

STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST

WEEKLY

FEB. 13, 1937

10

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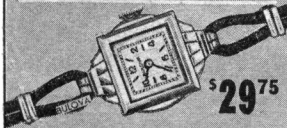
LJ-6... Perfectly matched "Queen of Hearts" engagement and wedding ring ensemble of 14K Solid White or Yellow Gold. Engagement ring is set with a fiery, genuine blue-white diamond, and the wedding ring with 3 matched diamonds. Specify gold desired, Both for only \$2.87 a month.

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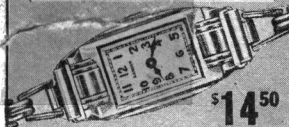


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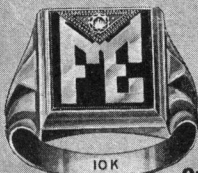


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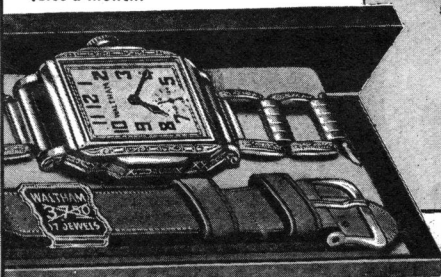


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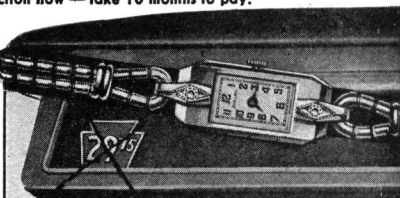
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LJ-7... Gentleman's initial ring, very attractively priced. 10K Solid Yellow Gold, set with a brilliant, genuine diamond and 2 Solid White Gold Initials on contrasting, genuine black Onyx. (Specify initials desired.) Only \$1.59 a month.



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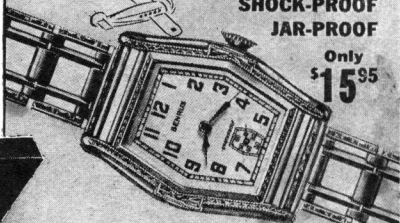
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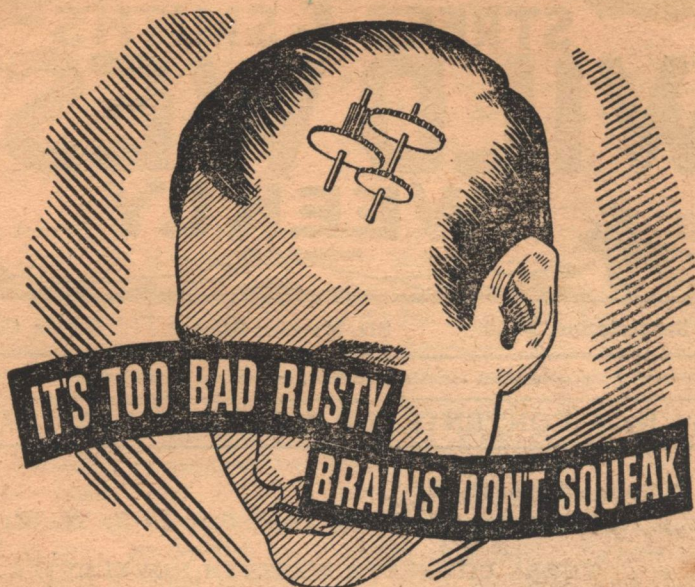
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Vol. 108, No. 5 CONTENTS FOR FEBRUARY 13, 1937 Whole No. 1791

Cover Picture—Scene from

"Sonny Tabor Smokes The Circle Tail" Painted by H. W. Scott

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

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The young outlaw is an expert at that kind o' smokin'.

Skunk Bait Lee Bond 63
It catches a whole passell o' two-legged varmints.

Pinto Shane's Murder Mortgage . . . Philip F. Deere 96
He pays it off in lead an' smoke.

FOUR COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

Killers For Ranch Guests William A. Todd 38
A fightin' waddy believes in makin' 'em feel ter home.

Dead Hombre's Silver J. Allan Dunn 51
It leads Bud Jones o' Texas up agin' a plumb slick crook.

