forward over the pommel, letting the driving rain run onto the back of his neck. He thought he heard the click of passing hoofs. He wasn't sure. Then a jagged streak of lightning came, and the side of the gorge was revealed like the world of a nightmare.

Risky saw the horsemen filing in front of him, not five feet away. Their heads were bowed, the cones of their hats plowing into the wind. In the lightning, their cheeks had a greenish hue, so that they looked alike for that short moment.

Darkness blotted them out. But not before one of them glimpsed Risky's head and shoulders rearing above the lashing brush.

He heard a sharp exclamation of terror, the squeal of a bronc dug with a spur. An angry shout lifted, then a mocking laugh, as if the leader of the horsemen was assuring them that one of them had seen a spook.

Risky didn't move for a full five

minutes. Sitting his saddle in the storm, he wondered what business those four had been on in Echo Gulch, and whether he should follow them. That would be hard on his exhausted bronc.

Those four hadn't much feeling for their animals to take them out on a night like this, when the next camp was at least twenty miles away. But perhaps they were lost strangers. If so, how did they know this narrow trail?

Risky scowled, then turned his roan on down the route to the gorge.

Fifteen minutes later, Risky McKee was threading his way through the bottom of Echo Gulch, over an old wagon road knee-deep in mud, with a roaring torrent at his right. He picked up a small square of window light on a bench of the cliff at the left. Dismounting, he led his roan up the path to the cabin.

Before he got there, he could hear the front door banging in the wind, and all the misgivings that those four riders had aroused in him now welled into a deep alarm for the old friend whom he was to visit. Leaving his mount outside the cabin, he stepped through the swinging door and bent his gray eyes upon the big living room.

Risky's breath caught. The cabin was wrecked—chairs smashed, tables overturned, floor boards torn up. The fireplace hearth was uprooted and sections of the chimney pried out.

The figure of a white-haired man lay sprawled on a bunk, chest wet with crimson, eyes shut, mouth open. One arm was dangling. It was Hoke Barton, the sourdough who had written a frantic letter asking Risky to help him pack his gold dust out of the Worthless Mountains.



The puncher went to him, calling, "Hoke!"

There was no answer from the miner as Risky pushed back his eyelids and found the pupils hadn't rolled from sight. The puncher bent to listen to a feeble heartbeat. Hoke Barton was out cold, but still alive.

Wheeling, Risky moved quickly for the door. Outside, he picked up the reins of his bronc and led the animal to the rear of the cabin and into a dry tool shed. There was straw bedding on the floor of the single stall, and mash in the manger—evidence that Hoke had been awaiting Risky's arrival.

The puncher quickly unsaddled his mount and threw a blanket over it. Then he was running back to the cabin.

By the light of the flickering lamp, the cowboy went to work on Hoke Barton's wounds. He sterilized the instruments of his first-aid kit in the flame of matches. Three .45 six-gun slugs were extracted. Risky cleansed the holes, plugged and bound them. Hoke didn't awaken.

"Those old-timers can pack more lead than a grizzly," the cowboy said aloud.

His friendship for Hoke Barton was of long standing, since the day that the sourdough had found him wandering loco in a distant desert and nursed him back to life. At that time, Risky had told Hoke to send for him if the miner ever needed him. Hoke certainly needed Risky now.

Letting the old fellow sleep, the puncher blanketed the window, then patched the fireplace, in which he kindled some logs. Undressing, Risky set his clothing to dry, wrapped himself in a blanket to keep warm. He sat for an hour in

a chair, studying the torn and battered cabin, as if he was reading the lay-out of a strange gambling room.

Risky was no card shark. He owned one of the finest horse-breeding ranches west of the Pecos River. But even that luxury could not keep him off the back trails, where his reckless spirit led him to gamble with fate.

He had a reputation for never turning down a bet, provided the odds were high against him and justice, and he could win by the use of horse and gun.

He sat studying the remnants of the game that had been played in Hoke Barton's cabin. Several times, he left the chair to pick up cakes of still wet mud on the floor and set them to dry. His cool gray eyes missed nothing—the method by which the gangsters had pried up the planks, the strand of long gray hair that had caught on a wall nail, the fact that Hoke's larder had been looted of several items and not others. These clues he sifted in his mind until a groan drew him to the bunk.

"Hello, Hoke! Know me?"

The old sourdough was blinking out of a glassy-eyed daze. His wrinkled face was drawn and as pale as a tombstone. He spoke through trembling lips, "Risky!"

"You win the teacher's apple, Hoke."

"They got my gold, Risky! It was under the floor."

"Bad place to hide it, pard," the puncher replied, pressing the miner back from rising. "Rest easy an' stop worryin'. I'll get the dust back. How about some hot broth?"

"They was the Gold Ghosts," Hoke went on excitedly. "I saw the black beard of one hangin' below his mask. Another had tried ter tuck his long gray hair up under a hat,

but it was fallin' down. The hunchback stood in the doorway, so I wouldn't know him. The last had an iron bailing hook fer a hand."

Risky McKee scowled. "I got it all, Hoke, every brand. You wrote me how a tough bunch called the Gold Ghosts were going around murdering miners in these Worthless Mountains. Rest easy, boy."

"I can't forget 'em," Hoke Barton whispered, eyes closing.

"You'd better catch some shut-eye, Hoke, if you aim to play cribbage with me to-morrow. I'm one up on you in games from two years ago."

Hoke was asleep.

Risky sat on the edge of the bunk, listening to his patient's troubled breathing. The cowboy thought of the description of the "Gold Ghosts."

In that short glimpse of them on the trail, while lightning flashed, their faces had taken on a greenish hue, so that they all looked alike. He hadn't been able to recognize them in the storm.

But they had left enough clews for Risky McKee to work on.

## II.

By morning, the norther had blown itself out. Big fleecy clouds were playing tag about the craggy peaks that reared above Echo Gulch. The sun was drawing steam out of the wet cliffs, and the waterfall in the gorge had subsided.

Risky McKee was on his way to the town of Hotspur. He had mended the floor and furniture in Hoke Barton's cabin and left the sourdough poulticed with Indian herbs, with food and water beside his bunk.

Hoke hadn't thought well of the idea. He had protested that the

Gold Ghost gang had fled into the mountains, taking with them enough provisions from his larder to last them two weeks.

But Risky rode back over the rocky trail that had brought him to Echo Gulch and turned at the fork toward the wild mining town. He remembered that the killers had forgotten to take sugar and baking powder from Hoke Barton's shelves. And he knew that any hombre who planned to shove off into the wilds wouldn't overlook those necessities. So Risky was making his bets on the town of Hotspur.

It was a twenty-mile trip, a mere pleasure jaunt for the powerful roan under the puncher. The journey had been anything but that the night before, when Risky rode right through Hotspur in an attempt to make Hoke's cabin before the storm broke. He had not been alone when he pulled into the town that day. And now, as he neared the mining camp, he kept his eyes peeled for the three hombres who had remained in Hotspur.

He met them coming up through the foothills, lazily astride ponies that were caked with mud and hadn't been groomed for a week. Those animals would have fooled any one but a horse fancier, who might have noticed the sign of speed in their slender legs.

But the same gent wouldn't have been impressed by the two mules loaded with mining equipment that the three riders were driving on ahead of them. Those mules had been bred by Risky McKee out of special stock. They were as fast as a bronc and twice as strong.

Risky slowed down to hail the bald-headed leader of this outfit that was pointing into the mountains.

"Well, I'll be a mildewed sister to

a Chinese medicine man if it ain't Sufferin' Joe!" Risky sang out. "I never seen you look so fine, old-timer. Pink cheeks, eyes aglitter with gold fever, an' it looks like you're sprouting brown curls above your ears."

Slowing to a halt, "Sufferin' Joe" made an ugly, toothless face. He gave the impression of a lean sapling, with scrawny shoulders, and a thin leathery neck. But Risky knew there was the strength of steel in his muscles, and the endurance of a pack mule.

"Sufferin' Joe" had been a wagon scout in his time, had served with the Rangers, and knew more about the Western ranges than the men who owned them. His one failing was his constant complaint about imaginary ailments, and it was said that Risky McKee was the only hombre who could stand his company.

"Cut the comedy, Risky," Sufferin' Joe now spoke up. "I ain't in no mood fer it. If yuh had been through what I've been through, an' still am goin' through, yuh'd have shot yoreself long ago. That thar hurricane last night got my rheumatiz ter achin' ag'in. We all had ter sleep in a leaky barn, an' I got a crook in my spine what feels like permanent paralysis. We eat this mawnin' in a Mex joint, an' I'm plumb shore the grub was pizen'd, from the way my pore stomach is actin'——"

Risky held up a hand. "All right, all right," he interrupted. "We won't go into the rest. What did you find out about Hotspur? That's what I left you there for." And he winked at the two young wranglers who had halted behind Sufferin' Joe.

"That thar town back thar?" Sufferin' Joe asked, leaning forward over the pommel. "I don't ever

want ter see it ag'in. They got as much hospitality as a family o' rattlers. Listen, Risky, the hull works is owned by a stuffed silk shirt by the name o' Jim Silk. He owns the big mine on the hill overlookin' the camp. The gold from that mine bought him the saloons, the gamblin' joint, the hotel, the livery, the spring water what yuh drink, an' even the flies what fly an' the skeeters what sting."

"Jim Silk," Risky repeated the name. "Did you meet him?"

Sufferin' Joe snorted. "Yuh can't help meetin' him if yuh don't need yore sleep an' yuh foller the bright lights, like yuh told us ter do," the lanky scout retorted. "He waits fer the party ter git goin' good an' hot every night in the Lucky Fortune Saloon. Then he makes a grand entrance an' buys free drinks fer the crowd. He makes more noise than a stampede. They calls him 'Big-hearted Jim' Silk down thar."

"You must have swallowed some of Jim Silk's rotgut liquor the wrong way," Risky replied. "You were saying as how Jim waits for the party in the Lucky Fortune Saloon to get going good before he turns up. Does he put out his entertainment for strangers?"

Sufferin' Joe shot the puncher a crafty glance.

"Risky, I'll always give yuh credit fer askin' jest the right question," he drawled. "No, Jim Silk ain't no snob ter strangers. But wait a second. Afore yuh kin horn in on his pink tea, yuh get questioned by some pretty big an' tough hombres. They want to know who yuh is an' why. An' I got a feelin' that if they don't like yuh, yuh git yore head knocked off afore it's time ter meet Jim Silk."

"What did you tell 'em, pard?" Risky asked, hiding a grin.

"I allowed as how I was a stove-up wrangler what was hittin' the gold trail in the hopes o' curin' a bad case o' gallopin' arthritis with a touch o' hardenin' o' the arteries. They was awful impressed, Risky, not like yuh at all. They interduced me ter Jim Silk personal. An' after he an' me talked a while, he began ter figure he had somethin' wrong with him, also. I'm sure it was a bad case o' too much showin' off, but I didn't tell him so."

Risky drew off the trail to allow the mules and riders to pass.

"You can't miss Hoke Barton's cabin, fifteen miles from here," he said. "Hoke will put you up an' tell you what's what. I'll be seeing you boys later."

Sufferin' Joe shook his head. "I knowed yuh wasn't comin' with us," he remarked, spurring his bronc ahead. "Don't tell Jim Silk that yuh know me. I borrowed fifty bucks from him ter stake a claim."

And the old-timer moved past Risky, who waved a hand at the two waddies from his home ranch who followed Sufferin' Joe.

Risky McKee had long ago found out that Sufferin' Joe was not the fool most people believed him to be. And from the old scout's account, Risky understood that if he was to get anywhere in Hotspur, he'd have to stand in with Jim Silk, who owned the camp, hook, line, and sinker.

Well, if Jim Silk owned the biggest and best mine in the Worthless Mountains, he could afford to give saloon parties and make strangers bow to him.

Fully prepared for the ordeal that he must undergo, Risky rode into the rutted main street of Hotspur. Somewhere among the shabby cabins, he was betting that the Gold

Ghost gang hid out. Risky's eyes noted the absence of the law and a calaboose. He took in the Silk Hotel—a frame building in front of which the best horses in town were tied.

Not far behind it, up on the side of a steep hill, were a group of log buildings surrounded by a high barbed-wire fence. That would be the Jim Silk Mine, for there were two shafts and a sluice box protected by several armed men.

Risky pulled in to the Gold Fortune Saloon rack, and dismounted. He appeared to have come a long way. His chaps and buckskin vest had not been cleaned since the storm. His roan bronc was uncurried. And as he trailed his spurs through the swinging doors of the barroom, he felt the eyes of several loafers on the plank sidewalk sizing him up for a loan.

It was noon, and the saloon had drawn a good-sized crowd to the free-lunch table. Booted and belted men stood talking in groups, munching cheese and bread, and swilling it down with liquor.

At one end of the bar, several hombres were clinking glasses and having what seemed to be a business meeting all of their own. One of them was dressed in a red silk shirt and checkered trousers tucked into embossed cow boots. He was apparently paying the bill, for his voice was loudest.

"That's Jim Silk," Risky said under his breath, and hoisted a toe to the brass rail, well away from the other customers.

He was aware of the eyes of several hombres and also the sharp glance of Jim Silk as the bartender came up to take his order. Risky spun two bits on the counter and asked, without a trace of embarrassment:



"Does that buy a drink an' the free lunch?"

The hollow-cheeked bartender frowned at the money, then looked the puncher squarely in the eyes.

"It don't," was the reply. "This is a gold camp. Ain't yuh off yore range?"

Risky's face was a poker mask as he heard the talk in the saloon subside. He was not a drinking man, but he could get out of that easily enough. He was making his play for Jim Silk, the supposed friend of the down and out.

"I swing a wide range loop," Risky said. "How much buys free lunch, without no drink?"

The waiter hesitated, stealing a glance down the bar at Jim Silk.

"Where yuh from, stranger?" he asked.

"Arizona," the cowboy replied.

In making that statement, he knew he was leaving himself open for any bets that Jim Silk might want to call. And from what Sufferin' Joe had said, Jim Silk would not fail to call. For Arizona men often don't take well in Texas, and Texans are not often welcome in Arizona. Either must prove up in the foreign State.

Jim Silk, who loved a fight, as Sufferin' Joe had said, was certainly no man to let such an opportunity escape.

Risky saw the wealthy mine owner nudge a barrel-chested lout, who swayed out from the bar, stared hard at the cowboy from Arizona, and called at the top of his lungs:

"Did I hear somebody in this saloon say he was from that snake-infested, skunk-smellin' Injun reservation across the State line?"

Risky stiffened, turned slowly away from the brass rail, and faced the unshaven barroom bouncer.

"Go on," the cowboy invited

coldly. "Get it all off your chest, or has your brain run down already?"

There was a gruff laugh from the crowd as the husky bouncer cocked his head and tried to figure out what Risky meant. Then the tough did catch the drift of it, and his fists doubled.

"Thar ain't nothin' bad enough ter say 'bout Arizona men!" he bel-lowed. "I ain't ever seen one yet what had nerve enough ter stand up an' fight a rabbit. Fer two cents, I'd throw yuh out inter the gutter. I seen yuh come in hyar tryin' ter buy a drink an' a big meal fer two bits. Git back ter the cheap place yuh come from! We don't want yore likes. I'm countin' three, an' if yuh ain't out o' hyar by the time I——"

Risky interrupted. "No need to count at all," he remarked coolly. "It might tax your intelligence. I ain't in the habit of runnin' from nobody."

"Yuh don't say!" the bouncer exclaimed sneeringly, falling into a crouch and inching forward.

Risky saw Jim Silk reach out to grab the bully by the shoulder.

"Now wait a minute, Tug," the mine owner cautioned. "Ain't you a bit hasty? This cowboy is a visitor here in town." Jim Silk was trying to hide a grin. "Arizona might be a fine place, for all you know. It ain't polite to act that a way."

Risky looked at Jim Silk. "Thanks," the cowboy said, but he knew that the mine owner was anxious to see the end of the argument. "But don't stop him if he's too wrought up. His kind come easy to Arizona men."

"What's that?" the bouncer known as "Tug" bellowed, suddenly infuriated. "Makin' light o' me, eh?"

"I'll show yuh!" And he came charging like a longhorn bull on the prod.

Risky, rising on his toes to make ready, took a deep breath. He saw a great many things in that brief instant. He noted that all the customers were drawing back to give the fighters free play. He glimpsed the beaming smile on Jim Silk's face. At the same time, he took Tug's measure, and knew that the awkward bouncer was easy.

Risky side-stepped as Tug roared in. The puncher did it with a practiced grace, a short movement to the left, away from the bar. And as the bouncer went sailing past him, fanning the air, Risky flicked out a right hand and pulled his hat down over his eyes.

A howl of laughter shook the bar-room as Tug slammed into the bar, stumbled, and sprawled on the floor, yelling madly, knocking his hat off. He came up with a leap, teeth bared, eyes glinting.

"Sneak!" he shouted. "Stand an' fight!" And he charged again.

Risky's face was a mask as he waited, hating to do what he had to do. It was like taking candy away from a baby. He didn't side-step. He slid into Tug's rush, ducking under the bouncer's wild-flung right fist.

Then Risky struck a short uppercut that caught Tug in the stomach. It was not a hefty blow, but it did the work. It stopped him in his tracks. He doubled over, the wind knocked out of him. His knees buckled, and he went down to the planks.

Risky stepped back, watching him, knowing what was going to happen.

Tug went for a gun, and the bar-room yelled in panic.

Risky drew with the speed of a striking snake. His right hand

whipped across his chaps, fingers plucking his weapon loose. The barrel was spitting flame as it cleared the holster. There was the clang of his bullet striking the gun which Tug was jerking up. And Tug's weapon was knocked across the floor.

Jim Silk's voice was the first to make itself heard above the roar of panic as customers ducked behind the bar, tables, and a piano.

"Tug, you big-mouthed, yellow-striped, bungling fool!" the mine owner was shouting. "I've warned you about shooting scrapes in here. Get out, you lummox! You're through! Don't ever come back. You couldn't whip a sparrow."

Risky, smoking gun in hand, watched the bouncer stagger to his feet, trying to speak, but still without enough wind. Jim Silk was striding toward the bouncer, who wheeled and swayed toward the doors. Jim Silk jumped and gave him a shove which sent him sprawling out to the gutter. Then, standing in the swinging doors, Jim Silk mocked the defeated bouncer with a husky laugh.

It was a laugh that sent a cold chill down Risky McKee's spine, for he remembered it only too well. He didn't change expression. He stood waiting for Jim Silk to turn inside the barroom and gaze at him.

"I like your style, cowboy," the mine owner chuckled. "You don't never lose your head. There ain't many men what know how to keep cool an' calm."

Risky forced a grin that he didn't feel. Now, if ever, he had to play his hand to perfection. He was thinking about those four riders who had passed him on the trail during the storm. He remembered what Sufferin' Joe had told him of the time when Jim Silk usually

turned up to give his after-midnight party in the Gold Fortune Saloon. Risky was sifting his clews as he replied in a poker voice:

"The fight wasn't exactly fair, 'cause I knew more than Tug about footwork. I've been licked in my time, an' will be again before I die."

"That's what I call hoss sense."

Jim Silk called to the barroom. "Boys, here's a gent after my own heart. An' he's broke. Who says we can't treat a gent from Arizona like we wants to be treated when we go there? I don't know this hombre from Adam, but he's got a job on my pay roll if he wants it."

Risky saw the smirks on the faces of the saloon customers, who were ready to crowd to the bar for the free drinks which they knew Jim Silk would put out. Big-hearted Jim Silk! His style was to let the better man win. And he always stood ready to hand out a reward for courage and good sense.

"I could use a job with you," Risky said calmly. "But minin' ain't my line. It's riding an' rope work." And he emphasized the last, but Jim Silk certainly missed the point.

"An' that's just what I need, hombre," the mine owner chuckled. "A good rider what can use a gun on them Gold Ghosts that are poisoning these mountains." He turned to the bartender. "Fill up their glasses, Sam! I'm taking my new hand up to show him the mine."

Jim Silk linked his arm in Risky's and started out of the door, whispering to him that there would be a bottle of good liquor waiting them up the hill. And following them came a small rat-faced gunman with all the earmarks of a dope fiend, who was talking to a serious-eyed man in a black suit.

The latter plainly didn't belong

in this camp. He was the hombre for whom Jim Silk had been giving the party in the Gold Fortune.

### III.

It was not until Jim Silk, Risky McKee, the rat-faced gunman, and the gent in the black suit were seated in the mine office that Risky discovered who the last was. There had been a few drinks, which the Arizona puncher slipped into a spittoon without being noticed.

Jim Silk was jubilant. "You came just at the right time, cowboy," he told Risky. "Now that you're working for me, I can tell you secrets. This"—he pointed to the man in the black suit—"is an insurance gent. We're going in for something new up here. It's because of that Gold Ghost gang. I sent for this fellar last week to insure my next shipment of gold. It cost me plenty, but I've got to protect myself. To-night, I'm sending out a lot of dust, an' this fellar is insuring it. Do you get the point?"

Risky nodded solemnly, aware that the insurance man was studying him covertly.

"That means if somebody holds up your cargo," Risky said, "the insurance company pays for what is stolen."

"That's the idea!" Jim Silk laughed. "I ain't got no more worries, an' can have a good time in Hotspur while my gold is going to the railroad to be minted by Uncle Sam. The deal is all sealed." He paused, narrowing his eyes at Risky. "But don't think that I won't be sore if that gold is stole. I'm sending you along to guard it. The insurance company wants four guards. I liked your style in the saloon, an' I'm banking on you."

Risky's jaw hardened. "Ain't you

taking a chance on a stranger like me?"

Jim Silk glanced at the solemn-faced insurance man, who leaned on the table.

"I've seen you ride in rodeos, hombre," the man said coolly, and by the tone of his voice, Risky suddenly realized that the gent was every bit as good a gambler as he was. What was more, this insurance man had caught his number completely, and was keeping it to himself. "You'll pass, Mr. McKee."

"McKee?" Jim Silk questioned, looking at Risky. "I plumb forgot to ask your name, cowboy. So you're a rodeo rider. That's fine. We'll call you 'Rodeo' McKee around here. An' you won't frown at the salary I pay you, either—a hundred a month an' a room in the Silk Hotel."

"I take it the gold cargo goes out to-day," Risky said.

"Jest as soon as Stubbley, the insurance gent, inspects it, an' we load up," Jim Silk replied, reaching for the bottle. "I'm a fast worker, boys. Life is short. Make hay while the sun shines." And he voiced that mocking laugh which sent cold chills up and down Risky McKee's spine.

It was sunset before the gold cargo was started on its way.

Risky, riding his roan, was given the lead on the road to the railroad junction. The rat-faced gunman came behind him, a double-barreled shotgun balanced across his saddle pommel.

Following him were two pack mules with the valuable freight, and then two more guards rode—the men who stood over the sluice boxes during the day. They were hard-faced gents, tight-lipped, dangerously silent.

Jim Silk waved the riders off, and Stubbley, the insurance man, departed for the hotel to catch the stage out on the following day.

Trotting slowly along in the salmon tints of the fading day, Risky's mind was keenly alive. He was telling himself that he could be mistaken about Jim Silk's mocking laugh. The night of the storm, four riders passed him on the trail. One spotted him and cried out in fear. That had been the time Risky heard the laugh before.

But the wind had been whooping and his nerves had been taut. There was a slim chance that he was wrong that it had been Jim Silk who mocked the rider who cried out.

The purple shadows of night drew over the world. Risky was leading into a dark gulch five miles out of Hotspur. Twice, he turned in the saddle and looked back. The eyes of the rat-faced gunman were like two burning coals of fire.

Risky didn't like the look of them. He thought of how easy it would be for those three riders to shoot him down and make off with the gold. Jim Silk would be paid for it by the insurance company. Perhaps the riders behind Risky would return to the mine to say that he had stolen the cargo, after they had hidden his bullet-riddled body in a canyon grave.

Risky studied the trail ahead of him, carefully turning over the law of averages in his mind. A plan clicked. He would make a quick bet against the rat-faced gunman who had the earmarks of a drug fiend.

Risky's hands gently tugged the bridle reins, and as quick as a flash, his bronc rose on its hind legs and danced off the road.



"Snake!" the cowboy yelled, and swung a leg over the saddle horn.

Behind him, the rat-faced one cried out in fear, dropping his double-barreled weapon to yank his bronc off the trail. It was the same sort of cry that Risky had heard on the trail to Echo Gulch the night before. The puncher's horse was turned, facing the gold guards. Risky laughed mockingly—a close imitation of Jim Silk.

"You're seeing spooks, like you did last night, Dopey," Risky taunted.

Those words had an electric effect. They brought the rat-faced gunman up stiff in the saddle, mouth open, eyes staring at the Arizona cowboy. There was an oath from the two riders behind the pack mules. Then all three went for their weapons.

Risky was ready. He drew as he vaulted out of the saddle, his hand whipping past his thigh. His gun was up and blazing before he landed on the ground. He caught the rat-faced guard with a bullet in the chest before the latter could thumb his gun hammer.

Then Risky's feet touched the ground, and he threw himself clear of his horse, shooting at the other two guards as he did so. His powder flame met the light of one of their guns, and he knew he had hit, for a rider screamed. But the last one was ducking low on the neck of his horse and spurring it forward, shooting as he came.

Risky rolled over and over, hearing lead chopping into the road around him. He fired up as he rolled. The dark figure of the rider was passing him.

He shot again. A shriek. The rider sprawled down the flank of his mount, falling on top of Risky, trying to club him on the head.

Risky's gun barrel deflected the blow. It flashed in the light of the stars as it swiped at the guard's skull, and struck.

Ten minutes later, Risky McKee was galloping back to Hotspur. He avoided the town, taking the trail to Echo Gulch, urging his bronc to topmost speed. He was sure of his clews now. Behind him lay two dead members of the Gold Ghost gang, and one hog tied in the bottom of a canyon, where the pack mules were tethered.

It was long before midnight when he roared up to Hoke Barton's cabin. Flinging himself from the saddle, he burst into the living room, to find his pards playing poker with Hoke Barton.

"Risky!" Sufferin' Joe yelled. "Yuh ain't runnin' away from the smallpox, aire yuh?"

Risky caught his breath. "Sufferin' Joe, I want the white tail from your bronc. Hoke, tell the boys where they can find ponchos an' black cloth for masks. We also need a bailing hook. I've got your gold, an' now we're goin' after the leader of the Gold Ghosts."

Hoke's mouth fell open, then snapped shut. He closed his eyes and lay back in the bunk, groaning:

"I thought I was awake. It's that nightmare ag'in!"

But it was no nightmare. When Risky McKee barked orders, his hands went into action. Inside of fifteen minutes, they were on their way back to Hotspur, riding as if a sheriff was on their trail.

It was close to midnight when Risky led his men into the back door of the Silk Hotel. He paused, staring down a gloomy corridor that emptied into the silent lobby. Motioning to his pards, he slipped up the rear stairway to the floor above, where he once more stood listening.

His ears caught the murmur of voices from the front of the hotel.

Tiptoeing forward, he recognized Jim Silk's mocking laugh; then the voice of Stubbley, the insurance man. The game couldn't have been better arranged. Risky had thought he might have to get Stubbley from his room. Now, the cards were arranged to perfection.

Halting in front of Silk's door, Risky quietly turned the knob. His costume would have scared a herd of cows clear off the range as he bounded into Jim Silk's luxurious quarters. For he wore a battered black hat, pulled low, with dirty gray strands of hair tucked up under the brim. A poncho draped his shoulders.

Behind Risky came Sufferin' Joe, also masked, and the end of a baling hook extended from under his raincoat to take the place of a lost hand. And the last gent in the outfit had a blanket wedged up under his poncho to resemble a hump.

As they leaped in, Jim Silk was brushing off his checkered vest before a dressing-table mirror and talking to the serious-faced Stubbley, who sat on the edge of a bed. Jim Silk whirled, staring at the strange guests. His cheek muscles trembled. He drew back as Risky McKee gazed at him through the holes in his mask.

"Yo're growin' too big fer yore shoes, Jim Silk," Risky snarled, imitating the tone of the ratlike gunman whose body lay deep in a canyon. "Now it's yore turn ter die at the hands o' the Gold Ghosts."

Jim Silk caught his breath. Beads of sweat broke on his brow. He staggered back to the dresser, hands in front of him.

"Wait!" he cried out in terror. "Don't shoot, Dopey! You're a fool.

I've split all the loot with you boys. Kill the insurance gent, so he won't know. Let me parley with you. You've gone loco."

"No, we ain't," Risky growled. "You've held out on us, Jim. All Hoke Barton's gold wasn't on the mules."

"I swear I put it all in the packs!" Jim Silk shouted, and then he stiffened, for Risky McKee was removing his hat with the horsehair wig.

#### IV.

"Big-hearted Jim Silk," he said tauntingly, letting the poncho drop from his shoulders, to reveal him in cowboy garb with six-gun strapped low. "Put on your beard, Jim, an' join our Gold Ghost gang. How's that worthless mine of yours up the hill? Has it produced a grain of gold for the last two years, or are you using the dust from the miners that you murder?"

"He's a Ranger!" Jim Silk gasped.

The insurance man, who sat on the edge of the bed, swallowed hard.

"Gosh, Risky," Stubbley groaned, "you had me fooled, too! But I knew you were up to something when you signed to ride on Jim Silk's pay roll, so I kept my mouth close hob—"

Stubbley didn't get time to finish.

Risky was watching Jim Silk like a hawk. He caught the swift gleam in the eyes of the leader of the Gold Ghosts. He expected him to go for a gun. But Silk didn't. The fake mine owner held a clothes brush in his hand, and with lightning speed, he hurled it at the lamp.

There was a crash. Darkness swooped into the room. Then another crash came—that of a breaking window.

"He's thrown himself onto the

wooden canopy overhagin' the sidewalk!" Risky shouted, and with a run, he plunged out of the window.

He almost landed on Jim Silk's rising figure. And by the light of the saloon windows from across the road, he saw Silk throw up a gun to shoot.

Risky's hand shot out, grabbing the barrel as it exploded. He almost deflected the shot, but not quite. The lead tore through his left side—a flesh wound. He held onto the barrel, jerking it.

"Double-cross me, will yuh?" Silk yelled, and he let go of the gun barrel.

The next moment, he had leaped back and caught Risky by a boot, and was trying to fling him off the wooden canopy.

Risky squirmed, bucked like a downed colt, and rolled over and over, twisting his boot loose from Jim Silk's grasp. Free, he came to his feet as Jim Silk charged, bellowing like a bull. Risky could hear the shouts of men running out of the saloon to see the fight.

He settled back, cool and calculating. He saw Jim Silk jerking a derringer from inside his vest by a string. The puncher bounded forward, into the attack, just as he had done that afternoon in the Gold Fortune. His right fist swung in a

vicious uppercut that exploded on Jim Silk's jaw.

"Ugh!" the leader of the Gold Ghosts grunted, halted in his attack, firing his derringer harmlessly skyward.

He staggered back. Risky tried to catch him, but he fell whirling to the street below.

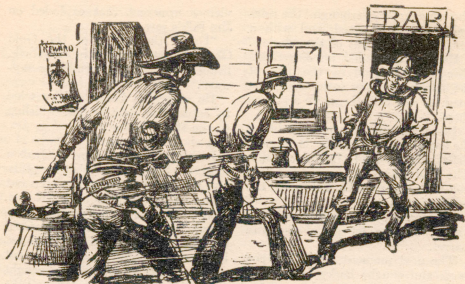
A shout went up.

Risky waved an arm. "Just a minute!" he called. "Wait for stubble, the insurance gent, to step out here an' explain a few things. You've got a surprise comin', hombres. We've nailed the Gold Ghosts, an' we can prove it by showing you that Jim Silk hasn't a cent of ore in his mine. We've caught the whole works, hands down. Take it easy, an' Stubble an' I will explain."

The crowd below was suddenly silent as Stubble came crawling out on the canopy. From back inside the room, Sufferin' Joe's voice sounded clearly in Risky's ears. The complaining old fellow was saying:

"Waal, it's all over but the shoutin', an' I never even got a shot in edgewise. It's lucky that Silk skunk turned out ter have the small-pox, cause I lost them fifty smackers what he gave me fer a stake. Hoke Barton shore knows how ter play poker."





# Mustang Mesa

A "Circle J" Novelette

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "Devil Tripp's Border Trail," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### TAKIN' HIS TIME.

**C**OW-PUNCHIN' gents generally act natural. And it was plumb natural for red-headed Joe Scott to poke his freckled beak nose into everything, whether it was his business or not.

Right now, Joe was at the hitch rail of the Cactus Saloon in the border town of Mercedes. He was untying his cayuse's reins and getting ready to pull his freight out of Mercedes. But his attention was suddenly caught by the sound of voices coming from the alley on the other side of the Cactus.

"Sounds like a couple o' gents get-

tin' downright proddy, hoss," Joe murmured to his chunky little gray cow pony, which wore the Circle J brand. "Twon't do no harm ter see what it's all about, huh?"

So Joe left his cayuse at the hitch rail and hurried around the corner of the Cactus to see what was going on there.

Two hombres were quarreling loudly, beside a water trough. One was a big, hulking bully, who packed two guns—a tough mug with wide beefy shoulders, a blocky chin, covered with a stubble of black beard, and small piggish eyes, set under a low wrinkled forehead.

He towered threateningly over a slim, youthful cowboy of about Joe



Scott's own age. This kid didn't seem a bit afraid. He had a frank, pleasing face, under a mop of bronze-colored hair, and clear brown eyes that gazed at his enemy boldly and fearlessly.

"Git out of town and git offn this range!" roared the big man. "If I catch yuh in these parts again, I'll shore——"

"I hired out to yuh, Sully, to do a cow-puncher's work," the kid said in a tone of defiance; "and I'm ready to do it. I didn't hire out to——"

"I paid yuh man's wages and a bonus ter——" the hulking bully began.

"Yuh can't pay me enough ter do the kind of skunk's work yuh want done, Sully!" retorted the nervy youngster.

"Git out of this town!" ordered Sully, his voice trembling with fury. "Or I'll——"

There was murder in the piggish eyes of the brutish Sully. His big hand was moving swiftly toward the six-gun at his hip.

Joe Scott, looking on, sensed the young cow-puncher's danger. The latter seemed slow on the draw. He was bewildered by the sudden turn of affairs.

The bully's gun was already leaping out of its leather before the kid even made a move to get his shooting iron into action.

But Joe Scott was no slowpoke when it came to gun play. His own freckled right hand shot down to his hip and came up.

Sully had had a good start, but Joe Scott's Colt was the first to clear the leather.

*Bang!* The redhead from Circle J fired—just once.

There was a howl from Sully. He dropped his gun to the ground as if it was a live rattlesnake. Joe's bullet had struck the cylinder of Sully's

weapon, numbing the bully's fingers and forcing him to drop it.

Men were running out of the Cactus, attracted by the sound of the shot. Shootings were common enough in Mercedes, but they never lost their interest.

There were several friends of Sully's in the crowd that gathered. He pointed Joe Scott out to them.

"Thar he is!" Sully shouted. "Git him! He must be a pal o' that young coyote, Linc Waterman!"

The youngster who had been quarreling with Sully had been standing, white-faced and goggle-eyed, against the wall of the Cactus. Now he made a dash forward and seized Joe Scott by the sleeve of his red jersey.

"They'll kill yuh, pardner!" he panted. "Let's git away!"

Joe whirled about, backing toward the wall. Half a dozen tough-looking gun slingers were coming toward him and the kid known as Linc Waterman.

In a swift instant, the redhead from Circle J calculated his chances. He had to get out of this town and meet his boss, Billy West, for one thing. And then, he wanted to see young Linc Waterman get safely through his adventure.

There was no use making a stand and trying to shoot it out with half a dozen gunmen. If the first one didn't down him, the others surely would.

"Out the other end of this alley!" Joe muttered to Linc, from the side of his mouth. "Yuh go first. I'll be right along."

The kid looked doubtful. "Will yuh——" he began.

"Think I'm stayin' here ter be turned inter buzzard bait?" Joe interrupted. "Hurry now, or we'll both git a dose of lead poison!"

Thus urged, Linc Waterman backed swiftly toward the rear of

the alley. Joe Scott, gun in hand, eyes on the group of hard-faced rannies, also retreated.

"Don't let him git away!" Sully roared. "Let him have it!"

The next instant, guns roared in the narrow alleyway. Hot lead whistled about Joe Scott's carrot head. But he crouched low, triggering his own Colt as he backed away, placing his bullets with careful aim.

One of his slugs drilled the foremost of his attackers in the foot, bringing the man down sprawling to the ground. For a brief space of seconds, the alleyway was blocked by the fallen hombre, and the men behind him were thrown into confusion. It was just the break Joe Scott wanted, for the redhead had no intention of making a stand-up fight of it against such odds.

The kid, Linc, was already out of the alley at the rear, and now Joe Scott darted after him. The pair raced around the Cactus Saloon to the hitch rail where Joe had left his cayuse.

"Yuh got a hoss, younker?" the redhead panted, as he untied his mount's reins.

"Thar's my Sandy hoss," Linc answered, swinging into the saddle of a neat little buckskin.

"Burn leather, kid!" Joe called out, mounting his own Circle J cow pony. "Foller me!"

The Circle J waddy's spurs rolled lightly along his cayuse's flanks. The gray leaped forward, churning up a cloud of dust.

Linc's sandy hoss was right at the gray's heels, then at its saddle skirts; a moment later, the two brones were running neck and neck.

"Nice li'e hoss yuh got there, fella," Joe Scott remarked, as his blue eyes took in the smooth, easy running of the buckskin.

Young Linc Waterman's face

glowed. A compliment to his little Sandy hoss pleased him more than anything.

Together the pair rode out of Merced in a cloud of dust, striking out across the cactus-dotted flats that surrounded the little border town.

"Where we goin'?" Linc asked.

"Out ter my camp," Joe told him.

"I want yuh ter meet my boss."

Linc asked no more questions. He had faith in this new friend of his. They rode on in silence for a few minutes. Then Joe turned and made for an arroyo, from which a curl of camp-fire smoke rose skyward.

It was the place where his boss, Billy West; his saddle pard, "Buck" Foster, and their Chinese cook, Sing Lo, had pitched their camp.

Joe rode into the arroyo first, with Linc about a yard behind him.

Suddenly a tall, lanky figure blocked their way. The man had stepped out from behind a boulder and seized Joe's cayuse by the reins, stopping it in its tracks.

"What's this yuh drug in, carrot-top?" a loud, angry voice demanded.

Linc got a glimpse of the owner of the voice. It was a cow-puncher of lean, stringy build, with a much-battered, weather-beaten face, the chief ornaments of which were a badly mended broken nose and a long grizzled cowhorn mustache. His old black Stetson was pushed back from his forehead, and his bulging brown eyes blazed from under his shaggy gray brows.

"What's this yuh drug in, carrot-top?" he repeated. "Some young hoss-thief friend of yores, or some chuck-line rider?"

Linc Waterman's face flushed. He felt uncomfortable. "If—if that's the way yore boss feels," he said to Joe Scott, "I'll be——"

But the redhead cut him short. "My boss!" he exclaimed, with a

bold grin at the lanky waddy who was holding the reins of his brone. "That ain't my boss! He ain't boss of nothin'! Don't pay no 'tention to the ol' windbag. That's only a stove-up ol' ranny we call Buck Foster. He ain't got nothin' ter say around here!"

## CHAPTER II.

### LINC TELLS HIS STORY.

BEING an hombre of strong likes and dislikes, Buck Foster didn't take very kindly to the kid, Linc Waterman. This was hardly surprising, as Buck rarely did approve of any of Joe Scott's doings.

The red-headed ranny's last remarks got under Buck's skin like a bur under a saddle. His leathery face flushed. He sputtered and gasped for words for a few seconds. He was getting ready to blister Joe's hide with a torrent of violent language which would put that young jasper in his proper place.

"By ganny! Yuh ornery hound pup, yuh——" Buck began.

And then he stopped short, as a powerful hand was clapped over his mouth, and he was roughly pushed against the near-by sandstone boulder.

"Looks like yo're forgettin' this stranger's a guest of Circle J, Buck." The ranny who had done the pushing horned in on the talk.

He was a serious-faced young hombre, with straight-gazing gray eyes that held a twinkle of amusement in their depths. His mouth was straight, but its corners curved upward when he smiled—as he was doing now.

His range clothing was of extra good quality, from the fine clear beaver Stetson on his head to the fancy-stitched kangaroo leather boots on his feet. But everything he

wore had seen plenty of hard service.

This Billy West was no dudish dressed-up cowboy, but an active range rider. At round-up time, he always did as good a day's work in the saddle or in the branding corral as Buck Foster or Joe Scott or any of the other hired hands.

Buck Foster looked a little surprised to see his boss take part in his argument with Joe.

"Durn it, Billy," the grizzled puncher tried to explain, "this red-headed young bobcat called me an ol' windbag!"

"Yuh've called him worse names plenty times," Billy reminded him. "I've heard yuh myself."

"And he said I wasn't boss of nothin'," Buck complained.

But Billy was paying no further attention to the grouchy old buckaroo's grumbling.

He held out his hand to the newcomer.

"Welcome to Circle J headquarters, stranger!" he said, with a friendly smile. "We got a better home rancho up North, but this'll have to do fer the time bein'."

Linc Waterman looked puzzled. "Just where up North——" he began.

"Quite a ways," Billy told him. "Ever been in Montanner?"

Linc shook his head. "No, I was born down here in Arizona and lived here all my life. But I reckon I'd like it in Montanner."

"Waal, come up some summer and look over Circle J," Billy invited. "I'm West, part owner of the spread, and I'd advise yuh not to pay too much attention ter those two sage hounds," he added, nodding toward Buck and Joe, who were just warming up for another argument.

"Thanks fer the invite and fer the

advice," Linc said, with a quiet smile. "My name's Lincoln Waterman, but most of my friends call me Linc."

"Glad to know yuh, Linc," the Circle J boss said. "Yuh hungry?"

"It ain't chow time," Linc answered, but his eyes had a hungry look.

"It will be afore long," Billy informed him. "And our Chinese cook sure dishes up swell grub. Light an' make yoreself to home!"

Thus invited, Linc Waterman slid out of the saddle and led his little buckskin cayuse to the rope corral where the horses of the Circle J party were held in.

In so doing, he passed the camp fire, where a small yellow-faced man in loose-fitting black coat and pants was working busily with pots and pans and singing to himself in a shrill voice.

This was Sing Lo, the Circle J cook, who always went with Billy West and his saddle pards on their adventuring trips to the Southwest.

He smiled at young Linc, showing a flat yellow face with tiny slits of almond eyes.

"Me cookee velly fine glub, so be!" the chink murmured. "Stick aloud, stlanger!"

Later, over a tasty dish of stew which Sing Lo had prepared, Linc told the Circle J cow-punchers the reasons for his quarrel with the big foreman, Sully.

"Yuh see, this Sully's roddin' the Star Land & Cattle Co.'s spread, and I hired out to him fer regular cowhand's work."

"And what did he want yuh ter do?" Billy asked, studying Linc's face closely.

Billy liked the young waddy's clear brown eyes, with their straight-forward expression. The kid looked like a square-shooter.

"D'yuh know Mustang Mesa?" Linc asked.

"No, can't say I do," Billy answered.

"I ain't never heard of it, neither," Joe Scott said, and Buck Foster mumbled something under his breath which none of the others heard.

"It lays a little ways north of here," Linc explained. "It's a big plateau that's kind of hard to get to, and it's got good feed an' water. But it's mostly given over to herds of wild hosses."

"Sounds like a kind o' horse heaven," Billy remarked.

"That's what it is—or was," Linc said.

"How d'yuh mean 'was,' Linc?" Billy asked.

"When Sully put me to work fer the Star outfit," Linc explained, "I found he wanted me to take part in huntin' the fuzztails on Mustang Mesa and killin' them off."

"Killin' off hosses!" the exclamation came from Buck Foster.

"Yeah," Linc said: "they catch them in a corral trap and then kill them off."

Buck Foster set down his plate of stew on the ground and got to his feet, his brown eyes blazing.

"I knowed the minute I seen yuh that yuh was a young snake!" he shouted at Linc Waterman. "I ain't sittin' down to eat chow with the likes of you, by ganny!"

"Say, yuh thick-headed ol' loon!" Joe Scott came to the kid's rescue.

"It wasn't Linc who was huntin' down the fuzztails. As soon as he found out what the job was fer, he quit. That's what I found him an' his foreman fightin' about."

Buck Foster's leathery face showed his disbelief. He shook his shaggy head and stroked the ends of his mustache.

"I dunno," he murmured, sus-



picion in his tone. "He looks like an ornery young hoss thief ter me."

"But I heard him refusin' the job," Joe Scott shouted, as if the loud tone of his voice would make Buck understand more clearly. "And this big skunk, Sully, would 'a' killed him if I hadn't horned in."

Buck sat down again, shaking his head. It was too bad to leave the rest of that savory stew of Sing Lo's. So he picked up his tin plate again and stuck in his fork.

"By ganny!" he muttered. "I ain't got no use fer a jasper that goes around killin' off hosses."

"Suppose we hear the rest of Linc's story," Billy West suggested.

"The way I figure it," Linc went on, "thar's two big spreads that wants ter divide Mustang Mesa up fer their cattle. One's the Star Land & Cattle. The other's the Block T. The Star's an English-owned company. The Block T belongs ter some bunch back East."

"Are they workin' together in this hoss-killin' business?" asked Billy.

"They both send out parties to trap an' kill the wild uns. And they pay a bonus of two dollars a head to the hoss-huntin' gangs. When they git all the fuzztails cleared off the mesa, they'll blast out a couple of trails with giant powder and run cattle there."

Linc Waterman looked around at his listeners as he finished.

Billy West's bronzed face held an expression of belief and sympathy, mingled with indignation and anger.

Joe Scott, too, sat there, his tin plate in one hand, his spoon in the other, and it was easy to see that he was boiling inside.

But Buck Foster was the most wrathful of all—at least outwardly. His leathery face was flushed, and

his grizzled mustache ends were quivering. His brown eyes were fixed on Linc Waterman with a suspicious glare.

"Say, young fella," he began in a low, shaky voice, "is yuh sure you ain't in on this hoss-killin' business?"

"Not a-tall, pard!" Linc insisted.

"Ain't I told yuh I seen him come plumb nigh stoppin' a bullet 'cause he wouldn't do the job the Star foreman wanted him to do—same bein' this hoss-shootin'?" Joe Scott put in.

A gleam of understanding showed in Buck Foster's eyes. He got it at last. His gnarled hand shot out.

"Put 'er ther, younker!" he exclaimed, seizing Linc's hand in a grip of iron. "Yuh ain't what I thought yuh was. How d'yuh git to this Mustang Mesa? I'm fer——"

"Hold yore hosses, Buck!" Billy interrupted the eager veteran. "Just listen to me a minute, will yuh?"

The Circle J boss's voice held a note of sternness. Buck calmed down and paid attention.

"The way I figure it," Billy went on, "thar's some crooked work bein' done by the Star and the Block T outfits, and this hoss-killin' is only a part of it."

"Yeah," Joe Scott agreed. "But what're we goin' ter do?"

"I'm ridin' fer the Star headquarters as soon as we finish chow," Billy declared. "And I want you two to start fer the Block T at the same time. Sing Lo and the kid can stay here."

"And what'll we do at the Block T?" Buck Foster wanted to know.

"Yuh'll git yoreselves a couple of jobs and keep yore mouths shut, and yore eyes and ears open," Billy told him.

"And how about you?"  
"I'll be doin' the same at the Star."

### CHAPTER III.

#### TOUGH HOMBRES.

THE headquarters of the Star Land & Cattle Co. lay about ten miles east of Mercedes. It was mid-afternoon when Billy West, slouching lazily in Danger's saddle, rode up to the bunk house and asked a couple of cow-punchers loafing there where he could find the rod or boss of the spread.

"What d'yuh want him fer?" asked one of the loafing waddies, a lean, hatchet-faced fellow, squinting his eyes at the visitor.

"How's chances fer a job?" Billy asked.

"Good," the other answered, "if yuh got nerve and kin obey orders."

Inwardly, Billy West was raging, for he knew what this skinny jasper meant by "obey orders." There was cruelty in every line of the man's face. He was just the type to obey such orders.

The man with him was no better, a thickset, brutish type, with matted black hair and shaggy eyebrows, and the long, powerful arms of an ape.

"There's Sully now—over at the corral," the lean hombre added, pointing to a big fellow with a pair of wide beefy shoulders and a square-chinned face, decorated with a stubble of black beard.

Billy turned and rode toward the Star foreman.

Sully turned as the visitor came close, and studied him out of his small, piggy eyes.

"Well?" Sully shot the question in a challenging tone.

"How's chances fer a job?" Billy asked boldly.

Sully looked interested. This

visitor appeared capable; he had a fighting jaw, and a horse that would be a prize in any man's string.