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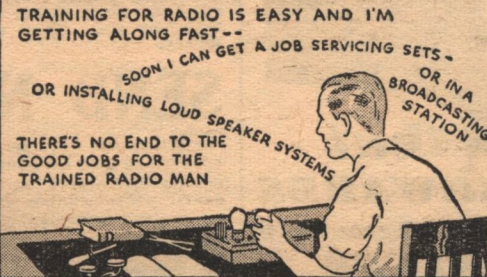
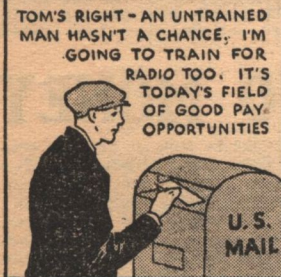
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acids from
your blood**



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Causes Many Ills

Dr. Walter R. George, many years Health Commissioner of Indianapolis, recently stated: "Most people do not realize this, but the kidneys probably are the most remarkable organs in the entire human anatomy. Their work is just as important and just as vital to good health as the work of the heart. As Health Commissioner of the City of Indianapolis for many years and as medical director for a large insurance company, I have had opportunity to observe that a surprisingly high percentage of people are de-vitalized, rundown, nervous, tired, and worn-out because of poorly functioning kidneys."

If your kidneys slow down and do not function properly and fail to remove approximately 3 pints of Acids, Poisons, and liquids from your blood every 24 hours, then there is a gradual accumulation of these Acids and Wastes, and slowly, but surely your system becomes poisoned, making you feel old before your time, rundown and worn out.

Many other troublesome and painful symptoms may be caused by poorly functioning Kidneys, such as Getting Up Nights, Nervousness, Leg Pains, Dizziness, Frequent Headaches and Colds, Rheumatic Pains, Swollen Joints, Circles Under Eyes, Backaches, Loss of Vitality, Burning, Itching, Smarting, and Acidity.

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Rastelli, famous surgeon and scientist of London, says: "Cystex" influence in aiding the treatment of sluggish kidney and bladder functions can not be over-estimated." And Dr. C. Z. Rendelle, of San Francisco, said: "I can truthfully recommend the use of Cystex," while Dr. N. G. Giannini, widely known Italian physician, stated: "I have found men and women of middle age particularly grateful for the benefits received from such medication. A feeling of many years lifted off one's age often follows the fine effects of Cystex."

And Dr. T. A. Ellis, of Toronto, Canada, has stated: "Cystex" influence in aiding the treatment of sluggish kidney and bladder functions can not be over-estimated." And Dr. C. Z. Rendelle, of San Francisco, said: "I can truthfully recommend the use of Cystex," while Dr. N. G. Giannini, widely known Italian physician, stated: "I have found men and women of middle age particularly grateful for the benefits received from such medication. A feeling of many years lifted off one's age often follows the fine effects of Cystex."

Guaranteed 8-Day Test

If you suffer from any of the conditions mentioned in this article or feel rundown, worn out, and old before your time, poorly functioning kidneys may be the real cause of your trouble. And because Cystex has given successful results in thousands of cases throughout the world after other things had failed, you should put this doctor's prescription to the test immediately, with the understanding that it must prove satisfactory in every way within 8 days, or you merely return the empty package and the full purchase price is refunded.

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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."

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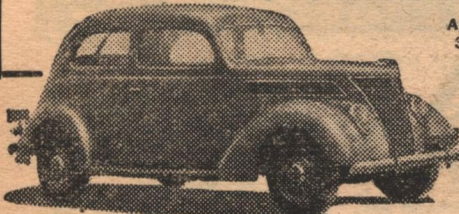
If you are tired of slaving for small pay, here's your chance to break away and make big money. You can even start in your spare time—see the business grow—have cash in your pocket—be independent. Think of the joy of being a successful business person in your own locality with big, year 'round earnings of your own. Earnings begin at once, the very first day.



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"Only six and a half months ago I started with your company without a penny to my name, and today (I just finished 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 \$20.00 clear profit. Your Happy Hustler, Hans Coordes, Nebr."



ALBERT MILLS, Pres.
3819 Monmouth Ave.,
Cincinnati, Ohio

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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



FAILURE

SUCCESS

Now look at these two men as they meet in 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?