Then, too, Linc Waterman wasn't the only cowhand who'd balked at this horse-killing business on Mustang Mesa. All the decent cowboys felt the same way about it, and had chucked their jobs. As a result, Sully was a bit short-handed.

"We need seasoned men," he told the job seeker. "Yuh look kinda young."

"I'll match myself agin' yore best hand at any kind of job on the spread," Billy said, thrusting his chin out and putting on a boastful, swaggering air. He was trying to impress Sully with the idea that he was of the same type as the others on the Star pay roll.

"How's yore shootin'?" Sully asked.

"Want to see it?"

The foreman nodded.

Billy pulled a silver dollar out of his pocket, spun it in the air, and caught it again. Then he held it out to Sully.

"Want to put it between yore teeth? I'll shoot it out without touchin' a hair of yore mustache."

But Sully shook his head. He took the dollar, examined it and prepared to flick it skyward with his thumb and forefinger.

"See if yuh kin shoot it in the air. I'd rather see that."

He gave the dollar a sudden quick snap and sent it whirling high in the air. He probably figured on catching Billy unprepared, but the Circle J boss's gun was out in the flick of an eyelash. He pointed it as a man points his finger, and squeezed the trigger.

*Bang!*

There was one sharp report, a clink of metal as the bullet struck

the spinning silver coin. Then bullet and dollar disappeared from sight.

"Yore shootin's pretty good," Sully admitted. "Where yuh from?"

"Up North a ways."

"Ain't on the dodge, are yuh?"

Billy put on a guilty expression. His eyes shifted, avoiding Sully's searching gaze.

"I—I'd rather not talk about that," he murmured. "I'll earn my pay here. Yuh won't lose on me; don't worry."

"And the name?" Sully asked, with a sneer. "Mebbe yuh'd ruther not mention that, either, huh?"

"S'pose yuh call me West—Bill West'll do."

"All right, Bill West. The job's yores—forty a month and bonus fer special work."

"What kind o' special work?"

"A little huntin' now an' then," Sully explained. "That's why I wanted to be sure yuh kin shoot good."

He studied his new hand for a moment, noting the well-worn range clothing and its fine quality.

This fact didn't arouse any suspicion; many cow-punchers like to buy expensive duds, even though it costs them about all they can earn.

"Yuh kin just hang around and git acquainted till chow time," Sully added. "Sim Slocum, that skinny fella over by the bunk house, will tell yuh where yuh kin stow yore war bag."

"Thanks," Billy murmured and turned to go away, when Sully spoke again.

"Mebbe yuh'd like ter make some extra money ter-night," the foreman suggested, with a sly smile.

"I could use it."

"Then yuh'd ought ter be ready to ride in about an hour."

Billy's eyes narrowed, and his jaw tightened. "Where to, and what's the job all about?"

"Thar's a party goin' ter hunt fuzztails on Mustang Mesa. Best time to lay fer them is around sundown, when they come ter the water hole. We got a big corral trap up there."

"Sounds like it might be plumb excitin'," Billy remarked.

"Yeah," Sully agreed. "We kin bag maybe fifty or a hundred. In the mornin', we take 'em to Dead Horse Drop and either shoot 'em or run 'em off the cliff an'— What's the matter?"

Sully broke off to fire the question at Billy, as he noticed the white expression of horror and disgust on the new hand's face.

The Circle J boss controlled his features with an effort.

"Nothin'. Tell me the rest."

"The company allows two dollars fer every cayuse we kill," Sully went on. "They want the range cleared fer their cattle. That'll make about twenty dollars a man if we kin catch a hundred ter-night."

Billy West was flaming within. He wanted to fly at this hulking, brutish fellow with his fists and pommel him unconscious.

Horse-lover that he was, the Circle J boss hated any man who would take part in this wholesale killing of the wild, free mustangs that roamed the great mesa to the north.

There was plenty of range for the Star cattle without this slaughter of the horse herds, but the owners of the ranch probably didn't know that.

With a powerful effort of will, Billy controlled himself and faced Sully. The latter's piggy eyes were studying him closely.

"Waal, West, what d'yuh say?"  
"I'll be ready to ride with yuh,"  
Billy told him, in a low, strangled  
voice.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE MESA TRAP.

FOUR riders from the Star Land & Cattle Co.'s ranch drew rein at the foot of the rugged trail leading to the summit of Mustang Mesa.

Sully, the Star foreman, was in charge of the party; with him was his new hand, Bill West. There were two other Star hands—the pair Billy had seen hanging around the bunk house that afternoon.

One was the skinny, hatchet-faced fellow, whose name, Billy learned, was "Sim" Slocum. The other was a thickset gorilla of a man, who was introduced as Jake Maloy.

Above them, Mustang Mesa loomed—a vast table-land stretching for miles to the north and west. The surface of the mesa was by no means level, but was broken up with deep chasms and high ridges, and it was overgrown with piñon and juniper and other scrub timber—wild country in which mustangs could find freedom and fodder, but not such good country for running cattle. It was too wild and rugged and broken up, and the trails were steep and dangerous.

Another group of horsemen appeared, riding toward the four Star men.

"Hyar's Ab Loder now," Sully said, recognizing the foremost of the newcomers. "He's the Block T foreman," he added, speaking to Billy.

The Circle J boss nodded, as he watched the approaching riders. Then, as they came closer, he felt a sudden quickening of his pulsebeat, for there was no mistaking the two familiar figures that rode behind the Block T foreman.

"Good fer Buck an' Joel!" Billy murmured under his breath. "They got themselves jobs on the Block T pretty quick."

The minute Buck Foster saw Billy in the group of riders from the Star outfit, he opened his mouth to let out a yell, but Joe Scott punched him sharply in the ribs, at the same time muttering a low-voiced warning:

"Keep yore trap shut, mosshorn! Don't let on yuh ever seen Billy before!"

The hands from the two spreads now joined forces and began the climb up the steep trail leading to the summit of Mustang Mesa.

They rode in single file, with Sully in the lead.

When they reached the top, Sully explained the lay of the land to the newcomers.

"The wild uns come through yonder notch," he told them, pointing to a break in the cliffs to the east. "Thar's a water hole they'll make for, about two mile further on," he added, pointing in the opposite direction.

Billy West's eyes swept the vast broken-up surface of the mesa. Heavy growths of piñon, juniper, and scrub oak covered large areas.

"Whar's this trap of yores?" he asked carelessly.

"It's all hidden by the timber," Sully told him. "We worked on it close on a month, with six men. The wings is about a mile long on each side, but they're so hid by junipers that they'd fool most anybody—specially a fuzztail."

Billy shuddered with disgust. Sully started to lead the way westward, the others following him. But the three Circle J waddies managed to hang back in the rear and exchange a few words among themselves.



They found the wild-horse trap as Sully had described it. There was a large corral for the imprisoned animals, and leading up to it were the "wings" which formed a sort of chute through which the horses could be headed into the corral trap.

And now Sully posted his men on either side of the corral gate and gave them instructions.

They were to wait in silence till the horses entered the corral. Then the gate was to be closed.

Buck Foster and Joe Scott were ordered to post themselves at the ends of the wings, so as to be ready to haze in any stragglers that might wander away or fail to follow their leaders.

Sully stayed with Billy, hiding close to the corral gate. Their bodies were completely concealed by the screen of piñon and juniper.

On the opposite side of the corral gate was the Block T foreman, Abner Loder, with another of his own men, and Sim Slocum, of the Star. The other Star hand, Jake Maloy, stayed with Sully and the Circle J boss.

They waited. Over the western rim of the mesa, the sun was going down in a sea of crimson and yellow and orchid and gold. Pinnacles and spires of sandstone rock were outlined against it, like some magic city of the desert afloat in the sky.

Bit by bit, the color faded out into fainter hues. A cool breeze swept across the desert.

"Listen!" a low whisper from Sully drew the attention of the others to a low drum of hoofbeats on the mesa.

The Star foreman bent near to the ground. There was no mistaking the sound. A band of wild horses was coming.

Minutes passed. Now the hoofbeats were closer. The watching

horse hunters at the corral could see them streaming through the distant notch, a band of fuzztails of every size and color—roans, pintos, buckskins, grays, sorrels, blacks.

There were all of seventy in the bunch—probably more, Billy West figured, as he strained his eyes to count their numbers in the fading sunset light.

They came thundering down the slope leading to the place where the wings of the horse hunters' trap spread out.

An exclamation of satisfaction broke from Sully's throat. Looking at him, Billy West saw the brutish foreman's greedy little eyes aglow with eagerness.

"See!" he murmured. "They're comin'! We've got 'em! They're comin' right—"

*Bang!*

Sully broke off with a strangled oath as the sound of a six-gun suddenly shattered the air.

His face was flushed with rage, and his eyes flashed.

"Who done that?" he shouted.

The sound of that single shot threw the wild-horse band into panic. Their leaders stopped, whinnying and pawing the ground for a few moments, as if talking things over in horse language.

Then they whirled and tore away, heading toward the north, and in a few moments, they were lost to sight in the mass of scrub timber that clothed the top of Mustang Mesa.

Sully climbed aboard his cayuse and thundered to the end of the wings of the trap—where Buck Foster and Joe Scott had been posted. There was murder in the piggish eyes of the Star foreman. His heavy features were twisted and snarling.

Billy West followed him on Dancer, his own horse.

At the end of the wings of the big horse trap, Buck Foster sat his gray cayuse, calmly blowing the smoke out of the muzzle of his smooth-handled old Colt .45.

Sully came charging at him. "Yuh—yuh fool! Yuh sp'iled the whole business! Yuh scared them hosses away!"

The Star foreman's gun was in his hand. He raised it, pointed it at Buck Foster, and squeezed the trigger.

*Bang!*

The gun exploded, but Billy West was at Sully's elbow and shoved his arm up, so that the bullet flew wild.

"Yuh don't want ter hang fer murder, do yuh, Sully?" Billy shouted, seizing the Star foreman's gun wrist in a grip of iron.

Then Ab Loder, the Block T foreman, came racing up from the opposite wing of the trap. He, too, was in a towering rage over the failure of the plan to catch a bunch of the wild horses. He pointed an accusing finger at Buck Foster.

"Yuh—yo're fired, yuh blunderin' jackass!" he roared.

And Buck Foster roared back at him, in an even louder tone:

"Yuh ain't firin' yores truly, Buck Foster! I'm through! I'm takin' my time! I don't like yore mangy ol' crowd of hoss-shootin' polecats, no-how!"

And with the words, Buck whirled his cayuse, touched it with the spurs, and rode off without a backward glance.

## CHAPTER V.

### QUEER DOIN'S IN MERCEDES.

LIGHTS were twinkling in the double row of adobe buildings that made up the little border town of Mercedes. From some of the Mexican *cantinas* came the sound of music—guitars and mandolins—as

well as the clink of glasses and bottles, and the rattle of cards and chips and dice.

Many of the Mexicans' shacks gave forth smells of highly seasoned cooking, and this caused Buck Foster's battered nose to twitch and sniff in the savory odors, as he rode along the single street of the town.

After quitting his job on the Block T in disgust, Buck had ridden straight to Mercedes, and it was more than an hour after dark when he got there. The cooking odors reminded him that he was hungry—as he generally was.

"Now I wonder," he murmured under his breath, "whether thar's any decent grub ter be had in this man's town."

Buck didn't like the highly seasoned dishes of the Mexicans, and he was wondering just how to go about getting some good plain American grub when a sound of singing from a near-by saloon caught his attention.

It wasn't exactly singing that Buck heard, but a high-pitched, wailing note that pierced the air with its shrillness, and made itself heard above the din of the saloon.

Buck recognized the sound at once, and a surge of joy went through his lanky body. For he was sure that the shrill wailing was the voice of the Circle J cook, Sing Lo. And Buck was equally sure that Sing Lo was taking advantage of the absence of his boss and Buck and Joe to get a skinful of "tanglefoot" or hard liquor.

This was the little Circle J Chinaman's chief weakness. He had others, including a fondness for gambling and cheating at cards. But he also had many good qualities, which made him a valuable man to the Circle J spread.

Buck slid out of his saddle, hitched

his cayuse at the rail, and strode inside the Cactus Saloon.

There was grim determination in the Circle J veteran's leathery face as he dragged his spurs across the floor of the barroom.

Sure enough! Buck was right! Draped across the bar was the figure of Sing Lo, clad in his usual loose-fitting black coat and pants. There was a foolish smile on the Chinaman's flat, yellow face, and his slant eyes held a bleary expression.

His voice rose high and shrill in a wailing Chinese song. Men turned away and thrust their finger tips into their ears.

Sing Lo stopped, nodded to the bartender, grinning widely.

"Velly nice song, so be," he murmured, laying a silver dollar on the bar. "Bling notha dlink of tanglefoot!"

The bartender nodded. "Another drink of tanglefoot, huh?" And he pushed a bottle and glass toward the Chinaman.

Sing Lo reached out his thin yellow hand, poured a drink and started to raise it to his lips. But it never got there.

The big horny hand of Buck Foster suddenly clamped down on the little Chinaman's wrist; the glass tilted suddenly, spilling the liquor all down the front of Sing Lo's coat.

At the same time, the voice of the old Circle J buckaroo roared in the little cook's ears.

"Goldarn yuh, yuh rum-guzzlin', pie-faced little card cheat! What did I tell yuh I'd do to yuh if I caught yuh gittin' spifflicated on redeye ag'in?"

Sing Lo turned on Buck, his flat yellow face taking on a forlorn expression.

"No dlink ledeye, Mistleee Buck," he murmured faintly. "Velly good tanglefoot, so be."

"And why ain't yuh out at the camp, gittin' grub ready fer me an' the rest o' the boys?" Buck demanded, grabbing Sing Lo by the shoulders and shaking him until his eyes rolled in his head.

Sing Lo burst out into a flood of protests in Chinese, but Buck paid no attention to them. Instead, he seized the little cook by the slack of his pants and the collar of his coat and gave him the bum's rush out of the place.

Outside, Buck spied the Chinaman's favorite piebald cayuse, dozing at the hitch rail.

"Kin yuh ride?" he asked.

"So be."

Buck dragged Sing Lo over to the piebald and helped him to mount. Then he climbed aboard his own bronc and herded Sing Lo and the piebald ahead of him, making for the Circle J camp.

The kid, Linc Waterman, was at the camp. He had built a fire and cooked supper for himself, and was scouring the pots and pans when Buck and Sing Lo arrived.

The veteran waddy at once put the Chinaman to work to cook a meal. Sing Lo was a little sobered by his ride, and set about preparing a big dish of ham and beans and a plate of flapjacks, together with a fresh pot of coffee.

Buck sat down at the feast, licking his lips hungrily.

"By ganny!" he muttered, spearing a chunk of ham with his fork and holding it up. "This ain real grub. I s'pose it's too much to expect an ornery Chineee to do anything more than dish up good chow."

Sing Lo, smiling broadly, set a

steaming cup of coffee beside the veteran.

Buck shoveled two heaping spoonfuls from the sugar bowl into his cup. Then he lifted it to his lips and took a big swallow.

"Auf! Grr! Ouff!"

Buck made a series of terrible sounds in his throat and spat out the coffee. He continued gurgling and gulping for several seconds.

Finally, he turned on the Chinaman.

"Drat yuh, Sing Lo! Yuh tried ter poison me! I'll flay the ornery hide ofn yuh fer that! I'll be a horned toad, if yuh kin—"

"Whatta matta, Mistle Buck?" Sing Lo asked, keeping the camp fire between himself and the angry veteran.

"Matter!" Buck roared. "Matter! That coffee's full o' salt. It's worse'n the Great Salt Lake! It ain't—"

Sing Lo picked up the sugar bowl in a hurry, took a taste on the tip of his finger and put it to his lips.

At once, an expression of horror spread over his flat yellow face, as he realized what he had done. Being rather muddled in the head from too much tanglefoot, Sing Lo had refilled the sugar bowl with salt from his supplies, instead of sugar. And Buck Foster had been the first to suffer from the mistake.

"Velly solly, Mistle Buck," Sing Lo apologized.

"Sorry, huh? Yuh tried to murder me! Yuh'd ought ter be hanged! Yuh'd ought ter be scalped by Injuns! Yuh'd ought ter—"

Buck paused, partly because he had run out of ideas of punishment for Sing Lo; partly because the cowboy, Linc Waterman, was tugging at his sleeve.

"What is it, younker?" asked Buck, turning on the waddy.

"Don't look right away," Linc said. "But I'm sure thar's some one hidin'—one, mebbe two men—down in that clump of ocotillo yonder!"

He nodded toward a mass of the plant growing close to the mouth of the arroyo.

Buck stared a moment. Then he spat on the ground several times to get the taste of the salted coffee out of his mouth.

A second later, he was dashing as fast as his saddle-bowed legs would carry him straight for the clump of ocotillo.

The men hiding there had no time to retreat or to get to their horses. Before they knew what was happening, a furious, fighting whirlwind tore into the ocotillo and came to grips with them.

But the two hidden hombres could take care of themselves in a fight, and Buck Foster soon found that he had his hands full. The three were locked in one another's arms, rolling over and over in the ocotillo, clawing, tearing, punching, in a savage rough-and-tumble brawl. No quarter asked, or given.

Buck Foster wasn't a hero, by any means. He'd have busted any hombre in the nose for calling him such a thing. He was just a plain, cow-punchin' gent, with a talent for getting himself into trouble and scraps and such things. And right now, Buck was having his mettle tested. He was tough and lean and wiry, but the two jaspers he was tangling with were every bit as good scrap-pers, and they were handing Buck a terrific beating.

Their fists thudded against his face and jaw and into his ribs and stomach. But he gritted his teeth



and fought back with all the fury of a maddened bobcat. And he handed out plenty of punishment, too.

But he was taking twice as much as he was giving, and that can't last in a rough-and-tumble battle of this kind. Weight and odds are bound to tell.

So Buck's breath was coming short; his lungs were feeling ready to burst, and his head was filled with shooting stars. His arms were weary, and his face and body were sore and battered.

Things began to whirl. Lights flashed across his eyes. There came a few moments of blackness, when he felt nothing and heard nothing.

This was followed by a return of consciousness and clear vision. He heard voices of men around him. Some of the voices were moaning; then there was the shrill chatter of Sing Lo, and the calmer tones of the young cow-puncher, Linc Waterman.

Buck opened his eyes and looked around. His head was splitting, but he could see what was going on, and he could guess at what had been happening during his spell of unconsciousness.

Linc was holding a lantern, which shed a dim yellow light over the scene.

Buck's two foes in the recent rough-and-tumble were lying flat on the ground, groaning and mumbling, in a half-conscious state.

The veteran waddy staggered to his feet, looking very much like a wounded gamecock, rising on tottering legs to crawl over its dead victim.

"D'yuh see what I——" Buck began, but then his eyes fell on Sing Lo.

The little Chinaman was standing beside Linc, his flat yellow face

spread in a broad smile, his slant eyes twinkling.

"Hi lo, Mistleee Buck," he greeted. "How you feel?"

Buck stared at the object which Sing Lo held in his hand. It was a heavy iron skillet which he used in cooking. Buck wasn't a very fast thinker, but it didn't take him long to figure out what had happened.

"Me clown bad homblays," Sing Lo said, waving the skillet in the air. "Knock 'em into middle of next week, so be!"

"Yuh was just about done in, Buck," Linc added, "when me an' the chink got here with the lantern. We couldn't take a chance of shoot-in', but Sing Lo shore conked those hombres with his skillet. They was out cold fer nigh on five minutes. And they ain't full come to yet."

Buck grunted. Then he held his hand out to the Chinaman.

"Thanks, little pard," he murmured. "The only thing yaller about yuh's yore hide, and yuh can't help that!"

"So be." Sing Lo acknowledged the compliment with a smile.

"Let's take a look at them skunks!" Buck suggested. "Give me that lantern!"

He seized the lantern from Linc's hand and strode over to where the two unconscious hombres lay.

The yellow light of the lantern played over their features.

"I know 'em!" Linc exclaimed, his boyish face lighting up with eagerness, his brown eyes flashing. "They're two waddies that was workin' fer the Star Land & Cattle spread. The skinny one's Sim Slocum. The other's Jake Maloy."

"That's them! I know 'em, too!" Buck declared. "Slocum an' Maloy! Now what in tarnation was

them two polecats doin' around this hyar camp?"

"Hush!" Linc warned the veteran to silence.

Hoofbeats sounded close at hand. Linc covered the lanternlight. The approaching horseman came straight into the arroyo. Now he was right on top of Linc and Buck Foster.

Linc uncovered the lantern and let it shine full on the newcomer.

A harsh exclamation broke from Buck Foster. "By heifers! It's the redhead!"

Joe Scott reined in his cayuse and dismounted. "Yuh all safe an' sound, Buck?" he asked in an anxious tone.

"Sure I'm all right! Why wouldn't I be?"

"Thar was two hombres sent from the Star spread to follow yuh," Joe hurried on to explain. "They took yuh fer a spy sent by the owners of one o' the spreads. As soon as I found they was after yuh, I rode to town and then come on here."

Buck took Linc's lantern and showed Joe where the two half-conscious rannies, Sim Slocum and Jake Maloy, were still lying on the ground.

"Yeah, I know," the veteran said. "Thar's the two ornery skunks! Yuh got here too late ter be any use, carrot-top!"

Joe looked surprised. It showed in the expression of his blue eyes and the lengthening of his freckled face.

"D'yuh mean——" he began.

"Sure I knocked them two jaspers cold by myself," Buck interrupted, "with just a leetle help from the kid and the chink, thar."

Joe Scott saw Sing Lo, the skillet still in his hand. He also saw the big lumps on the heads of the two

Star cowhands. His quick mind put two and two together. He started to laugh. He tried to speak, but only a gurgling sound came from his lips.

"What yuh sayin', Joe Scott?" Buck demanded. "Don't yuh believe I——"

Joe controlled his mirth and found his voice at last.

"I believe yo're a cockeyed liar, Mr. Foster!" he told his saddle pard.

## CHAPTER VI.

### CROOKED BUSINESS.

THE bunk house of the Star Land & Cattle Co. was filled with the snores of slumbering cowhands. It seemed to Billy West, lying awake in his bunk, that every kind of snore the human nose and throat can make was being produced all around him.

"Sounds kind of homelike," he told himself. "Kind o' like the Circle J bunk house, with Buck doin' his worst."

There was one snore that sounded like a dull saw biting through a plank filled with knots. There was a snore that resembled the grunting of a pig caught under a gate. There were snores that sounded like the bellows of frightened steers; harsh snores, loud snores, soft snores, whistling snores—every variety you could think of.

The chorus had been going on for all of two hours when Billy decided that the entire ranch headquarters of the Star outfit must be asleep. He had some investigating to do that night, and this was the time for it.

He sat up and continued to listen for a few minutes. Then he got up and strode softly over to the door, in his stocking feet.

He opened the door and stepped

outside. Moonlight bathed the ranch buildings in a white radiance, throwing the deepest of black shadows on the farther sides.

Keeping in the shadow of the bunk house, Billy crept around the building. Then he made a swift dash across an open space for the main ranch house. There was crooked work going on here, he felt sure, and this was the time to find out what it was all about.

He knew where the ranch office was located, and he expected that a search of it would tell him what he wanted to know about Sully's management of the Star Land & Cattle Co.'s business, in those parts.

Of one thing Billy was sure. Sully was a crook and a scoundrel. There was something back of his cruel horse-hunting project on Mustang Mesa. And the Circle J boss intended to learn just what the whole business was all about.

The office window was partly open. Billy pushed it up gently, inch by inch, until the opening was large enough for him to crawl through. Then he drew himself up to the ledge and slipped inside.

Cautiously, he struck a match, held it cupped in his hands for a moment until he could find the lamp. He found it set in a bracket on the wall.

He took it down, set it on the slide of the desk. By this time, the match had burned down to his fingers, and he was obliged to drop it.

His next move was to take off his spotted calfskin vest and arrange it as a screen around the lamp, so that its light should be confined to a space of a foot or so on the desk itself.

Billy then struck a fresh match and lighted the lamp. He put the chimney in place and sat down at the desk, intent on searching it until

he found out what he wanted to know.

He examined papers in several pigeonholes, but they were ordinary business documents, bills, receipts, and the like.

After a search of nearly half an hour, Billy was beginning to feel that there was nothing in the desk that would be of any use to him.

And then he came across a letter from the Eastern office of the company. It was addressed to Sully.

DEAR FOREMAN SULLY: At your recommendation, we are glad to have the place known as Mustang Mesa cleared of wild horses, so that it can be used as grazing land for cattle. You are authorized to pay a bonus of two dollars a head to cowboys for destroying these wild horses. We thank you for the suggestion and hope that the plan will work out successfully.

Yours very truly,  
STAR LAND & CATTLE CO.,  
By J. McLAIRROW,  
Eastern Representative.

A few moments later, Billy found a flat account book which shed further light on the matter.

It showed entries of amounts charged to the company for the killing of the wild cayuses on Mustang Mesa. The latest entry had been made that day, and charged the company two hundred dollars for the killing of one hundred fuzztails.

Other entries were for smaller amounts, but Billy knew from his conversations with Sully and others that the horse hunt that night was the first large one, as the men had been busy for a month building the big corral trap for the mustangs.

Billy also knew that no fuzztails had been killed that night; Buck Foster had seen to that.

These charges on the books were a fraud. Sully was taking money from the ranch funds and putting it into his own pocket. There could

be no other explanation. The crooked foreman would pay out small sums to the cowhands in bonuses, but he would grab far larger amounts for himself.

Feeling that he had enough evidence against Sully, Billy prepared to leave. He slipped the account book into his hip pocket. Then he reached over to put out the lamp. He started to turn down the wick. The light flickered and began to dim.

Footsteps sounded outside the door of the office. Voices muttered in low tones.

Billy blew out the lamp hastily and darted for the window. But before he could reach it, the door was flung open, and a man, with a lighted lamp in his left hand, stood in the opening. His right hand held a Colt .45.

It was Sully!

His small eyes flashed, as he recognized the Circle J boss.

"It's you, West, huh?" he snarled. "Put 'em up, yuh sneakin' spy!"

Billy West felt like a trapped animal. Never before had he been in such an awkward jam. He had been caught unawares. His own six-gun still hung in its leather. He hadn't a chance to get it out and try to make a fight for his freedom.

He slowly began to raise his hands.

And now a second man entered the office. Billy recognized him as Ab Loder, the Block T foreman. Loder was probably working the same trick on his employers as Sully was working on the owners of the Star. A fine pair of crooks, these two trusted foremen!

Sully set the lamp on top of the desk, keeping Billy covered with his gun every second.

"Waal, West," he drawled, "what yuh doin' here? What are yuh—a company spy?"

The Circle J boss did not answer. He was thinking hard, looking for a way of escape.

"See what yuh kin find on him, Ab!" Sully told the Block T foreman. "If he's stole anything, we'll see that he goes ter jail."

Ab Loder's seamed face broke into a mean grin. "We caught him red-handed. Our testimony ought ter send him up fer ten years, anyhow, if——"

Loder paused and shot a meaningful glance at Sully.

The latter nodded. "Yeah. I get yuh, Ab. We'll find somethin' on him—enough ter put him in the pen fer a good long time!"

Billy went cold inside at the words. He hadn't thought of this possibility—that Sully and Loder would plant money on him and accuse him of stealing it. They would both tell the same story—and swear to it. It would be the word of a stranger in that part of the country, against the sworn testimony of two respected citizens.

"Mebbe we'd ought ter call some of the boys, so we'll hev more witnessses," Loder suggested, with a sly leer.

"Better see what he's got on him first," Sully said.

Ab Loder stepped toward Billy and began to search his pockets.

Sully uttered a sharp warning: "Git his gun first, yuh fool!"

But it was too late. With a quick shift of position, Billy got Ab Loder between himself and Sully. Then the Circle J boss's arms came down and gripped Loder, pinioning his arms against his sides.

Keeping his hold on Loder, Billy backed toward the window. Sully



dared not shoot at him, for fear of hitting Loder.

But Sully had another idea, which was almost as good. He started yelling at the top of his lungs and shooting over Billy's head.

"Thief! Thief! Thief!" Sully shouted, and emptied one of his guns through the window of the office.

Shattered glass fell on the Circle J boss's head. Ab Loder tried to wrestle himself free, but Billy held onto him with desperate strength.

Sully reloaded his empty gun, and then blazed away with the other, yelling all the time.

The bunk house began to come awake. Half-clad cow-punchers came running out to see what all the noise was about.

Billy's retreat by way of the window was cut off. It was no use trying to get away with the important evidence he had obtained. There was nothing left for him to do but fight his way to freedom—if he could.

With a swift movement, he hurled the wiry body of Ab Loder away from him, at the same time whipping out his guns.

Sully saw his chance, turned his own Colts on Billy. Both men triggered at once—but Billy was a split second faster at handling his shooting irons.

*Bang-bang! Bang-bang!*

In the swift exchange of lead, Sully slumped to his knees; his guns dropped from his limp hands. Then he collapsed in a heap on the floor.

One of Sully's bullets tore across Billy's jaw, opening up a raw, burning wound. But the Circle J boss gritted his teeth against the pain and turned to make good his escape.

With a sudden feeling of despair,

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he saw that his chances were even worse than before he had downed Sully. The ranch yard was crowded with the men from the bunk house, who had been aroused by Sully's shouting and the roar of his six-guns.

If Billy showed himself at the window, it would be their signal to start shooting at him.

But there was a more pressing danger than the men who had been sleeping in the bunk house.

Ab Loder, the Block T foreman, had picked himself up while Billy was shooting it out with Sully. Loder had been a little stunned when the Circle J boss hurled him against the wall, but his head was clearing, and now he stood in the doorway. A big Colt .45 in each hand, he blocked the Montana waddy's escape in that direction.

Billy whirled on him, his face pale under its bronze, save for the ugly crimson streak along his jaw.

"Let me through, Loder!" he barked.

But the Block T foreman stood his ground.

"The boys'll be here in a few seconds, West," he reminded Billy.

"That won't do yuh no good, Loder, if I put a slug through yore liver afore they git here!" the Circle J boss retorted in a harsh tone, intended to scare the other.

Loder paled, and his hands shook a little. He had already seen the Montana puncher's swift gun play. He wanted none of it when his own carcass was to be the target. He dared not match his trigger fingers against those of this gun wizard.

He shrugged, slid his guns back into their holsters and stepped aside. Billy rushed to the door, flung it open, and stepped in to the hall beyond.

Loder shut the door behind the Circle J boss. Then he rushed to the window and began to shout for all he was worth.

"Git West!" he yelled. "Git him—dead or alive! Me an' Sully caught him robbin' the office. He's shot Sully. Don't let him escape!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### CIRCLE J CALLS SHOW-DOWN.

**B**ILLY WEST was on the veranda, when Loder's cries reached his ears. He saw the group from the Star bunk house come racing toward him, dragging their Colts free of the leather as they ran.

Sully had chosen his men well. They were ready to kill at his bidding or that of his partner in crookedness, Ab Loder.

*Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang!*

Bullets began to sing about the ears of the Circle J boss as he stood with his back to the door, trying to figure out his next move. There wasn't much sense in standing there and trying to shoot it out with a dozen gunhands. A better bet would be to try to silence Loder.

Billy emptied his right-hand gun at the oncoming waddies. Then he whirled about and tried to open the door. But it wouldn't yield.

Loder had outsmarted him again. He had followed and locked the door on the inside, so that Billy couldn't get back into the house. A smart, tricky coyote, this Loder!

Billy shrugged his square shoulders and turned to face his foes again. There seemed no way out but to take his chance in a six-gun show-down with this crew of hired horse killers.

Crouching behind a post of the veranda, Billy began to trigger his Colts with all his skill.

The men offered dim, shifting targets in the moonlight, but he saw one of them go down from his first volley.

And then hoofbeats sounded, racing across the ranch yard—galloping hoofbeats that thudded on the hard-packed earth with the rhythm of drums.

In another instant, Billy caught sight of the riders, and his heart leaped with joy. He let out a wild cowboy yell:

"Yip-pee! Hi, thar, Buck! Joe!"

The two riders brought their racing broncs to a sliding halt near the veranda.

"What d'yuh mean, Billy," came the voice of Buck Foster, "startin' a ruckus hyar without invitin' yore own pards ter sit in the game?"

"It was a surprise——" Billy tried to explain quickly.

"D'yuh want me an' the redhead should clean up these hoss-shootin' polecats for yuh?" Buck interrupted.

"Yuh kin help," his boss told him.

That was enough for Buck and Joe. They were off again, yelling like redskins on the warpath.

Straight for the group of Star cowhands they charged, shooting wildly, while Billy West triggered carefully from his post on the veranda.

Sully's men were thrown into panic by the sudden furious attack of the Montanans. Two of them went down, hit by bullets. The others scattered right and left as the flying hoofs of the Circle J horses threatened to trample them. Some of them dropped their guns and ran; others raised their hands above their heads, as a sign of surrender.

Billy came running down from the veranda. Buck and Joe wheeled

their cayuses and galloped back to join their boss.

At an order from him, they herded the Star men into a group, while Billy kept the prisoners covered with his two six-guns.

Then Joe Scott slipped out of his saddle and took away the Star waddies' guns.

There were ten prisoners altogether; three of these were wounded so badly that they couldn't walk, and they were carried by their pardes to the bunk house.

"Pardners," Billy said to Buck and Joe. "I'm leavin' yuh in charge of these gents. Treat 'em gentle—so long as they behave thei'selves. And see that yuh keep 'em all here till I git back."

As he spoke, Billy turned and started for the door of the bunk house.

"Hey, where yuh goin'?" Buck Foster wanted to know.

"I got some important business with a couple o' jaspers named Sully and Loder. I got to hurry!" Billy replied.

With a wave of his hand and a grin on his bronzed young face, he left the bunk shack and went back toward the ranch house.

He saw that there was no longer a light in the office. The building was entirely in darkness.

Billy was a little puzzled. Then a new idea occurred to him. He circled the building, watching for some ray of light or sign of life.

The first streaks of dawn were showing in the eastern sky. Before long, the dawn would be at hand.

Then Billy's ears were struck by a distant sound—the faint clink of a bridle bit.

He turned swiftly and gazed in the direction of the corral. A blurred mass of horses showed in the

dim light. But Billy presently could make out that two men were there, taking out their mounts.

"So the varmints are tryin' to sneak away," Billy exclaimed softly, as he started for the corral.

The pair had their cayuses saddled and were taking them out of the corral. They closed the gate and swung aboard the brones, striking off on a northeast trail across the desert flats.

"Looks like they're makin' fer the Block T," Billy reflected, quickening his pace to a run.

He found his own favorite mount, Danger, with head hanging over the corral bar, waiting to greet him with a whinny of welcome:

"Howdy, Danger hoss!" Billy murmured, stroking the chestnut's velvety neck. "Feel like takin' a ride?"

Danger bobbed his splendid head up and down as if nodding in agreement.

Billy found his saddle, entered the corral, and throwing the hull on Danger's back, cinched up.

"Maybe we'll have some racin' ter do, hoss," Billy remarked. "Reckon yuh don't mind that, do yuh?"

Danger stretched out his long neck and wagged his head to and fro—which was his way of saying no.

And then Billy was in the chestnut's saddle and off in pursuit of the two foremen.

Billy could see them about half a mile ahead, hitting across the desert at an easy fox trot.

Danger cut down their lead to about two hundred yards before the fugitives noticed that they were being followed. Then they put spurs to their cayuses and tried to make a runaway race of it.

But they soon saw that they

didn't have much chance, with the fleet Danger after them.

Soon Billy was within hailing distance.

"Come back here, you two!" he called after them. "What's yore hurry?"

Sully and Loder did not answer, but half turned in their saddles and got out their Winchester.

They raised the weapons and let fly. But the risks of shooting from the back of a galloping horse counted against them, and the bullets went wild.

They waited until the range should be closer.

Billy West urged Danger on fearlessly. He wasn't worrying much about being hit. He was a moving target, and the men he was pursuing were not in a position to display their best shooting. Besides, the Circle J boss had a little plan of his own that he wanted to try out.

Danger swerved and zigzagged as he raced toward the fugitives, guided by the pressure of his rider's knees.

And then, when he felt that the distance was right, Billy West uncoiled a lass rope from his saddle horn, sent it whirling out in a wide loop, and then, with a flick of his wrist, jerked it over Sully.

The lariat circled the bulky shoulders of the Star foreman, tightened. The next moment, a sharp jerk on the tough maguery rope pulled Sully out of his saddle. He hit the ground and was dragged along, as Billy snubbed the slack of his rope around Danger's saddle horn and changed direction for the next move of his game.

The Circle J boss uncoiled a second lariat and sent it snaking out like a living thing. Its loop widened out over Ab Loder's head, then descended, catching both arms

around the Block T foreman's body as it tightened and bound him in its coil.

A moment later, Loder, too, was jerked out of his saddle and was bumping and jolting along the ground, keeping Sully company.

Billy dismounted, made sure the two crooked foremen were bound tightly at wrists and ankles, then took away their guns.

When he climbed into Danger's saddle again, there was a broad grin on his rugged young face.

"Come on, gents!" he called out to them. "The boys in the bunk house are plumb anxious to see yore faces—especially if yuh git them scratched up a bit from ridin' home this a way."

And then, with the bodies of the two foremen dragging after him, Billy turned Danger around and started for the Star Land & Cattle Co.'s ranch headquarters.

"It'd be too bad if we run inter a patch of cat's-claw," he told his prisoners a few minutes later. "But this ought ter be a lesson to yuh not to start shootin' when a gent rides up to yuh and wants ter say a friendly howdy."

Buck Foster was getting a little impatient. He wondered what had become of his boss. Joe Scott was a bit worried, too, but he couldn't leave Buck alone with such a large number of prisoners.

Both the Circle J waddies were plumb relieved, therefore, when they saw Billy ride into the Star ranch yard, with Sully and Loder trailing in the dust behind him.

"Hoo-raw!" Buck yelled. "Billy's went an' drug in the two worst polecats of the lot!"

"So be!" said a quiet voice behind him.



Buck whirled—to see Sing Lo standing there beside his lazy piebald cayuse, smiling slyly up at him.

"Whar in tarnation did you come from, chink?" Buck demanded.

"Me get tired hang alound camp. Me want takee look-see what going on."

Billy came across the yard. He drew rein outside the bunk house, dismounted, and set his prisoners on their feet.

He led them to the door of the bunk house.

As Sully and Loder looked inside, they met the gaze of the bunch of Star hands who had been made prisoners by the Circle J waddies.

A surly growl of hate greeted the two foremen.

"These are the two gents that left yuh ter do their fightin' fer them, while they high-tailed it with the ranch funds!" Billy told the men in the bunk house.

Then the Circle J boss nodded to Buck Foster. "Go an' rope their cayuses and bring 'em here!" he told the veteran.

The horses ridden by Sully and Loder had followed their riders at a little distance. Billy pointed them out to the veteran.

Buck swung into the saddle of his own bronc and galloped away. In a few minutes, he was back with the two cow ponies.

"Now see what they've got in their saddle pockets!" Billy ordered.

Buck searched, and what he found made his eyes bulge more than ever. For the saddle pockets were stuffed with money—gold, silver, and currency—more than Buck could count.

Billy beckoned to Sing Lo. The little Chinaman came close, and his boss whispered something in his ear.

Sing Lo at once mounted his piebald cayuse, drummed its ribs with his spurless heels and set off at a lazy jogging pace.

Billy watched him disappear beyond a ridge, heading in the direction of Mercedes.

He let the prisoners inside the bunk house see the money taken out of the foremen's saddle pockets.

The sight seemed to rouse the men to fighting fury. Murder blazed from their narrowed eyes. Only the determined look on the faces of the Circle J pardners prevented them from making a charge for their freedom.

When they saw the three Montanans with their shooting irons ready for action, they realized that they were defying death a little too boldly, and they backed away from the door.

Fear showed in the faces of the two foremen.

Billy turned to them, with a sneer of contempt.

"Shall I turn yuh over to yore own men ter deal with yuh, Sully, and you, too, Loder?" he asked. "Or will yuh take yore chances with the law?"

"The law!" the two crooks answered, their voices hoarse with fright. They had visions of seeing themselves strangled to death by the bare hands of their own men.

"It means a long term at hard labor in the State pen," Billy reminded them.

"I don't care," Sully said. "I'll risk the law!"

"Me, too," Loder added.

"All right," Billy told them. "The chink's gone fer the sheriff and enough depities ter handle this crowd. They'll be here inside an hour."

A look of relief showed on the faces of the two thieving foremen.

"And I reckon the owners of yore spreads'll know enough to send out a manager who won't fool them with the idea of payin' bounties fer killin' the fuzztails on Mustang Mesa," the Circle J boss added.

"Yeah! By heifers!" Buck Foster had to put in his two cents' worth, and he glared at the two crooks with brown eyes ablaze under their

shaggy brows. "I'll be a horned toad if that ain't the orneriest skunk trick I ever heard of!"

Waal, now, Billy West shore did beat them crooked foremen at their own game. Even Buck Foster would have ter admit thet. When an hombre starts killin' fuzztails, though, he's plumb apt ter git real waddies on his trail, an' thar ain't no realer ones than them hard-ridin', straight-shootin' Circle J pards. They'll be back ag'in soon in another thrillin' story. Watch fer it in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



### THE FLAG OF THE ALAMO

THE fall of the Alamo of San Antonio took place on March 6, 1836, after eleven days of stubborn defense by the one hundred and eighty Texans against General Santa Anna's attacking force of ten thousand Mexicans.

Travis and his little band of brave defenders were killed to a man, and this massacre is considered as one of the most "glorious defeats" of the world.

While nearing the one hundredth anniversary of this unequal battle, the flag that waved above the Alamo on that unforgettable occasion has been discovered, and is now on exhibition in the National Museum of Mexico City.

Texas archives have revealed the fact that this light-blue flag was made by a group of Texas girls on the banks of the Sabine River and was presented by them to the volunteers just after they had crossed into Texas.

In the center of the flag is an eagle, and the inscription, "God and Liberty." Around the flag are the

words, "First Company of Texan Volunteers. From New Orleans."

It was Santa Anna who ordered that no quarter should be given the Texans. This "victory" was looked upon as a disgrace to Mexico by many outstanding military men of that country, who used language against the general and the massacre of the Alamo as harsh as any Texan.

In later years, when Santa Anna was asked by Texans why he had ordered the slaughter, his reply was that "Travis was too obstinate."

The incidents at the Alamo, the brutality of Santa Anna, and the murder of the brave defenders so inspired the Texans in the battle of San Jacinto, in which Santa Anna was defeated and made prisoner, that they went into the fight shouting "Remember the Alamo!" while the fleeing Mexicans cried out in terror, "Me no Alamo! Me no Alamo!"

They were afraid that the Texas general, Sam Houston, might do to them what Santa Anna had done to the Texans.



# The Plug Hat Waddies Celebrate

By William F. Bragg

Author of "Moran's Six-gun Double," etc.

**I**N the mail that "High-pockets" Halligan, short-coupled horse-wrangler of the Plug Hat outfit, brought back from town was a letter that put a broad smile on the iron-jawed face of old Ed Jeeters, ranch manager.

He called in all the cowpokes from the bunk house and ordered "Jerky" Bill Bowers, the bald-headed cook, to serve dried-apple pie and coffee with canned cream in it.

"This here's a festive occasion," Ed told his men. "This letter's from the buyer for a big beef packin' house in the East. He sez that due

to a sudden jump in the market that last passell of longhorns we sold him brought a record price. He's holdin' the money in town an' wants to know when we'll come fer it. Now here's my idea."

When Ed commenced talking about ideas, High-pockets flushed up to his eyes that were blue as new poker chips. He was noted around the Plug Hat for having all the ideas, but most of them, although designed for the good of the outfit, had brought disaster to High-pockets. So this evening he kept silent and let the boss ramble on.

"Lots of pore ranchers here on Calico Mountain put their beef cattle in with the Plug Hat drive," said old Ed. "This means lots to them."

All the tanned and bow-legged punchers there knew how much the extra cash meant to ranchers and their families who faced the blizzards and droughts of Wyoming. Extra clothing for women and children, something in the grub line beyond flour gravy, fried spuds, and jersey beef.

"Some of you boys didn't git on the pay roll until fall round-up," Ed went on. "Hombres like Red Smith thar." He indicated a tall rider with sporty red mustache, shiny white teeth, and bold black eyes. "So yuh don't know that this big beef sale also means a confoundin' of that rustler, Bitter Crick, who's been tryin' all summer tuh clean up this range. So to celebrate both successes—record sale an' beatin' Bitter Crick—I'm goin' to invite all the Calico Mountain folks to a big blow-out right here at the Plug Hat ranch house. We'll git a couple o' fiddlers, barbecue a yearlin', an' eat an' sing an' dance from dark until dawn."

At this the cowpokes whooped and old Ed beamed, for entertainment was as scarce as hens' teeth on the Calico Mountain range. Folks would ride fifty miles to a dance, stay up all night, and ride another fifty the next day to get home for the chores.

But Jerky Bill, the cook, was silent. And there was no grin on High-pockets's round face.

"Me," growled old Bill, as he pawed his longhorn mustache, "I got to cook a hull dang yearlin' while everybody else is dancin'. Yuh know it takes all night to git the right brown on barbecue beef."

"Me," groaned High-pockets, "I'll

have tuh take care of all them ranchers' teams an' saddle hosses. Feed and water 'em. I'll be too danged tired tuh trip the light fantastic, after pitchin' a couple ton of hay."

The two were holding their mutual sympathy meeting over behind the stove where the boss couldn't see or hear them. Finally Bill scratched his head, that was bald as a billiard ball, and said to High-pockets:

"I got an idea."

High-pockets sniffed. "Everybody around here is breakin' out with ideas like measels runnin' through an Injun camp. What's on yore mind beside that noble dome?"

But Bill waved him aside and took the floor.

"Boss," he said. "As yuh all know, when I weary o' dishin' out flap-jacks an' spotted-purp puddin' fer uncarin' cowhands, I take a vacation by workin' at somethin' entirely different. Onct I helped a painless dentist by holdin' down patients. 'Nuther time I was pin setter-upper in a bowlin' alley until knocked off my perch by a foul strike. I've been most everything from a sailor in the Peruvian navy to an actor on the Broadway stage."

"Actor?" gasped old Ed. "You—an actor?"

Bill bowed modestly. "Fer two months, I assisted a parlor magician an' card expert known as Hermoso the Great. Some of you boys may have noticed my skill with cards in the leetle bunk house poker games."

"So," whispered High-pockets, "that's why he kin always take away my wages."

"Anyway," Bill continued, "here's my idea. It'll prove so popular with these Calico Mountain folks, who never git a chance to see a show, that they'll figure the Plug Hat is



ace-high when it comes to blow-outs. In short, we'll stage a show *here* drawin' on local talent fer the various acts."

"Show?" snorted Ed. "Ain't no actors or actorines on Calico Mountain."

"I jest told you I had appeared in New York."

"Red" Smith broke in sneeringly. "Appeared," he drawled, "but dang briefly I'll bet."

Jerky Bill glared at the speaker. "You got no right to miscall me until yuh watch some of my tricks."

"I'm right tricky myself," grinned Red.

He leaped up, whipped two six-guns from his fancy-stamped holsters and shot the spout off the coffeepot. High-pockets, sitting back of the stove, dived behind the wood box. Jerky Bill's lathy-built form hit the floor. Ed Jeeters fell off his chair and a half dozen cowpokes jammed up in the doorway as they attempted to depart as one man.

Red held the floor. He flipped a gun and drove a ten-penny spike, used by Ed as a hat peg, back into the wall. He cut his initials in the wood box, while curling splinters flew into High-pockets' eyes.

Then Red lowered his Colts, blew the smoke from the barrels, and said with a laugh:

"There's a leetle trick that wasn't in Hermoso the Great's show. Provin' the hand is quicker than the eye. An' also, Bill, that a fast gun will make any card shark lay down his hand pronto."

No man on the Plug Hat had ever witnessed such skillful gun play. Old Ed slumped down in his chair. The punchers filed in, goggle-eyed. High-pockets and Bill were indignant.

"Yuh got no right," said the wrangler, "tuh dang near put out

my eyes with shivers. If I was wearin' my gun, I'd shore show you some tricks."

"Tricks," sneered Red. "You with yore face an' form might be able to call hawks an' charm blind rattlesnakes. But that's yore limit."

Jerky Bill roared. "Lay off High-pockets. He's a good boy. Try to bulldoze him, an' I'll wallop yuh alongside yore jowls with my pie skillet."

Red holstered his guns and said. "Don't git so mad. I was jest throwin' my guns to help out yore idea. To show ol' Ed we got talent on this range. If yuh put on a show, I'd like to show the folks a few gun tricks. You, Bill, you could do yore magician stuff. High-pockets, thar, could do snake charmin' or somethin'."