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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 \$67.20 in a week. Mrs. H. H. Hosick, Nebr., made \$41.75 the first week. Steve Witt, Mo., made \$21.59 in a day. Albert Becker, Mich., \$100.00 in a week. George W. Creed, Ohio, \$95.00 in a week. These exceptional earning reports show the amazing money-making possibilities of my offer to you.

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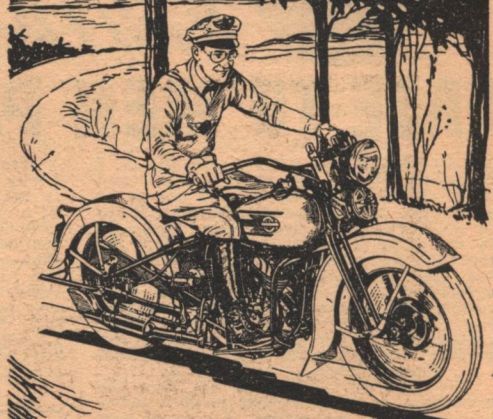
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Until I Read This Amazing Book FREE TO MEN PAST 40!

I started getting up nights. More and more often! Little by little I got other symptoms. More frequent headaches. Pains in my hips. Weak tired feeling and pain in my back. I got tired easily. Got the blues too often—I thought I was getting old too soon. I never dreamed what these symptoms indicated—until I read that amazing little book "Why Many Men Feel Old at 40." It certainly told my story. I realized my trouble might be inflammation of that vital yet little known male gland . . . the prostate.

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You Look Lovable



Visible Pimples and Blackheads, Freckles, Ugly Large Pores, Blotches and Surface Wrinkles Disappear This New, Easy Way!

Read This
Free Offer!

... and learn that what was considered impossible before—the removal of pimples, blackheads, freckles, tan, oily skin, large pores, wrinkles and other defects in the outer skin—can now be done harmlessly and economically at home in three days' time as stated by legions of men and women, young and old.

It is all explained in a new, free treatise called "BEAUTIFUL NEW SKIN IN 3 DAYS," which is being mailed absolutely free to readers of this magazine. So worry no more over your humiliating skin and complexion or signs of aging if your outer skin looks soiled and worn. Simply send your name and address to MARVO BEAUTY LABORATORIES, Dept. 381-G, No. 1700 Broadway, New York, N. Y., and you will receive this new treatise by return mail in plain wrapper, postpaid and absolutely free. If pleased tell friends.

Newly Discovered Hormone Helps Men Past 40

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"I have REDUCED MY WAIST 8 INCHES WITH THE WEIL BELT"

... writes George Bailey



"I suddenly realized that I had become a 'fat man'. The boys kidded me about my big 'paunch'."

At parties I learned that I had become a "wall flower". Nobody wanted to dance with me.

In a bathing suit... I was immense. The day I heard some children laugh at me I decided to get a Weil Belt.



What a change! I looked 3 inches slimmer at once and soon I had actually taken EIGHT INCHES off my waist... and 30 pounds off my weight!



It seemed to support the abdominal walls and keep the digestive organs in place... and best of all, I became acceptable for insurance!



I have a new enjoyment of life... I work better, eat better, play better... I didn't realize how much I was missing!

IF YOU DO NOT REDUCE YOUR WAIST THREE INCHES IN TEN DAYS

... it won't cost you a penny!



We have done this for thousands of others... we know we can do as much for you... that's why we make this unconditional offer!

THE MESSAGE-LIKE ACTION DOES IT

You will be completely comfortable and entirely unaware that its gentle pressure is working constantly while you walk, work or sit... its message-like action persistently eliminating fat with every move you make!

Many enthusiastic wearers write that the Weil Belt not only reduces fat but it also supports the abdominal walls and keeps the digestive organs in place

...and with loss of fat comes increased endurance, pep and vigor!

IMPROVES YOUR APPEARANCE

The Weil Reducing Belt will make you appear many inches slimmer at once, and in 10 short days if your waistline is not actually 3 inches smaller... 3 inches of fat gone, it won't cost you one cent!

Don't Wait. Fat is Dangerous

Insurance companies know the danger of fat accumulations. The best medical authorities warn against obesity. Don't wait any longer, act today!

SEND FOR 10 DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER

THE WEIL COMPANY, Inc. 512 Hill St., New Haven, Conn.
Gentlemen: Send me FREE, your illustrated folder describing The Weil Belt and full details of your 10 Day FREE Trial Offer.