"By gosh!" said a cowpoke. "We could shore make this show a howlin' success. Thar's Missus Colinda Tootle who can sit at her cottage organ an' sing "Only a Bird in a Gilded Cage" so it draws the tears into yore eyes. That woman can shore render a song."

"An' Wash Waterman," another added, "can take a guitar an' play a Spanish fandango on it while blowin' Yankee Doodle at the same time on a mouth organ. Wash developed that talent the winter we had so many coyotes hollerin' around the ranch. He drove 'em all north to Montana, time he had reached high G in his art."

All this talk had its effect on Ed Jeeters. He had started out with the vague idea of throwing a big party for Calico Mountain. With all this talent at hand, why not make it a real show?

"Boys," he shouted, "yuh got me all red-headed over this. I'm for it a hundred per cent. An' to show my heart's in the right place, I'll

put up a hundred dollars as first prize for the act that's voted the best on the programmy. A hundred dollars jest to make this blow-out a howlin' success."

"I'll win that money," shouted big Red Smith. "With my leetle six-gun, I'll win it."

"A hundred dollars yuh don't!" roared Jerky Bill.

"Put up or shut up."

So Jerky dug up what remained of his summer's wages. And Ed held stakes. A half dozen other punchers, after witnessing Red's gun skill, wished to bet. Jerky had run out of money but High-pockets, always loyal to his friend, bet his best saddle, Sunday shirt, and California pants that Bill would be high man.

Then Red Smith made another suggestion.

"Boss," he said to Ed, "let's make this a real surprise party."

"How?"

"Don't let these Calico Mountain folks know about the cattle money. Have the beef buyer bring it out here in hard cash. As a high point of the evenin', deal out to every rancher what he's got comin'. Then you will shore have what you desire—a howlin' success."

Ed frowned. "But there'll be around ten thousand dollars in the roll. Kind o' reckless, ain't it, to have so much loose cash layin' around? If this Bitter Crick heard about it, he might hold up the ranch. That would go hard on these folks that count on this money fer winter grub an' clothin'."

Red grinned and tapped his gun stocks. "You've jest watched me perform. You got plenty other good men in the outfit. Why be scairt o' Bitter Crick? It won't be that gent's night to howl. Not with us ridin' herd on the dinero."

With a dangerous outlaw like

"Bitter Crick" riding the range, Ed's better judgment told him to plant the beef money in a big strong bank. But he also wished to make the celebration one to date from. He relied to some extent on the judgment of Jerky Bill and High-pockets for both were loyal to their outfit.

"It would make the kids laugh," said High-pockets, "to find out all of a sudden that they was goin' to have plenty candy an' sich truck fer Christmas."

Jerky Bill smoothed his longhorn mustache and said. "The women folks would grin joyful knowin' they could all buy new hats."

"It's a go," said Ed. "A week from to-night. We'll invite everybody from Pizen Crick to Sourdough Flats. Everybody—man, woman, and kid."

"Everybody," Red Smith said softly, "except that slippery rustlin' hombre named Bitter Crick."

## II.

With his entire riding outfit bet on Jerky Bill's skill, High-pockets agreed to help out the cook's act. Bill explained that this was known as the egg-in-hand trick. It would bring down the house, he assured the stocky-built wrangler, and certainly take the first prize away from the vainglorious Red Smith.

"This here," said Jerky, "is real art. It ranges from the ridiculous to the sublime."

"I thought you was goin' to do card tricks."

"No more card tricks," said wise old Bill. "Not while a gunman like Red is around, an' I sit in on the bunk-house poker game. No, you come out in the barn, an' we'll practise up the egg-in-hand trick."

They rehearsed in a vacant box

stall after Jerky Bill had raided the hen house and procured a dozen fresh eggs.

"A magician," he told High-pockets, "always insists on strictly fresh eggs."

"Why?"

"Well, if he was doin' a trick an' dropped an egg an' busted it, an' same wasn't fresh, then he'd lose his audience. That would be pore showmanship."

"I reckon," High-pockets agreed. "Well, go on with yore trick. From the noise them hens are makin' after you throwin' 'em off their nests, I reckon you got good eggs. I'll take a chance."

Red Smith had also heard the squawking of the enraged hens. He witnessed the barnward departure of Jerky Bill and High-pockets.

"Up to some trick to win that fust money," Red whispered.

He grinned and slipped into the stable. He hid in a near-by stall and listened in on the rehearsal.

Jerky Bill maintained that the egg-in-hand trick always drew a big laugh from the audience. A hat, he said, preferably a new hat, was borrowed from some spectator. The magician then proceeded to crack open an egg and empty it into the hat.

"The audience," Jerky said, "goes into an epidemic of laughter while the owner of the hat, figurin' said lid is now full of scrambled egg, writhes speechless in his seat."

"Writhes?" gasped High-pockets. "Why, Bill, if you bust any eggs up in a cowpoke's hat, he won't writhe. He'll rear back an' fill yuh full of lead."

Jerky Bill laughed. "The trick comes in," he concluded, "when you return the hat undamaged after pullin' an uncracked egg out of it."

High-pockets couldn't understand

the putting of an egg together after it had been cracked. But Jerky Bill explained it was a trick involving two hats and two eggs.

"You will be my confederate," he said.

"If it's all the same to you, Bill, I'd ruther dress up like a Union soldier."

"You dang fool, this ain't a costume play! A confederate is just the wise guy that helps out the boss magician. When I call for a hat, you will go back to the wall an' thar you'll pick out that fancy forty-dollar one that is the pride of Ed Jeeter's heart. Then you bring it up an' we'll git a laugh out of Ed by bustin' an egg into it."

"Ed will bust us if we ruin that lid. Ain't another like it in a hundred miles."

"You dang fool, it really won't be Ed's hat! I'll buy a cheap one looks jest like Ed's fer three dollars. Inside is a sack painted up to look like silk linin'. You will carry the second egg in yore pocket. After Ed puts his hat on the peg, you will slip back an' put the trick hat in its place."

High-pockets was vastly relieved. "Jest so you don't go to foolin' around with Ed's forty-dollar hat," he said.

Then Jerky went into rehearsal. He showed High-pockets just how to hold the trick hat and the attention of the audience while the magician deftly extracted the sack filled with scrambled egg and put a whole egg back into the lid.

Jerky proved fairly skillful with his hands for he had tossed many a flapjack and juggled plenty hot skilletts. His act convinced High-pockets that he wouldn't lose his best saddle, Sunday shirt, and California pants.

"We'll shore put it over on that

smart Red Smith," said High-pockets. "The dang fool—sayin' I was only fit to call hogs or charm snakes!"

"He wasn't so far off," said Jerky. "I'd never figure you as much of an actor."

"No," High-pockets said bitterly, "about all I kin do is ride a hoss an' pitch hay."

But like every man, High-pockets fancied that if he could develop some freakish talent, he might astound his Calico Mountain friends. There were snakes on the Plug Hat range—long, beady-eyed diamond-back rattlesnakes. High-pockets put in an entire morning trying to charm one that was coiled under a sagebrush and narrowly escaped a bite on the shin.

"I'm no snake charmer," said High-pockets, as he put a .45 slug through the rattler. "I'll jest skin this leetle pet an' use his hide fer a saddle ornament."

Returning to the ranch, he strolled past Red Smith as the latter was preparing to mount a skittish broncho. High-pockets was whistling a little tune and joggling the snakeskin to which was attached nine rattles and a button.

"Yowie!" yelled Red Smith, and grabbed his pony around the neck.

"Blaw!" coughed the cayuse, and kicked Red across the corral.

High-pockets stood staring, with the snakeskin dangling from his hand. Red picked himself up from the corral dust, unhooked a six-gun, and put a bullet between High-pockets's feet. Before the wrangler could draw iron, the tall puncher roared down on him like a bad-lands blizzard.

"I'll blow out yore heart fer that!" roared Red.

"What yuh hostile about?" shouted High-pockets.

"Scarin' me an' my hoss."

"I was jest foolin' around with this rattler's hide. I didn't know it would scare you, hearin' it."

"I—I hate rattlesnakes!" snarled Red, and his teeth chattered. "Yuh can't make a fool out o' me. I got the drop, an' I intend tuh kill yuh."

"But listen here. I was jest practicin' what you advised. I was learnin' to be a snake charmer."

"Don't beg for yore life. Git down on yore knees an' say yore prayers."

High-pockets was a peaceful man, but no gun could make him kneel. He swung from belt level, hoping to get in a lucky punch before Red's gun blasted hot lead. Red dodged the low and lined his weapon. But before he could pull trigger, a sharp command rang out:

"Hold that bullet, Red."

It was old Ed Jeeters. He had watched the gun play, then stolen up, unobserved, to balk Red's murderous attack. He prodded the tall puncher with his Colt barrel and advised him not to get so pronto with artillery around the Plug Hat.

"You may be a trick gun artist," said Ed, "but confine yore talents to the comin' show. This man here is the best hoss wrangler in Wyomin', an' I don't want him wasted."

"I was jest playin' with him," sneered Red. "He had got me throwed by a brone, account of foolin' around with a rattler's buzzer. Said he was aimin' to be a snake charmer."

Ed swung angrily on High-pockets. "You quit foolin' around snakes," he ordered sharply. "You confine yore talents to hosses an' hay. That's yore speed. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir," said High-pockets.

But he resented Red's gun play



and tall talk. Ambition speeded up his mental processes, and finally he evolved the plan that would humble the gunman, draw Plug Hat and Calico Mountain applause, and prove that he was more than a stable expert.

"Talkin' about snakes," said High-pockets to himself, "how about that locoed ol' prospector named Stiffy Jones down in Skull Sinks? Stiffy lives alone an' makes friends an' pets of all sorts of animals an' reptiles. I'll see if Stiffy has any stock on hand."

When he rode down to Stiffy's shack, the old prospector exhibited a tame prairie dog that would eat from his hand, a talking magpie, a couple of fighting tarantulas in a pickle bottle, a one-eyed hoot owl that kept down mice in the cabin, and a pet black bear that waltzed to Stiffy's singing.

"I'm short on pets right now," said the prospector. "Got a claim tuh work an' winter comin' on. But I figure soon to start tamin' me a couple gray wolves an' a Mexican mule."

"What I'm interested in," said High-pockets, "is snakes. You got any?"

"Snakes?" asked Stiffy. "Why shore."

And he took a big rattler out of his sleeve. When that wicked, writhing body came suddenly into view, High-pockets yelled and jumped up on the bunk. He yelped a second time when Stiffy picked up the snake and put it in his pocket.

"I call him Eddie," Stiffy explained. "He's harmless. Fangs jerked out. If yuh treat him right, an' whistle tunes like "The Good Ol' Summertime," he'll sit right up on his tail an' keep time to the music with his rattles."

"Yo're crazy," gasped High-pockets.

"Mebby so," said Stiffy. "But jest the same, Eddie will go into his dance when you start whistlin' that tune."

"You shore he's plumb harmless? No teeth tuh bite with?"

"I ain't crazy enough to fool around rattlers fixed up fer business."

"How much is that snake wuth?"

"I wouldn't sell him."

"I'll rent him then fer one night."

"Bring him back alive," agreed Stiffy, "an' you can use him one evenin' fer two dollars. But if you lose him, I'll shore hunt yuh up with my scattergun. I think lots of ol' Eddie. Best snake in Wyomin'."

It took nerve to handle Eddie, but High-pockets was fired up to show Red Smith and the others that he was more than a mere hay tosser.

"I'll round up a few bets," he declared, "that I win the fust prize."

He wouldn't tell his friends—not even Jerky Bill—the nature of his act. So they willingly bet the rest of their pay against High-pockets's glass-eyed pinto pony, Angora goat chaps, and silver-mounted spurs. Only Ed Jeeters was suspicious.

"You mind yore business," the old boss said. "Don't git to playin' around with any fancy ideas. Jest stick to the stable."

"Boss, this Red Smith has yuh hypnotized. You act like yuh wish him an' his friends would win all the money from me an' Jerky Bill."

"I've seen you an' Jerky performin' before," growled Ed, "an' it generally ends up by costin' me money one way or another. So I say ag'in—you stay with yore hay an' let Bill mind his pots an' pans."

## III.

The night of the Plug Hat's big show brought in the ranchers from every gumbo flat and willow patch. Old Bill worked overtime dishing out hot coffee and pie to smiling women and bright-eyed kids.

High-pockets toiled in the barn, pitching hay to a score of hungry horses. Red Smith, all togged up in purple shirt and fancy boots, greeted the men and showed them where to hang up their hats and guns. For at social occasions, it was not deemed polite for a man to wear weapons.

"I'd stow away my artillery," Red said, "but the boss has asked me to do a few gun tricks later in the evenin'. I'll show you plenty of 'em."

Of all the big wide hats that ornamented the pegs on the kitchen wall, none gleamed with such a glossy finish as the ten-gallon lid that was the pride of Ed Jeeters' heart.

While Mrs. Colinda Tootle sang "Only A Bird In A Gilded Cage," High-pockets slipped into the kitchen, took Ed's hat off the wall, and substituted the trick hat prepared by Jerky Bill with the inside sack that resembled silk lining.

And again, while Mr. Wash Waterman executed a Spanish fandango on the guitar and "Yankee Doodle" on the mouth organ simultaneously, and so successfully, that three cayuses broke away from the hitch rack, High-pockets raided the hen house and procured two strictly fresh eggs. One he placed in his hip pocket. The other he passed on to Jerky Bill for public display previous to its cracking up.

So busily engaged, High-pockets failed to note the leering grin of Red Smith and the latter's stealthy

work in the kitchen while Colinda Tootle was rendering her number.

Then old Ed Jeeters, broadly grinning, announced the appearance of "Monseer Hermoso the Great" in his egg-in-hand trick assisted by that "champeen hay tosser," Mister High-pockets Halligan.

"After this act, friends," Ed concluded. "We will witness Mister Red Smith in fancy gun work. An' then comes what will make this evenin' a howlin' success. A big surprise fer everybody." He tapped a stout black box that was located on a small table in the rear of the room.

"What's in that box, Ed?" yelled a Poison Creek rancher.

"Candy for the kids, Bill. New clothes for the wife."

"Dang small box to hold so much," said Bill.

"Hold yore hosses," laughed Ed. "It'll shore surprise you a hull lot."

It would indeed, for the box held ten thousand dollars in beef money and a large share would be passed out to these ranchers as the climax of the grand blow-out.

Then Jerky Bill, attired in black Prince Albert frock coat and with longhorn mustache waxed with bear's grease, strutted out, and in the glare of the kerosene lamps performed a few nimble card tricks. He drew plenty of applause, but the men who had bet against his act whispered that Red Smith's gunnery would take first prize.

"My confederate, Mister Halligan," said Jerky Bill, "will now procure me a hat for what I call my egg-in-hand trick. I might say this has been performed before all the crowned heads in Europe with more or less success. If any gent would loan us a hat——"

High-pockets, yellow hair slicked back, and bow legs clad in tiger-

stripe California pants, took his cue. He went to the kitchen, took down a hat, and returned to the stage. In his rear pocket was concealed the egg which he would pass to Jerky Bill. Jerky would then remove it from the trick hat after it had been supposedly scrambled and much money would accrue to Bill and High-pockets in the ensuing laughter which was expected to put the egg-in-hand trick across for first money.

Keyed up, High-pockets failed to note the man who brushed softly against him as he stepped up on the stage. He stood smiling and expectant while Jerky Bill exhibited the hat to the audience. He turned it exposing its silk lining.

"A very nice hat," explained Jerky Bill, and he grinned in a superior way under his mustache. "I will now exhibit the egg-in-hand trick."

High-pockets held the hat, with crown down, while Jerky exhibited a fresh egg.

"I will now crack this specimen of hen fruit," said Jerky, "an' bust it thus"—he did—"into said hat."

Ed Jeeters leaped up roaring. "You dang fool! That's my forty-dollar lid."

Jerky Bill laughed. "Tut-tut!" he said. "Why the excitement? So it is, Mister Jeeters. But calm yourself."

With a long stick, Jerky then proceeded to vigorously scramble the egg he had broken into Ed's hat. Three men were now clinging to the Plug Hat foreman's arms. Ed couldn't talk.

"If I was packin' a gun—" he gibbered. "Why the dang idjit—"

The audience roared. Men who had seen stage tricks before explained that Ed's rage was for nothing. Jerky would soon reach in and

extract an uncracked egg, pass back Ed's hat, undamaged, and turn the laugh on the raging foreman.

"Gosh," groaned men who had bet against Jerky, "I reckon that dang cook *will* win."

Jerky whispered to High-pockets. "Slip me the good egg while I take out this sack."

But for some seconds High-pockets had been conscious of a strange sensation in his hip pocket.

"Gosh, Bill," he answered hoarsely, "danged if the good egg ain't busted up in my pocket!"

Jerky Bill flared up. "You've ruined the act. We've lost all our money an' saddle an' pants to boot. Yuh dang idjit!"

"By gosh, Bill, somebody busted this egg on purpose. I'll bet that Red Smith—"

But now, under cover of his long frock coat, Jerky was attempting to remove the fake lining from the hat. His face turned a purple shade. A wild look came into his eyes. They fairly popped as he looked first at his confederate then down to where six men were holding Ed Jeeters in his chair.

"High-pockets," he moaned, "this trick has gone plumb haywire. Find yuh a window. Dive through it if yuh want to live!"

"Why?"

"Dang it, this here *is* Ed Jeeters's hat. An' full of scrambled egg. Hit fer the open, High-pockets!"

They hit. Both went through the same window. The hat remained on the stage. Only brute force prevented Ed Jeeters from loading his shotgun and running the magicians to death. That, and his duty as a host.

"Folks," he said, "this hat was the apple of my eye. As soon as this show is over, I aim to hunt up that cook an' wrangle an' make

'em buy me a new one or fill 'em full of lead. But fust, we'll finish the show. Our next act will display that eminent gunman, Mister Red Smith, in fast tricks with a .45 Colt. Mister Smith!"

Down in the stable, Jerky Bill was chasing High-pockets with a pitchfork.

"It was you," he raged, "who spoiled the hull act. Now we not only lose out on prize money we bet, but we got to split the breeze for Montana before ol' Ed hunts us down."

"Jerky, I swear I hung the trick hat where you told me. Some low-down skunk took it down an' put Ed's lid there. Bein' in a hurry I didn't notice."

"Then to cap everything you busted up the good egg in yore pants pocket."

"Dang it, do you think a man would bust an egg deliberate in his pocket? No! Jerky, if you'll lay down that fork an' listen to reason, I'll state that Red Smith has framed us."

"Red Smith?"

"Shore. Red's out to win that prize. He must 'a' heard us rehearsin' here in the stable. A skunk's trick, Bill."

"Mebbe so," growled Bill, and laid down the fork. "Mebbe so." Then he said: "Slip up to the house. Peek in the window an' see how Red's comin' out. I'll saddle a couple o' hosses so we can start pronto for Montana."

"Make it Canada," said High-pockets. "The farther from Ed we git, the safer we'll be."

As High-pockets slipped up to the house, he was bitter also because he had not shown his snake-charming trick. He was certain that the sight of Eddie, the pet rattler, buzzing an accompaniment to "The Good Old

Summertime" would have brought down the house.

"We'd have made this show a howlin' success," growled High-pockets.

Then he looked through the window. And his blond hair bristled at the sight of Red Smith's gun trick. He could also hear the loud and jeering laughter of the man.

"Folks," said Red, and he flourished his Colt. "I took pains to-night to see that every gent here was disarmed. I hold the only gun in the room. I can shoot out a hog's eye as easy as fallin' off a log. I will now exhibit the trick that wins fust money."

He swung on Ed Jeeters. "Open that cash box that holds the Calico Mountain beef money."

"What for?" gasped Ed.

"Because I want it. An' I hold the gun that will take it."

While men roared and women screamed, High-pockets hustled back to the stable.

"Red Smith," he gasped, "is holdin' up the joint. He's stealin' the beef money. You got a gun, Bill?"

"Dang it all. If I had I wouldn't go after him. Didn't yuh see him drive nails with that cannon?"

"But, Bill, he's stealin' money that's meant to buy candy fer kids an' new hats fer womenfolks. We can't stand fer that, Bill."

"Dang it, High-pockets, I shore wouldn't stand fer that. But all our guns is up in the house."

"Yeah," High-pockets groaned. "An' this Red Smith has hid 'em out. We can't do nothin'."

"Nothin'," groaned Bill, "except to split the breeze fer Montana."

"Canada," High-pockets corrected.

Then he sighed and shook hands



with Bill. "Jest saddle one hoss," he said.

"We can't ride double."

"Unless the trick I figure to work goes better than that egg-in-hand trick, Bill, you'll only need one hoss. I won't be with yuh. So long."

"Whar yuh goin', yut idjit?"

"Back to make this evenin' a howlin' success, if possible."

"Come back, yuh hay-headed idjit! Come back! That Red Smith will kill yuh on sight. He hates us both!"

"Don't I know it?" groaned High-pockets, and disappeared into the night.

Red Smith was menacing the stupefied audience with a six-gun, and extracting money from the black box, when High-pockets entered the room.

"Come here!" roared Red. "Yo're the hombre I'm lookin' fer."

"Why me?"

"Yo're the box-headed joker that made a bronc throw me by buzzin' a rattler's alarm signal. No man kin make a fool out o' Bitter Crick an' live long to enjoy it. Come here!"

Through the room went a sigh like the breeze before a howling blizzard. There stood the outlaw who had sought all summer to rob Calico Mountain ranges. He had failed to rustle beef on the hoof, but had won first money in the end by stealing the bank roll at gun's point. Even old Ed Jeeters was dismayed and thought no more about his ruined hat.

"He'll kill pore High-pockets," whispered Ed. "Kill him like he would a dog."

The outlaw laughed harshly. He lined his gun on the wrangler.

"Come here, yuh snake charmer!" he ordered. "Close up, so I kin see to put a bullet between yore eyes."

WW-7B

Not a person in the room breathed while High-pockets stood there, blinking his blue eyes not a foot from the dark and vengeful glare of Bitter Crick.

Then the outlaw sang:

"I'm a big he-wolf from Bitter Crick,  
An' it's my night to howl!"

The gun flipped downward. "Git down an' pray!" whooped Bitter Crick.

"I shore will!" yelled High-pockets, and flapped his arms.

Out of his right sleeve came Eddie, the pet rattler. Eddie lacked fangs, but he carried ten rattles and a button on his tail. He was working all overtime for he hadn't heard anybody whistling "The Good Old Summertime," and was therefore irritated.

At sight of the six-foot rattlesnake, Bitter Crick jumped a yard high, threw back his head, and howled like a wolf.

High-pockets dived for the outlaw's gun arm, grabbed it, hung and rattled. As did Eddie.

"Take that snake offn me!" yelled Bitter Crick.

And he slapped High-pockets along the chops with six inches of steel gun barrel.

The wrangler went down, dazed and bleary-eyed. The sharp buzz of Eddie, coiled up in the center of the floor, aroused him. He went for Bitter Crick as the outlaw seized the cash box and attempted to dive through the window.

At this stage of the Plug Hat's big blow-out, not a person remained in the room with the exception of High-pockets and Bitter Crick. The house had cleared promptly at the appearance of Eddie.

"Yuh can't steal candy money

from kids," High-pockets raged, and clung to Bitter Crick's long legs.

The outlaw whirled to put a bullet through him.

It was then that Jerky Bill, late for the act, but serving now as High-pockets' confederate, reached in through the window and knocked Bitter Crick cold with a singletree.

The prize money and outfits, won by High-pockets and Jerky, were awarded by old Ed outside the ranch house. For High-pockets was still within, whistling "The Good

Old Summertime" in an effort to coax Eddie from a hole in the floor.

Bitter Crick lay hog-tied. Ed's hat, complete with scrambled egg, had been jammed down over his ears.

"All in all," Ed Jeeters concluded, while the Calico Mountaineers cheered, "I'd say this evenin' has been a howlin' success. An' if High-pockets ever corrals that dang snake, we'll go back in an' ruin our back teeth on some of Jerky's apple pie. He's better on pie, folks, than on scramblin' eggs."



### TEXAS COLONISTS

ABOUT the year 1810, the Mexican government began to encourage immigration to Texas. It guaranteed security to foreign settlers of good character, and gave large grants of land to each family. For anything the colonists might do to bring settlers, or to improve the country, they were liberally rewarded with land.

As time went on, they had so much of it that it became embarrassing. A colonist might not have a shirt to his back, but he was sure to have deeds to a few thousand acres of land around his shack.

Many years ago, an old pioneer who had lived in Texas in the days of the early colonists was boasting and bragging of the good old times, when every man was a land owner and could walk in a straight line all day without getting outside the boundary of his own property.

"Why, sir," he chuckled, "I was once offered a league of land for a pair of worn boots."

"Do you mean to say you refused to take it?"

"Well, I didn't take it."

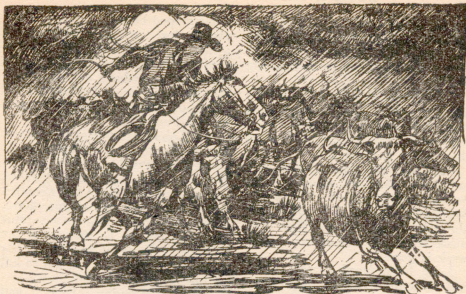
"No account land, huh?"

"Bless your heart, sir! It was the best piece of land in the whole country—grass five feet high, a clear stream of water running right through it, and an undeveloped silver mine in one corner."

"Then why in thunder didn't you make the trade?"

"Because, sir," wailed the old man regretfully, "you see, I didn't have the boots."

Leagues of land were squandered in betting on cock fights, horse racing, and other games, and were often passed in exchange for a dog, a horse, or a barrel of flour.



# The Whispering Rider's Storm Trouble

By Lee Bond

Author of "The Whispering Rider's Gun Show-down," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### A KILLER ESCAPES.

**A** GOOD, fast horse and an animal cunning that had kept him out of the clutches of the law for many long, crime-filled years were saving the life of "Lobo" Nash, border outlaw boss. The big, hairless killer was a little pale, and the left shoulder of his shirt was stained a soggy color that matched the flame of the rising sun.

Behind Lobo streamed six angry, grim-eyed riders, ranchmen and cowboys from Blue Basin, which lay just below the hills through which

the chase was leading. Nash twisted his hairless head to look back, and his evil green eyes glowed wickedly as he saw that he was at least holding his own in this mad race, if not actually gaining a little.

A bullet ripped past the rump of Lobo's fleet gray bronc, and another sang viciously above the hairless head of the killer. Lobo Nash ducked violently, snarling a frightened oath.

There was a zigzag red scar straight down the center of his hairless scalp that had been put there by a bullet from the gun of the mysterious "Whispering Rider." Bul-

lets snapping close to that evil head had proved unnerving to Lobo Nash ever since the Whispering Rider's slug had come so close to braining him.

And the bullet hole in Lobo's left shoulder that needed bandaging right now had been put there by that same Whispering Rider less than thirty minutes ago.

"Got ter ditch these blasted fools an' git this shoulder bound up!" the hairless outlaw panted. "Blast that Whisperin' Rider! I'll put a slug through his middle an' yank that mask from his face afore another week is gone."

Lobo Nash faced forward again, not bothering to fire at his pursuers. His thick lips peeled into a snarl, and that animal brain of his began working smoothly despite the pain of his wound and the grim death that hammered along behind him.

Lobo Nash turned straight toward the rising sun, knowing that his pursuers would have a mighty hard time in lining their sights against that blazing glare. Then the hairless killer was rocketing down a steep slope, grinning wolfishly as he spied a country ahead that was thickly grown with scrubby oak.

He swerved toward the closest fringe of the brush, knowing full well that he would have to travel at a slower pace. But so would the six ranchmen. And besides that, they could not see to shoot in such brush.

Lobo Nash and his border gang had been hired by a ruthless jasper who was trying to run all the smaller owners out of Blue Basin. There had been murders committed by Lobo and his bunch when they raided and burned ranches and rustled stock. Lobo needed no one to tell him what would happen if those six men back there once got their hands on him.

He gasped hoarsely, as if he could already feel the throttling pinch of a hangman's noose about his huge, corded throat. And to add to his feeling of uneasiness a bullet from his pursuers slapped through the sleeve of his shirt, bringing a snarl of pain from him.

But Lobo Nash was at the edge of the brush now, plunging into it. Stout limbs caught his clothing, ripping it. Those same limbs scratched and clawed and lashed the wounded killer until he slowed his horse, swearing in pain and anger. But strangely enough he thought of the Whispering Rider instead of the six men who were trying so hard to kill or capture him.

The Whispering Rider had jumped Lobo Nash and three other toughs at an old mine shack just at daylight. Those three tough friends of Lobo's were still there in the mine shack, stone dead.

But Lobo had managed to escape and had been racing away from the shack with the gun-swift masked man who was known as the Whispering Rider in hot pursuit when these six ranchmen bobbed up out of a draw and took after him.

"It's all the Whisperin' Rider's fault!" the killer panted, wiping crimson from his scratched face with one shirt sleeve. "But I'll git that blasted snake!" he went on after a moment. "In this bresh, I can give them fools that are after me the slip. An' I'll git that Whisperin' Rider if it takes me six months."

Lobo did give his pursuers the slip there in the brush. He came to a deep ravine that twisted down through the thick growth, jumped his horse down into the bottom of the ravine, and rode away at a fast trot. The bushes did not shake and tremble now since he was well below them, and he heard his pursuers



crashing about helplessly, trying to figure out which way he had gone.

Nash's lips peeled back in a snarling grin, and he holstered the Colt that he had carried cocked for instant use. He knew that this deep ravine would lead out of the brush close to the base of a tall ridge. He knew, too, that the time to cross that ridge would be while his pursuers were still down in the brush, where they could not see.

He spurred his horse into a lope, lying low over the saddle horn to escape branches that reached out and down toward him like gnarled arms. His shoulder was throbbing badly now, and he could feel warm, sticky moisture running down his side and back. His evil, lined face looked pale, and he felt a little shaky until he fished a pint flask from one saddle pocket and drank thirstily.

The strong whisky whipped up his lagging nerve, and Lobo was grinning in evil triumph when he quit the brush, raced his horse up a smooth slope, and dropped over a ridge. He spurred the sweaty gray into a run then, and followed the windings of the ridge until he saw a deep, blue canyon off below him.

"That blasted Whisperin' Rider killed a couple o' good men for me down in that canyon one night," the outlaw snarled. "But I reckon there's a place I can hole up there until I git this shoulder fixed."

He found a watercourse going down into the canyon and was squatting beside a deep, cold pool of water that had been gouged out of a gravelly bed by a rushing, tumbling stream. He took another long pull at the bottle, then stripped to the waist and undertook the painful job of cleansing the ugly and still-flowing flesh wound.

He poured raw whisky into the bullet hole and stood swearing in a

choked, thick voice until the burn of the stuff had lessened. Then he tore the unsoiled half of his undershirt into strips and bandaged his wound. He drew his crimson-soaked shirt back on, put his left arm in a crude sling made from his red neckerchief, and finished the whisky in the bottle.

"There's an old line shack down this canyon," Lobo muttered a little tipsily. "This hyar is Flyin' V range, which used ter belong ter Tom Vance an' his boy, Perry Vance. But Stockton an' the first bunch he hired to help him grab this range killed the Vances off an' burned their carcasses in the Flyin' V house."

Lobo Nash mounted clumsily, hiccuping as he slammed into the saddle. He reckoned that it would be safe to hole up in that Flying V line cabin since there were no Flying V cowboys to ride range.

"I'll gather some more men when I git well an' adopt them pore orphaned Flyin' V dogies," he muttered. "They're good grade an'll bring a high price down on the border."

Nash spurred his horse down the canyon, almost losing his seat when the bronc shot forward under the gouge of filed rowels. Lobo was grinning about the thought of gathering those Flying V cattle and driving them to the border.

But the grin would have faded from the half-drunken killer's thick lips had he known that the Whispering Rider had halted there on the crest of the ridge and was watching him through narrowed, smoky eyes that glowed dully through the slits of a gray silk mask.

The Whispering Rider's breath came in a choked gasp, and he blinked several times as if doubting his own eyesight. He had seen

those six ranchmen light out after Lobo and had felt sure that the wounded killer could not possibly escape. Yet there rode Nash, heading down the canyon at a good clip.

The Whispering Rider was weak and sick, for he had come out of the fight with Lobo Nash and the other three toughs with some bad wounds. Those wounds needed dressing, and the Whispering Rider's head felt strangely light.

He was sick and knew that he should ride on down to the big cave that was there below him, hidden by thick cedars. But all that the smoky-eyed masked man could think of at the moment was that Lobo Nash had escaped and would be up to other raiding and murdering stunts.

"I've got to stop him now!" the masked man croaked in a thick voice. "Got to go head that snake off an' settle with him."

He turned the big sorrel, started along the ridge. But the sorrel had made only two jolting lunges when the Whispering Rider went limp, clawed weakly at the saddle horn, then spilled sidewise to the ground.

## CHAPTER II.

### MYSTERIOUS VISITOR.

FOR three days and nights Perry Vance rolled and tossed from a burning fever, there in the big, dark cave. That fever came from the bullet wounds in Perry's lithe young body, for he was the Whispering Rider.

During those three days and nights, Perry jabbered almost incessantly. Sometimes his words were only a jumbled muttering. Other times he talked of the night the Flying V had been raided, and of how he and his father had been left in the blazing ranch house for dead.

Perry even told, in his delirium, of how his father had lived long enough to get him out of the house and back here into the hills. Tom Vance, Perry's father, had lived to do that much, then died. Perry buried his father then, and came here to this cave, where he had recovered from his own wounds and taken the justice trail after those murderous raiders.

"Alf Stockton is the leader o' them murderin' raiders!" Perry cried many times during those three days and nights. "I seen him plain the night him an' his gang shot dad an' me an' killed our cowboys. An' I've seen him a dozen times since, runnin' with Lobo Nash an' them other cutthroats he hires."

Perry would gasp out things about Sandra Stockton, Alf Stockton's pretty daughter. Sandra Stockton had promised to marry Perry Vance, and they had been planning the home they meant to build when those murderous raiders started striking in Blue Basin.

"Sandra thinks I'm dead, so I'll wear a mask as long as I stay around here," Perry gasped out once. "I'll never let her know I'm alive, for I aim to run down that daddy o' hers an' settle with him for murderin' my dad."

For the first two days and nights, Perry was like that, raving and tossing, burning with the fever. The third day he grew quieter, and there were times when it seemed that careful hands touched him, brushing over his face, throat, and arms with something damp and pleasantly cool.

It seemed, too, that some one spoke to him often in a calm, gentle voice, and that a spoon was forced into his mouth many times.

But at the time those things were no more understandable than a dream, and not until the fourth

morning did Perry Vance come to realize that there had indeed been some one there to bathe the fever from his flesh and feed and care for him.

The fever broke late the third afternoon, and Perry slipped into a sound, natural sleep. It was almost ten o'clock the following morning when he awakened, mind coming but slowly back to normal as he lay staring up at the high dome of the cave's stone ceiling.

Even as he lay there, with some vagrant thought of riding after Lobo Nash passing shadowlike across his brain, he heard the gritty scuffling of swiftly moving boots passing over the stone floor close beside him.

But the sound did not strike Perry Vance as important at the moment, and he lay with smoky eyes staring straight up, trying to untangle that thought about riding after Lobo Nash.

Then the last veil of illness vanished, and his brain sprang to full new life. He remembered coming to the canyon rim and seeing Lobo Nash riding along below him. He remembered, too, that he had started after Lobo Nash, and that things had gone black, and that he had grabbed at the saddle horn.

"But how'd I get here in my cave?" Perry gasped in a voice that sounded thin and hollow in his own ears.

He tried to sit up then, the faint echoes of those footsteps becoming really important for the first time. But he found that he was very weak, and that he could not turn about with any speed in the heavy blankets that covered him.

When he finally sat up, there were only the familiar walls of the cave and the streak of light that sliced past a shoulder of rock that hid the huge front chamber of the

cave where Snake, his sorrel, was kept. He heard the sorrel whinny a greeting and heard a friendly hand patting the sleek bronc.

"Hello, out there!" Perry called as loudly as he could. "Say, hold on a minute, friend. Come back in here, won't yuh?"

Perry's mind was rocketing back to another time when some mysterious person had come here to this cave and nursed him through sickness brought on by gunshot wounds. He was remembering, too, that that unknown friend had saved his hide one night by opening up on a bunch of hombres who were crowding him hard, about to capture him.

And that same unknown friend had brought food here to the cave many times, and grain for Snake. Those things flashed through Perry's mind while the echoes of his own voice were still in the deep cave.

Snake, the big sleek sorrel, answered with a welcoming whinny. Then booted feet were moving out there in the front room, and Perry heard the musical tinkle of spur rowels grow dim, cease.

"Come back!" he called. "Why leave like this?" But all the answer he received was an echo of his own shouting.

Shaking from weakness and nerve tension, Perry tried to crawl from his blankets. He wanted to rush out to the front of the cave and get a glimpse of that mysterious friend. But he found that he was weak, and that there were tight bandages about one hip and his side. His head felt as if he had a hat on, and he lifted one hand to discover that his head was also tightly bandaged.

He remembered getting that scalp wound, just as he remembered getting those other wounds. But at the moment those things seemed unimportant. He was staring at a bed

of blankets that had been made close to his own bed.

There were pots of food, placed so that he could reach them easily. One big pot was still steaming, and Perry caught the tantalizing odor that came from the vessel. He hitched toward it, lifted the lid, and sat staring.

"Stewed chicken, with plenty o' rich broth!" he gasped. "Say, who in blazes could that mysterious gent be?"

But Perry had racked his brain many a time for an answer to that question. The main thing right now was that pot of stewed chicken. He realized that he was ravenously hungry, and reached for a bowl and a big spoon that had been placed handily.

He devoured a bowl of the steaming broth first, then forked a big piece of tender white meat from the pot. He put the chicken down on a plate that was there to be used, and lifted a hand to rub thoughtfully at his chin.

His fingers encountered a stubble of beard, and Perry realized for the first time that he had been here for at least three days. He had been smoothly shaven the night he had been wounded. Yet here was a coarse, stiff stubble on his chin to inform him that that scrap had not been only last night, as he had naturally supposed. But once again hunger drove other thoughts from him, and Perry brought the plate with the chicken on it up into his lap.

"Whoever that hombre is who has been such a swell friend to me knew that I'd be comin' out of it this mornin'," Perry mused as he rolled and lighted a cigarette after eating. "That fire over yonder in the natural fireplace is still burnin'. That hombre cooked this chicken an' other stuff an' put it here, knowin'

I'd wake up. But why won't he let me know who he is?"

Perry finished his cigarette, still trying to think who could possibly have befriended him. His thoughts were jerked to a sudden halt by the low, nervous snorting of Snake, his big sorrel. Perry stiffened instantly, for Snake only snorted that way when he caught the scent of strange men.

Perry pulled himself out from under the blankets, remembering that Snake had not snorted at that mysterious person who had been there not long ago.

He found that he was shaky, and that his thigh and side pained when he moved. But he saw his guns and clothing lying near his bed, and reeled to where his guns were. He got the weapons out, called a low word to Snake, and weaved uncertainly out into the larger chamber. He passed the sorrel, and was soon beside the cave's entrance, a little dizzy from the short walk, but keenly alert.

"I seen smoke comin' from along in hyar some place, I tell yuh," came a voice that made Perry Vance stiffen, brought a hard gleam to his smoky eyes.

"Lobo Nash!" Perry breathed. "An' the skunk has seen the smoke comin' up out o' that natural flue o' mine. The smoke comes out plumb on top o' the bluff, though."

"Aw, come on, Lobo!" came a second voice, and Perry started more violently than he had at recognizing Lobo Nash's voice.

"Alf Stockton!" Perry gritted. "The two ring leaders o' the cut-throat pack that has been raidin' Blue Basin ranches. If I could slide out there——"

"Lobo, yuh come on hyar!" came that booming voice again.

"Jist a minute, Stockton," Lobo



Nash yelled back. "I see what looks like a hole in the bluff behind some trees up there. I'm havin' a look at that hole afore I come down."

### CHAPTER III.

#### PERRY HUBS TROUBLE.

PERRY VANCE crouched there inside the cave, his guns gripped and cocked. Sweat beaded Perry's brow, and he felt himself trembling from sheer weakness. He realized that he was in no condition for a show-down fight with Lobo Nash, yet there was no fear in his mind. He meant to wait until Lobo Nash poked his ugly head inside the cave's entrance, then sing out and start swapping lead with the hairless killer.

"Weak as I am, these guns will about jump out o' my hands when I pull the triggers," Perry gritted thinly. "But I'll make them two shots count, anyhow. Lobo Nash will likely drill me. But I'll take the ornery skunk with me if I can hold these cannons halfway steady."

He was whispering fiercely to himself, fighting those shaky nerves that were unsteady from the effects of the fever that had left him only yesterday. But an interruption came that unquestionably saved the lives of both Perry Vance and Lobo Nash.

"Lobo!" Stockton's voice bellowed up from the canyon floor. "I jist seen a rider out on top o' that bluff above yuh. Git down here, yuh fool!"

"A rider?" Lobo Nash's voice sounded much closer than it had before. "Yuh tryin' to kid me, Stockton?"

"Say, I come up here an' killed this deer for yuh so's yuh'd have meat," Stockton yelled back. "Yuh come on down an' let's go ter that

Flyin' V line shack down the canyon yonder an' git ourselves out o' sight. I seen a rider up there, I teil yuh."

"What'd the cuss look like," Lobo Nash asked, and there was uneasiness in his gritty voice.

"I couldn't tell," Stockton answered. "I jist glimpsed the crown of a hat an' the flash of a hoss's rump as that jasper rode in behind some brush. But it might be that Whisperin' Rider fer all we know."

Mention of the Whispering Rider brought an explosive oath from Lobo Nash. Then Perry heard booted feet churning away at a rapid gait. A few moments later, hoofs pounded dully, and Perry Vance leaned weakly against the wall of the cave.

"So Alf Stockton an' Lobo Nash are holin' up in that line shack o' mine down the canyon, eh?" he gritted. "Come night, I'll saddle my bronc an' ride down there."

But Perry Vance did not ride that night, nor for the five nights and four days which followed. He spent his time limping painfully up and down the cave, nerves ragged from worry. Those wounds had been deep, and the soreness of them clung stubbornly, making it impossible for Perry to do more than hobble about.

But the hobbling about gradually lessened the soreness of those bullet wounds. Perry would take his horse out to graze at night, and walk carefully about while the sorrel fed on the lush grass. He slept throughout most of each day, and ate ravenously, knowing that the food would build back his strength.

Twice during the five nights that mysterious friend left bulky packages of well-cooked food at the cave's mouth. And once there was a hastily scrawled note, warning Perry to keep close to the cave until he was fully recovered. The note

was unsigned, and the writing had very plainly been disguised.

But this was the sixth night since Perry had regained consciousness, and he was saddling Snake for the first time. Perry had shaved, and his face looked thin and pale in the light of the lantern there in the cave. But the limp was gone from his walk, and he moved with something of his old litheness, although his wounds still felt tender.

Finished with his saddling, Perry blew out the lantern and led Snake out into a night that was pitch black. Low-hanging, black clouds shut out stars and moon, and Perry could barely see the ears of his horse when he swung up into the saddle.

But he needed no light to ride by, for he knew every inch of this range land—had ridden it since he was big enough to straddle his first pony.

He turned Snake down through the cedars, struck the smoother canyon floor, and let the sorrel rack along at an easy pace. Perry's smoky eyes were puckered in the darkness, and there was a grim, hard set to his mouth.

"So Alf Stockton has Lobo Nash an' them other skunks he hires bedded down in my line camp, eh?" Perry gritted aloud. "We'll see about that, Snake."

Perry tested the twin guns that were in soft holsters at his thighs, and put Snake to a faster gait.

There was a warm feel to the night, and a silence that was almost depressing hung over the hills. Perry knew that it was about to storm, but gave the fact little thought at the time. His mind was on that line cabin down the canyon, and he kept trying to figure just what he should do when he got there.

And he was getting close now, for he was turning a bend, and caught

the pungent odor of wood smoke. Then he saw the yellow lights of the line cabin blinking ahead, and eased Snake off the trail and into thick brush.

Perry knotted the sorrel's reins, for he caught the distant rumble of thunder, and knew that the heavens might be torn by the electrical storm that was brewing before he returned. He removed his spurs, hung them over the saddle horn, then walked forward slowly, careful to make no sound.

He came to one rough wall of the cabin, moved on until he was beside a lighted window. Lifting a gray silk neckerchief up over his face, he fitted the eyelets that were cut in the cloth until he could see clearly through them. He removed his hat, and peered cautiously through one corner of the window that was slightly raised.

Thunder rumbled ominously overhead, and there was a faint stirring of the still night air. But Perry did not notice those things at the moment. He was staring through slitted, glinting eyes at a gang of hard-faced men who sat at a table, wolfing greasy food. Perry's eyes clung for a long time to a big, grizzled hombre who had his back to the window.

"Alf Stockton," Perry growled softly as he stared at the grizzled man. "So he's brought his hired killers here to hole up on my range, eh?"

Perry's eyes shifted then to Lobo Nash, who sat facing directly toward him. The red bullet scar down Lobo's hairless scalp showed plainly in the lamplight. Lobo seemed uneasy about something, for he kept craning his neck, greenish eyes rolling toward the cabin door. Perry counted six men in all at the table,

and noted that the dishes of food on the table were about empty.

"Now's my chance to settle with them snakes!" Perry thought swiftly. "While they're busy eatin' I can skin around to the front door, kick it open, an' get the drop on that whole bunch!"

Perry moved back from the window, drew his hat on tightly, and lifted both guns from their holsters in a smooth, deft motion. He noticed now that the night wind was beginning to stir restlessly, and that thunder was rumbling almost constantly overhead in an angry mutter.

He strode to the corner of the cabin and was turning around the ends of the logs that formed the corner when the first hissing bolt of lightning ripped the black night with a wicked, eerie glare. And in that glare Perry saw a gangly man there at the corner.

He saw the man's mouth open, heard the jasper's yell of anger and surprise even as the weird glare faded and a splitting roar filled the night.

Then two ominous little red eyes winked there before Perry, and the crash of twin guns came faintly through the howl of the storm that was breaking with a fury. Perry felt the thud of a bullet in the logs beside him, and felt the brief, puckering burn of another bullet that lashed across his left forearm.

Then Perry's guns bucked in his hands, just as the cannonading overhead stopped as abruptly as it had begun. Perry heard a strangled cry from the man who had been on guard there at the door. He heard wild yelps of alarm from within the cabin, and the thump of feet and slam of overturned chairs as men lunged up from the table.

Then another gun began licking

at Perry with a long red tongue from the far corner of the cabin yard, and he heard the hoarse cries of the men from inside bawling questions.

Perry fired once at the flash across the yard, then darted backward around the projecting log ends of the cabin's corner. He half whirled, then became as a man frozen. For there was a hard, round object boring his back, and a snarling, gloating voice reached his ears through a new blast of thunder.

"Hold it, yuh masked coyote!" that harsh voice called. "Make a move, an' I'll blow yuh in two!"

## CHAPTER IV.

### PERRY LISTENS IN.

PERRY VANCE knew that capture meant certain death. Those cutthroats would kill him as they had killed other Blue Basin men and be only too glad of the chance.

He thought of those things in the fraction of a second while his gun-filled hands were lifting. He knew that he could never whirl and fire a shot into that jasper behind. Yet any chance, regardless of how slim, was worth taking.

But Perry did not whirl. As his hands came up, the right suddenly flattened against his chest, then slid around his body until hand and gun were poking backward under his left armpit. Perry clamped down hard on the trigger, and threw himself hard against the log wall at the same moment.

He heard a strangled scream, felt the sting of powder blaze that burned through his shirt. But the slug had missed him, and the man who had had the drop was falling.

Perry darted away, for there were loud voices close to him, and he could hear Stockton's angry yells. Then lightning flared, and by its

greenish white glare Perry was sighted.

Guns hammered, their thunder drowned as a lightning bolt struck somewhere on the slope above the cabin. Perry felt slugs pluck at his clothing, and one tore a long slit in the brim of his hat. But Perry was weaving and dodging, heading at a run for the nearest brush.

He made the cover and the black, thundering storm struck with a yowl of wind and rain that seemed to come in solid, icy sheets. Perry shivered, slowed his pace, and spent precious moments getting his bearings.

He could hear the wild shouting of those cutthroats back there and knew that they were racing toward this brush patch.

"It was the Whisperin' Rider, all right!" Stockton's heavy voice boomed through the hiss of rain and wind.

"Yeah, an' the blasted coyote kilt Buck Ellis an' Dusty Barton both!" Lobo Nash yelled in rage. "Three men outside guardin' the cabin ter kill that feller in case he showed up. An' he kilt two o' them three an' is gittin' away."