Name

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Use Coupon or Send Name and Address on Penny Post Card

Sonny Tabor Smokes The Circle-tail

By Ward M. Stevens

Author of "Kid Wolf Blazes A Trail," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE DEATH PATROL.

SWEARING under his breath, the grizzled old teamster yanked his four plodding mules to a halt. There wasn't much else that he could have done.

Wha. are we goin' to do now, pards? Turn back?"

Two other hombres, roughly dressed and weather-beaten, came crawling out of the wagon, disgusted and angry. They were both past middle age, and had evidently experienced much hardship. Travel-



Strung across the rutted trail from one side of the narrow canyon to the other was a fence of galvanized barbed wire, bright and new, six strands high. It was stretched tight between tall cedar poles and securely anchored to the frowning cliff-sided walls of the mountain pass. The barrier glittered like silver in the hot sun of the Arizona afternoon.

"What's the matter now, Luke?" demanded a testy voice from within the dirty canvas wagon top. "Why're yuh stoppin'?"

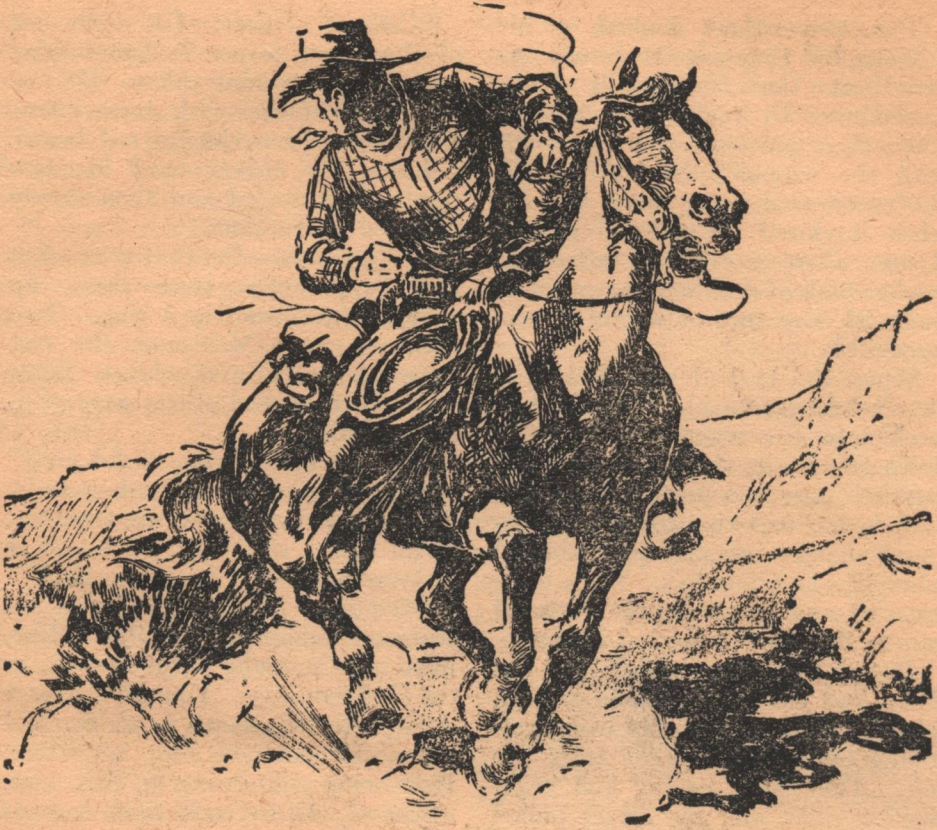
"The fence ag'in," the driver groaned. "If this ain't the limit!

stained and weary, they jumped to the ground to examine the fence and to punctuate the driver's flow of profanity with a few choice and sizzling oaths of their own.

"We *cain't* go back!" clamored one of them. "We're practic'ly out of water. Besides, I'm gittin' tired o' this. The West Arroyo Pass was blocked the same as this. It means we'd have to go way around by Tuba City. They ain't got no right to close the passes."

"Accordin' to thet sign," growled the other, "they shore think they have."

They all stared at it, a square of



new pine board on which was daubed in black paint:



RANCH
KEEP OUT! THIS MEANS YOU!