Churning feet made soggy sounds on the already wet earth, yet Perry Vance waited until lightning flashed again, and he could get his bearings. Then he turned up the canyon, found Snake snorting and uneasy from the yells and the roar of the storm.

"Blast the luck, I should 'a' thought o' guards!" Perry growled as he took a slicker from behind the cantle of his saddle and slipped quickly into its protecting folds.

He mounted and was about to ride away when he heard the popping of brush and soggy splashing of men running off to his right.

"That skunk escaped again, Stock-

ton!" Lobo Nash's voice came in a hoarse snarl. "We may as well all git back to the cabin. I'm soaked ter the skin."

"We'd never find that slippery jasper in this storm, that's a cinch," came Stockton's rumbling answer. "But this is jist the kind of a night we've been waitin' for, Lobo. We kin raid that——"

Stockton's voice was drowned by a sudden roll of thunder. But Perry Vance had heard enough to realize that he must know more.

"So yuh snakes aim to raid some spread to-night, do yuh?" Perry snarled behind the mask that clung wetly to his face.

He slid from the saddle, knotted Snake's reins to a stouter bush, and turned back toward the cabin. Now that the storm was settling down to a steady, roaring blast, Perry could hear little.

But by the flashes of lightning that were coming at intervals he saw men moving ahead of him—dripping, hatless men who were running toward the cabin and its dry warmth.

Perry followed only when he was sure that no one else prowled about. He got back to the window through which he had peered once that night, thankful that the window was up a few inches.

He peered in, and saw seven men now, all of them glowering and sullen as they stood stiffly about, water from their soaked clothing forming muddy pools on the floor. Perry stared hard at the face of Stockton, noticing the harsh, evil lines, the twisted, snarling lips and the murderous glitter of those gray eyes.

"By gosh, Alf Stockton don't look like the same man since he turned killer an' worse," Perry breathed. "The look in his eye is different, an' his face didn't used to be warped



into a snarl like that. But I guess he changed more inside than out, to have done the things he has done lately."

Those men in there were grunting oaths now, peeling off wet clothing, digging in war bags for dry garments.

The gang stripped and dressed in dry clothing, then Lobo Nash fished a big jug from beneath a wall bunk and stalked to the table.

"Come on, yuh jaspers, an' git some o' this booze down yore gullets," the bald killer called harshly. "Yuh'll need it, fer we're makin' that raid we been plannin'."

"Yeah, this is jist the kind of a night we been prayin' for," Stockton growled, a mean, twisted grin on his face. "We can grab that big herd them blasted shoestring owners down in the Basin pooled tergether."

"It was right kind o' the fools ter round up all their cattle an' throw 'em inter one herd fer us," Lobo Nash chuckled evilly. "They'll be three-four hombres guardin' that pool herd on a night like this."

"But there's enough of us to take care o' them guards an' spook the herd besides," Stockton growled. "An' we need the money we can git fer that herd. That blasted Whisperin' Rider has made this job of ours last longer than I figured it would, an' my ready cash is runnin' low."

Cups that had held coffee a short while ago were now filled with raw whisky, and the gang drank in silence.

Out in the storm-torn night, Perry Vance stood shivering in anxiety. Where was the pooled herd of cattle belonging to those small ranchers of Blue Basin? That question tortured Perry, for unless he knew where to look for that herd

he could never warn the owners in time to stop this raid.

Perry thought of trying to lunge inside the cabin and get the drop on those seven cutthroats who were planning robbery and murder as they drank their raw whisky. But the outlaws were on edge, moving restlessly as they drank and talked. Not once did they mention the location of the herd or say anything that would give Perry Vance the slightest idea where to look for the cattle.

"We'll sneak up to the herd quiet-like," Stockton was saying now. "Remember, men, we want whoever is guardin' them cattle plenty dead so's the alarm can't be spread too quick. We'll take another drink apiece, then git goin'. After we've got the cattle run off—"

Perry waited to hear no more. He knew now that the only thing he could do was ride down into Blue Basin and warn Paul Crawford or some of the other small owners. He thought of Paul Crawford's Star 8 first, because that would be the closest place to this spot where he could sound the alarm.

Perry backed swiftly from the window, turned, and ran with flapping slicker and splashing feet through the brush and rain and wind. He found his horse, flung into the saddle, and spun Snake. He jabbed spurless heels against the sorrel's ribs, and went thundering down the canyon, knowing that the roar of wind and rumble of thunder would drown what noise his bronc made.

But Perry slowed as he passed the cabin, for the door was open, and he could see slicker-clad men filing out. The gang headed around the cabin toward the corral at back, where their horses would be handy.

"Why in blazes didn't I think o'

turnin' their saddle hosses all loose?" Perry snarled.

But it was too late now to free the horses, and Perry sent Snake on down the canyon at a stiff clip once he had gained a little distance. But dread rode the saddle with Perry Vance that night, for he realized that his chances of warning those ranchmen who had pooled their cattle into one big herd soon enough were mighty slim.

## CHAPTER V.

### TOO LATE?

THAT he was riding over wet, slippery ground at a speed that endangered his own life as well as that of his horse did not bother Perry Vance. He halted only once in that mad flight down the canyon. He drew his blowing mount in under a bluff, and by the light of matches which he struck and wedged into a crevice between two rocks, hastily printed a note on a leaf torn from a tally book he carried.

He wrapped the note carefully around a rock the size of his fist, and tied it there with a piece cut from one of his saddle strings. Perry lifted his spurs from the saddle horn, buckled them on. Then he was in the saddle and hammering down the trail once more, the note carefully tucked into a dry slicker pocket.

He came out on a long nose of ridge that hung out over the vast, rain-drenched reaches of Blue Basin. He picked a way down through brush and rock, eyes straining toward dim orange blots that showed pale and wan through the rain.

Those were the lighted windows of Paul Crawford's Star 8 ranch house, and Perry raked at Snake's wet hide with dull rowels the moment they were down in the Basin.

Perry slowed his mount to a walk,

however, when he approached one of those lighted windows a few minutes later. He had lowered the mask from his face during that wild ride down out of the hills, and the rain whipped his lean, set features now as he leaned forward in the saddle, peering into the ranch-house living room.

He could see Paul Crawford and Paul's attractive wife, Irma, sitting beside a table that held a bowl of red apples and big dish of crisp white popcorn. They were chatting, and Perry could see them smiling over some pleasant topic.

Perry drew the stone which had the note wrapped around it from his pocket, and a mirthless sort of grin came to his cold, stiff lips.

"I hate to spoil your fun, folks," Perry murmured. "An' this'll cost yuh a new windowpane, Paul. But if I'm in time yuh'll save a heap more than the price of a piece of glass."

Perry took careful aim, then gave the stone an underhand toss.

*Crash!* The rock bored through the windowpane, sending glass spraying over the floor ahead of it.

Perry saw Irma and Paul Crawford jump, saw them come to their feet, Paul whirling toward a rifle that was hung on deer horns above the fireplace. Perry whirled then and rode back a good fifty yards, for he had seen Paul Crawford heading for the door with the rifle in his hands.

The door flew open, and Crawford leaped out and sidewise, putting himself instantly beyond the beam of lamplight that spread out across the porch. Then Irma Crawford was in the door, a white slip of paper fluttering in her hand as the wind struck her.

"Paul!" the Star 8 owner's wife called shrilly, not realizing that her

husband was so close. "This is a note, Paul, from the—the Whispering Rider."

"Back out o' the light, girl!" Crawford called shrilly. "Get to one side o' the door, an' tell me what that note says."

Irma vanished. But she was there very close to the door, for Perry Vance could see one of her hands moving, and could hear her quite plainly when she spoke.

"I'll read the note to you, Paul," Irma called loudly in her excitement. "It says, 'Paul, gather all the men you can and get to wherever you and the other small owners have pooled your cattle. The raiders are about to strike, so move as fast as you possibly can. It may be too late even now!' The note is signed The Whispering Rider, Paul. Do yuh think——"

"It's a blasted trick!" Paul Crawford yelled. "So that snake wants me away from the ranch, eh? I'll show——"

"Paul, do what that note says," Perry called in a voice made hoarse by uneasiness. "This is no trick, Paul, an' if yuh don't——"

A gun flashed there in the gloom of the porch, and Perry heard the vicious snarl of a bullet even above the beat of rain and wind.

Perry shifted Snake to one side, stood up in the stirrups, and cupped both hands to his lips. "Paul, for Heaven's sake listen to me!" he yelled. "I'm tellin' the truth. This is——"

Driven to desperation by his friend's stubbornness, Perry was on the point of shouting his name. He and Paul Crawford had been friends since childhood, Paul would never once hesitate to do what that note said if he only knew the Whispering Rider's true identity. But as usual,

Perry thought of Sandra Stockton and bit his words off sharply.

"Not even Paul an' Irma must know that I am the one who made war on Alf Stockton," Perry groaned. "If I don't have to drill the murderin' snake my own self, everything will be all right. But if I have to shoot Alf Stockton——"

Lightning flared through the rain. And up on the porch Paul Crawford leveled his rifle, taking what aim he could. The rifle roared just as the light faded.

The bullet struck with a smacking sound, and Perry Vance felt his whole brain go cold as Snake shuddered, grunted in pain, and began trembling. Then the big bronc settled slowly down, and a rage that was as wicked as a lightning bolt seared the brain of Perry Vance. His chalk-white face twisted into a snarling mask, and his cold hands lifted, tore at the slicker that hid his guns.

In that moment, Perry Vance forgot that Paul Crawford was his friend, and that Paul simply did not understand things properly. All that dwelt in Perry's mind was that his faithful horse had been shot by a man who stood yonder on that porch.

Crawford's rifle blared again, and Perry heard the snap of the bullet skinning the saddle horn before him as he finally got the iron buckles of his slicker loose. Snake was still grunting, and was still settling slowly, powerful body quivering.

Perry kicked his feet free of the stirrups, ready to leap clear at any instant. Then his hands found his guns, started them up and out in a deadly flash of speed.

But at that moment Snake snorted, crow-hopped to get his balance, and began prancing and snorting. Lightning flared anew, and by

its brief glow Perry saw two ugly red streaks running down Snake's arched, wet neck. Those ugly streaks came from little black dots.

"Gosh, boy, yuh ain't hurt!" Perry gasped, his anger fading as swiftly as it had come. "Paul's bullet plowed through your hide just under the hair roots. But it almost stunned yuh, at that."

"From the sounds, I think I hit that hoss o' yores!" Paul Crawford was yelling. "I'm sorry about that, for the hoss can't help it if his master is a dirty, back-shootin' skunk. Climb off o' that bronc, yuh whisperin' polecat, an' I'll settle this man to man with yuh."

"Paul, for the love o' Mike, listen to me!" Perry shrilled into the storm, shifting Snake as he talked. "If yuh don't gather the others an' get to that herd——"

"Go jump in the crick!" Paul Crawford cut in savagely. "An' if yuh an' any o' yore thiev'in' outfit go foolin' around Horseshoe Bend an' the herd that's pooled there, yuh'll get a surprise. Men are guardin' them cattle, an' yuh'll get drilled if yuh ride even close to 'em."

"How a good, sensible girl like Irma Warner ever married a lame-brained, box-ankled range plug like yuh, Paul Crawford, I can't figure," Perry yelled in exasperation. "Go roost in a warm, dry house, yuh Missouri mule, while good, honest men get killed when them raiders strike the herd."

Perry was spurring away as he yelled, knowing Paul Crawford well enough to know that he would be whanging away with that Winchester. Perry had valuable information now, and was trying to decide what to do next.

Sycamore Creek sliced down from the hills over to the east, ran almost straight out into the center of the

Basin, then made a great, looping bend that roughly resembled a giant horseshoe. And from what Paul Crawford had yelled, Perry knew that the pool herd was being held there in that great bend.

It was a good place to hold cattle, for the deep, swift stream would keep them practically corralled. And there was heavy timber along the bottom lands where guards could put up a mighty good scrap. But on a night like this would those guards be on the alert?

That thought sent Perry's spurs gouging at Snake's flanks. And an hour later he saw that the guards certainly were not on the alert, for he spotted the dull glow of a fire that was burning there within the big bend timber.

"Them guards have got wet an' cold, an' have bunched around the fire to dry out," Perry gritted as he hammered on toward the creek. "The raiders could see that fire for a long ways, an' could drill all them guards by the light that fire will be givin'."

Lightning flared overhead, and Perry Vance gasped as if it had burned his flesh. Ahead of him, bunched in the storm, stood seven saddled horses just at the edge of the timber.

"Too late!" Perry groaned. "Stockton an' his gang are down in that timber right now, creepin' up toward that fire!"

## CHAPTER VI.

### STAMPEDE.

PERRY VANCE'S thorough knowledge of the range land gave him one faint hope that he might yet be in time to warn those guards. Here in the lower loop of the big bend which was called Horseshoe Bend from its shape,



Sycamore Creek ran swift and deep between banks that had few breaks in them. It was, Perry knew, a good quarter of a mile down the stream to the first spot where man or horse could cross without swimming.

There was that one place downstream where it could be forded at normal times. It would be waist deep if a man waded, and on a night like this, with rain water sluicing into the stream from hundreds of slopes, the water at that ford would be even deeper.

Perry swerved his racing horse past the mounts of the raiders, turning downstream toward the ford. Stockton and his men had either headed for that ford to cross on foot, or else had decided to swim the stream directly opposite the fire which the cattlemen had built.

"It'd be like Stockton an' them cutthroat gunmen o' his to swim the stream, sneak up through the timber, an' plug them guards at the herd," Perry gritted, as he strained his eyes to see the break in the heavy timber that would mark the ford.

If Stockton and the other killers had decided to swim the stream and sneak up to that log fire Perry knew that he would be too late. But if they had come down here to the ford to wade across, he might yet spoil their plans.

Snake skidded, almost fell on the wet ground as Perry neckreined him suddenly. The swaying, tossing trees had thinned here, and Perry saw by a flash of lightning that he was almost at the edge of the muddy, rolling creek. The stream was up from the pouring rain, but not high enough to be dangerous yet.

Perry dismounted at the water's edge, tested his cinches, then crawled back into the saddle and sent Snake out into the lapping

water. The sorrel snorted uneasily, but moved straight on out, stepping cautiously.

Water lapped up on Snake's sides, but Perry drew his feet clear of the stirrups, held them there until he heard his horse splashing in shallow water.

He peered intently through the howling storm, trying to pick out the flickering of that fire upstream. But Perry could see nothing, and the roaring of wind and rain in the timber would have drowned out whatever noise there might have been at the fire. Perry turned directly up the stream now, riding at a fast pace despite the fact that he could only trust to Snake to keep out of bad spots.

It seemed hours before Perry again sighted the red eye of the huge log fire through the rain-swept darkness. But his hopes soared suddenly, for there was no alarming sound coming from the camp.

He turned toward the fire, and had ridden perhaps a hundred yards when he caught the brief, rain-blurred figure of a man moving between him and the big fire. Then another blurred shape moved out there, and still another.

Perry realized with numbing horror that those men moving between him and the fire were Stockton's hirelings. He ripped the buckles loose down the front of his slicker.

Those skulking killers were a good fifty yards ahead of Perry, and getting dangerously close to the big fire that was painting the heavy tree tops above it a crimson color. Perry saw that he had but one chance left, and took it instantly.

Whipping his guns from holsters, he jammed the spurs hard into Snake's flanks, and shrilled a cowboy yell that rang through the storm. Perry's guns began hammer-

ing then, and he saw dark shadows scuttling frantically ahead of him as men were frightened into leaping upright and running for cover. Perry's guns lashed lead at those scudding shadows, but he knew that he could not hope to hit the rain-dimmed targets from the deck of a plunging horse.

"Look out, pool men!" Perry yelled wildly into the rain and wind. "The raiders are right on yuh, boys! Get back away from that fire, yuh fools, before yuh get shot down."

Perry saw tiny, dark figures scuttling about the fire like ants racing around a disturbed hill. But his attention was drawn from those figures by a sudden blare of guns in the timber ahead of him.

He dropped low over the horn of his saddle, reined Snake sharply to the right, and raced away through the trees at top speed. In the big, open timber there were few limbs low enough to reach Perry. But he had to lie straight out over the neck of his pounding mount lest he be whipped against the bole of a big cottonwood or sycamore.

He could hear a faint hammering of guns, but if slugs came his way he could not hear them for the wind and the slap of Snake's hoofs in the mud and water. But Perry was checking his horse now, swinging back toward the fire again. And as he approached he saw lances of powder flame ripping the night from four different points beyond the huge log fire.

"Uh-huh, them jaspers who were supposed to be out guardin' that pool herd have spotted Stockton's outfit an' are puttin' up a scrap," Perry gritted as he halted to reload his own powder warmed guns.

He could see spurts of orange fire staining the wet night over toward the creek, and realized that Stock-

ton and his gang were standing pat, trying to smoke the now thoroughly aroused ranchmen out of the shelter they had taken.

"Thank goodness, we made it in time, Snake," Perry breathed. "Now if I could round off over yonder an' sort o' come in behind Stockton an' them other cutthroats mebbe they could be jumped back acrost that creek in a hurry."

He holstered his guns and rode away into the night, circling almost completely around the big log fire, staying well beyond its glare. When he stopped again he was close to the creek, and could see the raiders' guns spitting from dark timber further along the creek bottom.

Perry dismounted, tied Snake to a tree bole, and trotted down through the timber on foot. He came within a dozen rods of the raiders, and as the wind died down and the rain became less furious in its hissing, Perry could hear the hoarse oaths of the badly surprised raiders.

"It was him, I tell yuh!" he heard Lobo Nash roar wildly. "I ketched sight of him when he was yellin'. It was that blasted Whisperin' Rider that warned them four skunks that was huddled at the fire yonder. But if we work it right——"

*Bra-aa-ng! Wham!* Perry sent two slugs screaming toward that wrathful voice.

Then he began thumbing the hammers of his guns swiftly, spraying a withering hail of lead into the dark timber where those raiders were crouched.

"Pour it to 'em, yuh pool men!" Perry yelled loudly. "I've got the sons under my guns from this side now!"

Lobo Nash bawled something, then dark shadows flitted briefly there in the trees. But those shad-

ows were soon beyond the reach of the fire, and Perry Vance strained his ears in vain for a sound of them.

"They're runnin', boys!" one of the guards at the camp called jubilantly. "Whoever that feller is out there in the dark that warned us, shore saved our lives."

"Hello, friend!" one of his mates called. "You, the feller who give us that warnin' an' helped rout them raiders. Come on up to camp. We'd shore like to——"

"Look!" another of the guards almost screamed. "It's our hosses, boys. Them blasted raiders are escapin' on our own hosses!"

"An' they've let the ones they didn't need out o' the rope corral!" a fourth voice roared. "Seven o' the snakes, an' three of 'em is ridin' bareback. Cut 'em down, men!"

Guns blared, and the four guards went racing clumsily through the night, yelling and shooting wildly.

But Perry Vance had heard enough to understand what had happened. Stockton and his gang, routed from the trees on this side of the fire, had circled, and come upon the rope corral where the four guards had been holding their remuda. Stockton and his crew had instantly seized the opportunity of getting horses between their knees, and had freed what brones they did not use.

And Perry's mind leaped to another thing as he raced to Snake and flung himself up into the saddle. Mounted, knowing that the four guards were utterly helpless to prevent it, Stockton and his hirelings would head straight for the unguarded pool herd.

"An' I'm one to their seven," Perry snarled into the rain that lashed his tense face. "But maybe the murderin' coyotes have had a

scare. Maybe they won't bother the herd."

But in his heart Perry knew that men like Lobo Nash and those other killers in Stockton's hire would be hard to scare. He had heard Stockton say that they needed the money they could get for the pool herd—needed it to wage further ruthless warfare against the very men whose cattle would bring in the money.

Perry was past the camp now and boring straight into the night, heading up the center of that vast horse-shoe-shaped bottom land. The wind had died to a soft whispering now, and the rain fell patteringly rather than with its former lash and hiss. And down that gentle night wind came the sound of shots, and the rumbling bellow of cattle that were already uneasy from the now breaking storm.

Perry gouged hard with his spurs, raked out his right-hand Colt, and raced madly toward the sound of shooting and the bawling of cattle. He saw powder flashes ahead now, and tried to locate the raiders by their flashing guns that were pointed at the sky. Then a last streak of lightning rippled down the night sky like a flaming whip that would lash the storm back to its earlier fury.

By the glare Perry Vance saw a great sea of cattle, surging in bug-eyed alarm this way and that, horns gleaming like polished metal. Perry saw, too, that Stockton and his hirelings were spreading along each flank of that big herd and across its rear, their guns slamming lead into the sky, slickers waving over their heads.

Then the lightning flashes paled to nothingness, and Perry heard a hoarse, ominous rumbling that was the hoofs of fear-crazed steers. The rumble grew, and the *clack-clack* of

horn on horn sharpened as the big herd got under way.

The cattle were heading straight for the open top of the horseshoe bend, where they would pass on into rugged, brush-shrouded hills within two miles.

Snake grunted, stretched out into a full run as Perry gouged again with dull rowels. Perry meant to crowd in close to the tail end of the herd, and try picking those raiders off without actually tangling with the whole mob at once.

But he was still twenty yards from the nearest rider when the lumbering sound of the running cattle took on a new note. Perry heard it, and tried in vain to peer through the black night. Then a voice lifted somewhere ahead of him, a voice that was choked with fear and rage:

"Stampede! Blast it, Stockton, these critters are out o' hand. Old Nick an' all his imps couldn't hold 'em now! An' if we mill the critters, we'll never git away with 'em!"

"Mill 'em!" Perry Vance gasped the words in a tense voice. "Say, now, if I was able to mill this herd on these snakes I'd have 'em buffaloed."

Perry swerved his mount wide of the drags and the men who rode there. He hammered on past the flank riders, heard one of them yelling something as he streaked past. Then Perry drew to the middle of the vast, tossing mass of the stampeding cattle. He passed on toward the front, then began cutting in.

The clouds were breaking up now, and a wan moon was shedding a sickly light over the wild scene. Perry Vance saw a gaunt old steer in the lead, saw slobber stringing from the brute's open mouth, saw its horned head shaking in blind rage. Then Perry was cutting in,

putting his horse directly in front of that crazed leader.

To mill a herd of stampeding cattle a cowboy gains the lead, then rides in a wide circle, gradually bringing the leaders upon the drags, making it impossible for the brutes to run any more by packing them together in a milling mass.

With the best of footing, the stunt is extremely dangerous. With the ground soggy and slippery as it was this night, Perry Vance knew that death sat the saddle with him there before that vast herd of crazed steers.

Perry's eyes became set and staring, and he felt strangely cold from head to foot. He guided his grunting, foam-flecked mount in and out of brush clumps, watching as best he could for places where Snake might trip. One misstep, and man and horse would be a shapeless, gory thing to be found after the herd had passed on into the timber.

Perry risked one glance backward, saw that the cattle were swinging to follow him. Then his eyes whipped back to the front, and as the clouds thinned before the big moon still more, he saw Stockton and the other cutthroats drop back to the drags and come pounding along.

Perry groaned inwardly, understanding perfectly what the situation was. Those raiders, expert cowboys to a man, knew that Perry would circle the leaders in upon the drags sooner or later. And when Perry did that those murderous jaspers would be waiting for him with flaming guns.

To go on meant death by a bullet when Perry brought the herd to a milling halt. To swerve Snake sharply meant throwing his horse there in front of that mad herd, for



the ground was too wet for a quick turn and a dash to one side.

Perry Vance's face was white and cold as he flung his slicker back, drew his second gun, and gripped his reins as best he could with the gun in his hand. He had made his choice—had chosen to die fighting it out with the rustlers rather than risk a quick turn to the side that would almost certainly mean a spill and death beneath hundreds of pounding hoofs.

## CHAPTER VII.

### SIX-GUN ROUND-UP.

PERRY VANCE had the huge herd in a U-shaped formation now. The clouds had thinned until the moon gave a better light. He saw that his mad race with death would soon come to a close.

Yonder, almost within gun range, were the murderous raiders, galloping after the slowing drags, waiting like wolves until their quarry came within sure reach of their six-guns. Perry located the big, powerful form of Stockton, and the hulking Lobo Nash.

"I'll shoot only at them two!" he said in a toneless whisper. "I've got to get Stockton and Nash before they mow me down. I've got to do it!"

If those grimly waiting killers thought they would have a frightened, unnerved man to deal with they were badly mistaken. Perry Vance felt ice-cold all over. A natural fear of death squeezed his heart, and he felt as if hammers were beating at his temples. But his nerves had never been steadier.

Perry knew that he could never live through a gun fight with those seven killers. But he knew just as surely that he could stay in the saddle and keep his guns steady long

enough to blast Stockton and Nash from their saddles.

And now it was time to begin pinching in, closing the open top of that U-shaped mass of seething, fear-crazed cattle.

Perry swung his horse gently in, saw that he was on the course he wanted, and let the reins fall to Snake's neck. He gripped his guns, crouched forward. His eyes caught and held on Stockton and Lobo Nash until it seemed that only those two were there.

Perry's guns lifted now, and his thumbs raked the hammers back. Then the night was split by a chorus of shrill cowboy yells, and up out of that heavy timber streamed a band of hard-riding men. Perry saw the riders coming, saw the seven raiders jerk around and begin shooting. Then the coldness suddenly flowed from Perry Vance, and he felt himself begin shaking in reaction.

Stockton and his hirelings were fleeing, shooting back at the oncoming riders as they ran angling away from the herd. Perry saw Paul Crawford leading those men who had come ripping up out of the timber, and realized in a dim sort of way that Paul had listened to his advice after all.

But there was that racing death at Perry's back to think of, and he turned his attention to the herd, pinching his side of the U-shaped herd down into a tighter coil. Then he was swinging past the lumbering drags, circling through them to start a general confusion.

The whole herd began slowing, piling up in seething knots here and there. Caught in the tightening mass, Perry kicked at horned heads and started working toward the edge as swiftly as possible.

He holstered his guns, ripped his lariat from the saddle pommel, and

began belaboring the cattle nearest him. The bawling of the steers and the sodden impact of their bodies swelled to a vast roar as the stampeding brutes found it impossible to run any more.

Then Perry was at the edge of that heaving, tossing mass, sweat streaming from his face, yet shivering at the same time. His throat felt dry, and he was gulping air into his lungs as if he were half strangled.

But there beyond the herd guns were crashing, and Perry turned to see the three raiders who had been mounted bareback quitting their horses and taking shelter in a grove of cottonwoods. And Perry saw four others vanish into thick timber, heading back down into the dark timber of Horseshoe Bend.

In the fleeting glimpse he had of them, Perry recognized two of those four fleeing riders as Stockton and Lobo Nash. He saw, too, that Paul Crawford and the men who had come with him were milling about the cottonwoods, unaware that four of the raiders were streaking it away behind a stand of timber. Perry snarled harshly, flung Snake around, and sent the lathered, blowing sorrel plunging toward the timber.

"Hey, hold on, Whisperin' Rider!" Paul Crawford's voice lifted in a loud hail. "Give me a chance to say——"

Perry heard no more, however, for he was in the thick timber, riding at a reckless pace.

"Stockton an' them other three snakes are makin' for their own mounts over acrost the creek yonder," Perry gritted. "If I can get there in time to call a show-down, I might stand a chance o' settlin' things once an' for all."

Perry hammered on, crossed the ford that was now almost deep enough to swim his horse, and

turned up the stream toward the spot where he had seen the seven saddled horses as he came across. And as he sighted the seven horses he saw four dripping men staggering up out of the creek bottom.

"The fools swum that creek!" Perry growled. "They quit them hosses they stole on the far side yonder an' swum acrost. An' now——"

Grimly Perry bored down upon the seven saddled horses. He heard yells from the dark timber across the creek, and heard the dull thunder of racing hoofs as riders hammered along over there somewhere.

But Perry forgot those riders, for he was skidding Snake to a halt, ripping the slicker from his shoulder. He flung the slicker behind him, rolled it, and tied it in place. Then he was walking his blowing horse forward, eyes watching the thicket from which those four men would soon come scrambling.

Perry plucked at the mask, brought it up over his face more out of habit than anything else. The brush was popping now, and Perry halted Snake above the steep embankment. He saw a man come into view, then another.

"That blasted Whisperin' Rider shore sp'iled things fer us ter-night, Stockton!" Lobo Nash panted as he scrambled up out of the thicket. "He—— Look out!"

Stockton, hatless, clothes clinging to him, had just topped the embankment. Elbow to elbow he and Lobo Nash came up, panting heavily. Then they were crouching, staring at the silent, masked rider who sat facing them.

The other two killers came up—a lank, bean-pole of a man and a short, thick-bodied little hombre.

"It's him!" Stockton wheezed. "Blast him, boys! If we don't them other jaspers will pinch in on us

from behind. Drill that Whisperin' snake, men!"

Perry Vance saw Stockton's big hands swoop, saw them come up with guns that glinted in the now bright moonlight. Perry's own hands blurred, brought his guns out in a winking draw. Then he thought of Sandra, and hesitated the barest fraction of a second.

A gun blared, and Perry Vance saw Stockton reel backward, dropping both guns to claw at his chest. Stockton staggered backward over the rim, and Perry heard brush crashing, then a loud splash.

The shot that had downed Stockton had come from down the creek, and Perry glanced around to see Paul Crawford, dripping from a swim in the creek, racing forward, a smoking gun in his right hand.

Then a bullet tore skin from Perry's neck, and he whipped his glance back around to see Lobo Nash crouching there, taking more careful aim.

Perry fired, sent a brace of bullets screaming at the hairless killer, saw him twist sidewise and spill over the brink of the creek bank as Stockton had done. And there was another splash that came just as Perry turned his guns on those other two tough hombres who were slinging lead at him now as they tried to crawlfish down over the embankment.

Perry saw the squatty little tough's head jerk queerly sidewise, but missed the head of that lank jasper as the fellow vanished over the rim of the creek bank.

"Set tight, Whisperin' Rider!"

Paul Crawford called hoarsely. "I got Alf Stockton, an' yuh collected Lobo Nash's pelt along with the hide o' that little pot-bellied feller. Hang an' rattle, feller, until I round up that bean-pole cuss that got away."

Perry Vance holstered his hot guns, grasped the saddle horn, and sat grinding his teeth to keep from groaning. That bean-pole hombre's last bullet had torn across his ribs, almost knocking the breath from him. He could feel sticky moisture running down his side, and felt a little sick. Paul Crawford vaulted over the rim, and Perry heard brush crackling.

"Blast it, the carcasses o' Lobo Nash an' Alf Stockton both rolled into this crick," Paul called. "But they are gone goslin's, Whispering Rider. I'll see if I can find that lanky coyote, but I reckon he's scooted plenty far by now. I'll be back up in a minute."

But Perry Vance heard no more. He turned his sorrel and headed for the hills at a gallop.

"Well, Snake, I reckon our job is done this time, an' no mistake," Perry half groaned. "I'll give Sandra time to sort o' get over the shock o' her dad's passin'. Then I'll ride out o' the hills, an' burn this mask. I didn't have to drill Alf Stockton after all, an' somehow I'm mighty glad I didn't."

Waal, it looks like the troubles o' the Blue Basin folks are all over now, with Stockton an' Nash off the range. But yuh never kin tell. So be shore ter read the next Whisperin' Rider novelette in next week's issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

# Ace Hart



1. Ace Hart had arrested "Spot-cash" Slade, owner of the Box S Ranch, on the charge of being the "big boss" of the outlaw gang. Slade said he had been framed, that the spur clew which had caused his arrest had been planted by the real boss.



2. Spot-cash's story sounded convincing to Ace. But there was no proof. "I wish we could prove that," he began. "I don't believe——" Suddenly steps sounded in the jail corridor. It was "Square-deal" Herendeen. Spot-cash swore at the man.



3. Square-deal asked Ace to come out to the office a moment. "There's three tough-looking gunmen just arrived in town," he said. "They look like trouble makers. You better keep an eye on 'em. They're over in the Silver Dollar now."



4. Leaving Square-deal at the jail, Ace strode across the dusty street. He was in no mood to be lenient with trouble makers. Spot-cash Slade's case had him worried. In spite of himself he almost believed the rancher's claim that he'd been framed.



# Loses His Man

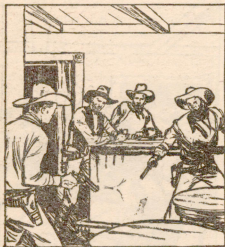


5. As Ace pushed through the swinging doors of the Silver Dollar, he saw that trouble had already started. A tough-looking hombre had a kid backed up against the bar and was threatening to drill him if he didn't take a drink of redeye.



6. Ace saw that the tough was drunk enough to carry out his threat. But the kid was game and kept refusing. "Blast yuh!" snarled the gunman, I'll blow yore mealy face plumb——"

*Bam!* Ace Hart fired.



7. As the bottle smashed in his hand, the gunman whirled, snarling oaths. The kid ran toward the back door. Ace faced the stranger grimly. For a long moment, deathly silence fell over the crowd in the Silver Dollar Saloon. Then——



8. "Yuh blasted slick-ear!" snarled the tough. "I'll larn yuh ter stick yore nose inter my business! I don't care if yuh are the law. I'll——" He whipped up his gun. Killing rage gleamed in his eyes. Then gunfire rocked the room.



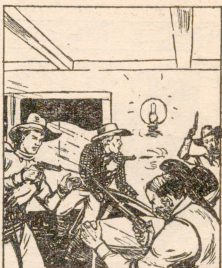
9. Ace's Colt spoke first. His bullet drove through the tough's shoulder, slamming him back and down against the bar. Ace stepped up to him. "Sorry, hombre," he clipped, "but yuh asked fer it." He didn't see another man coming up behind him.



10. Wham! A gun roared its message of destruction in the silent barroom, just before the man behind Ace Hart pulled the trigger. Arizona Ames, Ace's pard, had bought in on the scrap. He missed his aim, but made the back-shooter miss Ace Hart.



11. Ace whirled to face the man behind him. "Yuh young puppy!" growled the gunman. "I'll shore show yuh what it means ter shoot up a pard o' mine. Yuh law dawgs think yuh kin git away with anythin' jest because yuh wear a badge."



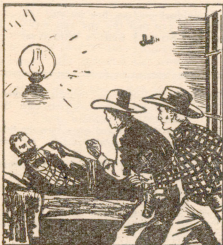
12. He chopped down with his gun. Ace fired a split second faster. Then, across the room, Arizona's gun chimed in as he cut down on the third tough who, seeing Ace drop his opponent, tried to get Ace from behind. This time, Arizona didn't miss.



13. It was a clean sweep for the law. After getting the three gunmen's wounds cared for, Ace and Arizona herded them to the jail, down the corridor, and into a cell. They weren't gentle with them. Ace was on the prod clear through.



14. Locking the door on the toughs, the two pards walked past Spot-cash Slade's cell. Ace looked in—and stopped in his tracks. "Arizona!" he gasped. "Look! In here—Spot-cash Slade's cell! He's gone!" Arizona swore in amazement.

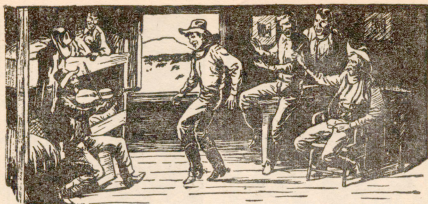


15. It was true. Not only was Spot-cash gone, but there, lying bound and gagged on the cell bunk, was Square-deal Herendeen, the town's leading citizen, whom Ace had left on guard at the jail. Square-deal was groaning and struggling.



16. "Masked men!" panted Square-deal. "They came in here while I was talking to Slade. They swarmed over me, tied me up, threw me on that cot, and then vamoosed with Slade. They didn't act like his friends—they looked like a lynch mob to me."

Next Week: "Ace Hart Stops A Lynching"



# Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is maintained in an effort to preserve old cowboy songs and frontier ballads.

If you want to find the words to some Western 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 old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

We do not send copies of songs to individual readers, but we will tell you in what issue of Wild West Weekly you can find the one you want.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

**H**OW be yuh this February day, folks?

I hope yo're thinkin' of the early beginnin's of yore country's history. Washington's Birthday ought tuh put yuh in the mood fer ol' songs. I hope yuh'll each search for some an' have good luck doin' it, too.

A rovin' cowboy who's down in the Canal Zone now has sent in a couple of old-time songs thet I know yuh'll want tuh have. The first one thet Mr. Long sends is the song called "Idaho Jack." I don't know who the author of it is, but I know yuh'll join me in thankin' him, wherever he is, fer writin' it:

## IDAHO JACK

Idaho Jack from the Salmon buttes  
Grinned up at the buckaroos workin' the  
shutes;

Feels of cinch as he jerks up the slack  
On the outlaw and man killer, Red River  
Black;

Twists on the hackamore, tightens the noose,  
Yells to the punchers, "All set, turn 'im  
— loose."

Down goes the lever and bang goes the bell,  
And out comes the cowboy a-ridin' for hell.

The crowd's up and screamin' with deafenin'  
cheers,

For they're sightin' a ride they'll remember  
for years.

Snake River Dugan leaps up and he bawls:  
"Watch that bow-legged rider from Idaho  
Falls,"

The outlaw's a killer who knows no defeat,  
But the rider's still with him and holdin' his  
seat;

His spurs rake the stallion, 'who's sunfishin'  
back,

But he don't know the rider is called Idaho  
Jack.

There's hazers and clowns with their trick  
ridin' mules;

Team ropers, pick-ups, and bull-doggin' fools;



Chuck-eaters, ranch hands, and tenderfeet  
proud,

Of the kind you meet in a rodeo crowd.  
Pens full o' cattle from the desert and range,  
A frightened bawlin' at scenes new and  
strange,

Waddies and gamblers on the dust-covered  
track

And the bets fifty-fifty on Idaho Jack.

There's yippin' an' yellin' that reaches the  
skies,

But the cowboy don't hear for there's blood  
in his eyes,

On the mad, fighting cayuse of sinew and  
bone

The rider from Idaho's holding his own;  
When a roar and a shout burst forth from  
the mob,

That starts with a cheer and ends with a sob;  
For the cinch breaks loose on Red River  
Black

And down with the saddle comes Idaho Jack.

Like a flash he's out from the hoofs below  
As the stallion strikes with a killing blow,  
Grazin' the saddle from the horn to cinch  
And he gains his life by half an inch.  
The pick-ups are ready and save his hide;  
He rolls the makin's with mouth set wide;  
Grins to the crowd as he wabbles back,  
And shakes his fist at Red River Black.

Waal, I reckon thet'll give yuh a  
mighty good picture of a rodeo if yuh've  
never been tuh one yoreself. Thar's  
nothin' so excitin' as thet first second  
when the cowboy rides out on a sun-  
fishin', wild, rangy broncho.

Folks have been askin' me fer the  
song called "Eleven Slash Eleven," which  
I published fer yuh once about two years  
ago. It jest happens that Mr. Long  
sends us his version of that song, too,  
so let's go:

### SONG OF THE ELEVEN SLASH ELEVEN

It's round up your cavvy, and it's rope out  
your pack,  
And strap your old kak well fast on his  
back;

Your foot in the stirrup and your hand on  
the horn,

You're the best durned cowboy that ever was  
born;

You land in the saddle and give a loud yell,  
For the longhorn cattle have got to take the  
hill;

You round up a bunch of dogies and take  
down the trail,  
But very first thing, you land in jail;

But the sheriff's an old puncher, and he fixes  
your bail,  
It's a durned poor country with a cowboy in  
jail.

So you round up your foreman and you hit  
him for your roll,  
For you're going to town to act a little bold.

You strap on your chaps, your spurs, and  
your gun,  
For you're going to town and have a little  
fun.

You ride a big bronc that will buck and  
prance,  
And you pull out your gun and make the  
tenderfoot dance;

You go into the gambling house a-lookin'  
kinder funny  
For you got every pocket just chock full  
of money.

You play cards with a gambler who's got a  
marked pack,  
And you walk back to the ranch with the  
saddle on your back.

Now, I've punched cattle from Texas to  
Maine,  
And I've known some cowboys by their right  
name.

No matter, though, whatever they claim,  
You'll find every dirty cuss exactly the same.

So dig in your spurs and peel your eyes to  
heaven,  
But never overlook a calf with Eleven Slash  
Eleven.

#### *Refrain:*

Singing hi yi yippy, yippy, hi yippy yea,  
Singing hi yi yippy, yippy, yea yea.

Waal, I reckon we got tuh thank Mr.  
Long all right, all right, fer sendin' us  
such a good pair o' songs. I'll be seein'  
yuh next week, an' hope yuh'll have good  
luck till then. So long!



# 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.

**W**AAL, here we go on another meet-in' o' the 3W riders. An' there's shore a good bunch of 'em on hand, too.

"Welcome ter the Corner, gents!" we exclaims. "An' all the readin' gents an' gals is plumb welcome, too."

Now let's see jest who really *is* on hand. First, there's them two young Texas Rangers, Hungry Hawkins an' Rusty Bolivar. They don't look none the worse fer their run-in with the Buzzards o' the Chisholm Trail, this week.

"But yuh ought ter see them Buzzards!" laughs little Rusty. "Them as is still above ground."

Then we sees that young hombre thet William A. Todd tells us about in "The Laugh of the Gold Ghost," Risky McKee. He's shore a capable-lookin' waddy, the kind who yuh kin bet won't be scared out by no kind o' spook—gold, silver, or any other color.

Ace Hart an' Arizona Ames is here, likewise the four waddies from Circle J—Buck Foster, Sing Lo, Billy West, an' Joe Scott. An' as usual, Buck, Joe, an' the chink are wranglin' an' arguin' about somethin'.

"By heifers, Joe Scott," Buck is sayin', "yuh am plumb loco! Yuh don't know no more about catchin' wild hosses than I does about woollies. Why, afore yuh was born, me an' another waddy, down in the Panhandle——"

"I knowed yuh was even older'n yuh look," cuts in the red-headed Joe, "an' thet's sayin' a hull lot. So yuh was chasin' broomtails afore I was born, huh? Waal, gran'pa, yuh shore——"

There ain't no need ter go inter what happens next. Let it go by jest remarkin' thet there ain't no business 'tended ter at the Corner fer fifteen minutes, at least.

Pretty soon, however, things quiet down a bit, an' we opens the mail sack. Drawin' out a letter, we reads as follers:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been a reader of your magazine for about six years. I have often wondered why people like Wally Wallington make such remarks as he did about Sonny Tabor.

Wally said Sonny was a sissy. He can't back that up. I'd like to see what kind of sissy he'd turn out to be, if he walked around the corner of his home and came face to face with Sonny.

I bet he'd plow the fields clearing out. Of course, Sonny wouldn't throw down on him. It would be a useless waste of lead to shoot such a critter.

I like all your waddies very much. I do wish, however, that you would put a few girls in some stories now and then. Remember that there really *are* girls in the West.

Here's hoping this gets printed in the Corner, for it's my second attempt to crash the

gate. The best of luck to the best magazine on the stands. Yours truly,

JEAN, OF MARYLAND.

"By heifers," we exclaims, "thet letter from Wally Wallington shore an' all did start somethin'! We figured it would, when we read it, but even us didn't figure there'd be so durned many squawks.

An' now here's the next one we comes ter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to you, and I hope it doesn't hit the wastebasket. I like all the waddies on 3W, but my favorites are Sonny Tabor and Circle J. The Deputy Death series was swell. Bring him back again soon.

I was sorry when Dogie Cantwell took a vacation. But Ace Hart, the waddy who has taken his place, is swell, too.

I wish you would print more stories about Sonny Tabor. Kid Wolf stories have been pretty scarce of late, too. Also, the Bar U twins should come around more often.

Joe Scott could knock Buck Foster right out of his mangy old fleabitten vest.

Yours till he tries it, NEIL MEYER.  
Carthage, South Dakota.

O' course, thet starts another ruckus. Buck gits up on his hind laigs an' dares Joe ter try knockin' him loose from his vest an' see how fur he gits. But Billy West horns in an' tells his two rannicky pards ter pipe down an' give the rest of us time ter hear a few letters from the readin' hembres.

So, thankin' Billy fer his help, we gits out the followin' letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading W.W.W. for over a year now, and I haven't a single kick to make. You have one swell magazine.

Like all the other readin' hembres, I have my favorites among the waddies. Here's the way I rate 'em: Sonny Tabor, the Silver Kid, Flame Burns, and Ace Hart.

Ace has not been on the spread very long, but I think he is going to turn out to be even better than Dogie Cantwell.

Your best writers are T. W. Ford, Guy L. Maynard, and Cleve Endicott.

Please print more stories about my favorite waddies. And don't forget that cowboy's vocabulary.

Yours till a sheriff catches Sonny Tabor—and keeps him, JIM MACCORMAC.

Maxton, North Carolina.

We ain't forgot that vocabulary, Jim. It'll be along some day—soon, we hope. Yuh know, it takes time ter git it tergether in sech a way thet we kin be shore it's complete—an' key-rect.

Here's the next letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I'm just an ol' cowpoke, tryin' ter see his name in print. I been readin' the W.W.W. fer quite a spell, an' it's the best magazine thet I have ever found during my forty-odd years on the Texas plains.

My favorite waddy on the 3W spread is Buck Foster. He reminds me of an old hombre I used ter work with up in the Panhandle.

Ter my way o' thinkin', Buck is the only real he-man on the spread. It was men of his caliber thet made the West what it is ter-day.

I don't blame him fer gettin' riled when thet young slick-eared pest of a Joe Scott calls him a sheep-herder. Them's fightin' words in any cattleman's language.

Next ter Buck, I like Buckaroo Jerome an' his two fightin' pards—only I ain't seen 'em in a long time. What's happened ter 'em?

Next come Bud Jones, Hungry an' Rusty, King Kolt, the Oklahoma Kid, Sonny Tabor, and the Whistlin' Kid.

Yours till you quit publishin' 3W,  
PANHANDLE SAM.  
Dallas, Texas.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" exclaims Buck Foster. "Panhandle Sam! Me ol' pard! I ain't seen nor heard o' him since I was ramroddin' ol' Slash 7 spread down there about—"

"Fifty years ago," snaps Joe Scott.

"Fifty year— No, by heifers! Blast yuh, Joe Scott! I got a notion ter 'arn yuh ter—"

"Calm yorself, Buck," we says. "Lay off till we read the next letter. Then yuh an' Joe kin finish yore argument."

Here's the next—an' last—letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: A while ago, we read a letter from L. S. of Kentucky in the Corner, and we want you to know that we are on the opposite side. We like to get one magazine without many women in it, and we have picked yours. We like it just as it is, and ask you to please keep it that way.

As to Johnny K., of New York—he said he didn't like Bullwhip Adams. Mother and I nearly exploded when we read that. It sure was a good thing he was way up in New York and not close to us.

We always look to see if Bullwhip is in the magazine when we buy it. If he is, you simply ought to see us scramble for it. I nearly always win. If he isn't in it, we are plumb disappointed.

We like the Bar U twins, Dogie Cantwell, Buck Foster, and all the Kids—Whistlin', Silver, Oklahoma, and Wolf. Of course, we like Sing Lo, too. But honestly, we like nearly all the boys and are worried if one doesn't come around to the Corner.

This is our first letter to you, but we just

had to write and tell you that we are all for Bullwhip Adams. Let us know what he says.

Yours till Bullwhip crosses the Divide,  
THE "O's."

Macon, Georgia.

Bein' as how Bullwhip ain't here this evenin', we can't tell jest what he'll say. But we do know that he'll be plumb tickled ter see that letter. An' we'll show it ter him jest as soon as we sees him ag'in. Which same, we thinks, will be in a couple o' weeks.

An' thet's all we got time fer this week. The meetin' stands adjourned till next week. Then there'll be another git ter-gether with some more o' the 3W waddies. So long, till then.

THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

### TRAIL PARDNERS

*Novelette*

By GUY L. MAYNARD

When a bunch of ornery gunmen try ter stop Flame Burns an' Billy the Kid from drivin' Ol' Man Chisholm's cows ter market, trouble pops ter the tune o' singin' six-guns.

### SONNY TABOR'S KILLER ROUND-UP

*Novelette*

By WARD M. STEVENS

The same killers—an' the law—try ter round up the young outlaw first. Then they discover their mistake, but some of 'em don't live long enough ter profit by it.

### THE WHISPERING RIDER UNMASKS

*Novelette*

By LEE BOND

His doin' same shore gives the ranchers in Blue Basin a surprise, but there's an even bigger surprise fer Perry Vance, after he shoots it out with the raiders.

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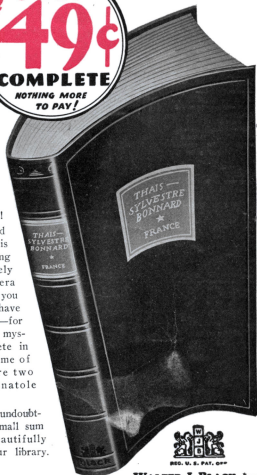
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