"The Circle-tail Ranch," spelled out the driver. "I've heard tell of this spread. It's a big one, all right. Fills up the hull Caliente Basin. I never knowed thet they was so touchy about folks a-crossin' it, though."

"They've got no right, I tell yuh!" one of his companions fumed again. "Even if this is their private property, they cain't block the only two passes inside o' two hundred mile.

Do they expect us to die yere without no water?"

The view from the top of the pass was tantalizing to the three wagon men. Ahead of them and below was a vast, basin-shaped valley, hemmed in on every side by towering naked peaks of volcanic stone, weirdly colored by the fires of ages past.

A violet-blue haze softened the harsh outlines of the farther mountains, while the wrinkled floor of the valley was dotted here and there by patches of dark green. Those patches meant trees and water.

"We're goin' on through, no matter what thet danged sign says!" decided one of the old men in a desperate voice. "Thar's wire cutters in the wagon, and I'm agoin' to use 'em!"

The two others looked a bit dubious, but they were too much angered at the Circle-tail's high-handedness to make any protest when their pardners went to work with the wire-snippers. After all, the ranch was going much too far when it closed the natural passes. A man afoot or even on horseback might climb over those craggy walls, but with any sort of wagon it was impossible.

When the barbed wire had been cut and dragged aside, they climbed back into the wagon and started down the grade, the mules quickening their pace to a jogging trot. The trail began to twist and zigzag between sharp ridges and queer-shaped monoliths and boulders. The wheels creaked and rumbled; the tattered canvas fluttered in the hot breeze.

But the travelers didn't get far. They had gone only a mile or two, when half a dozen riders came galloping toward the wagon from the left. They were yelling and brandishing rifles, and the driver pulled up his mules with an ejaculation of surprise and dismay.

As he did so, seven or eight other horsemen appeared on the crest of a ridge a few hundred yards to the right of the wagon. They, too, approached at a gallop.

The three wayfarers exchanged uneasy glances. Somehow, these riders didn't appear to be cow-punchers; there was something suspicious about them. They wore range clothes and rode range horses, but seemed more than usually weighted down with guns and ammunition.

Many of them wore two Colts, and most of them were armed with Winchesters as well. There was something flinty and forbidding in their bleak faces that alarmed the wagon men.

"Git out of thar! Git down out of thar, you jaspers!" commanded one of the oncoming riders. He was a burly hombre with tremendous shoulders and a shaggy red beard.

Luke, the driver, and his two pardners hesitated and then slowly followed instructions.

The gunmen—for that was what they apparently were—drew up around the wagon in a ring. Two or three were Mexicans; the rest were coarse-featured whites. Some were sneering, and others were grinning mirthlessly.

"So yuh cut the fence, did yuh?" jeered the whiskered desperado, licking a brown cigarette together. "Yuh didn't read thet signboard, I reckon. Or wa'n't it plain enough?"

"We seen it, all right," the old teamster admitted shakily. "But, mister, we're tryin' to git through to the Utah country. You got the west Arroyo closed, same as thisn, and we're danged near out o' water. How come yuh strung up thet wire, anyhow? All we want to do is cross this——"

"Who *are* you fellers?" asked another of the wagon men, speaking up in blunt defiance. "Are yuh Circle-tail rannies?"

A hoarse, hooting laugh went up from the twelve or fourteen gunmen.

"Yeah, we happenin' to be ridin' line—ridin' the dead line, so to speak," chortled the heavy-shouldered spokesman. "We're patrollin'—the death patrol, yuh might call us."

"I dunno what yuh mean," the driver of the wagon replied uneasily.

The leader of the group showed his notched and jagged teeth. "We're goin' to show yuh what we mean—and pronto."

Gun hammers and rifle mechanisms clicked sharply—the rattle of impending doom. Old Luke's mouth

came open in stupefied amazement. The two other wagon men paled.

"Yuh—yo're jist tryin' to give us a scare," the driver piped feebly. "Yo're only a-foolin'—"

"We ain't foolin' none." The spokesman's laugh was as cruel as the rasp of steel on granite.

"Fer the love of Heaven, men!" gasped the oldest of the travelers, in plaintive appeal. "Don't kill us! It'd be murder tuh—"

"We'll go back!" old Luke shrilled. "We'll go back right now."

He started to clamber back to the wagon seat, but a sweeping blow with a rifle barrel by one of the desperadoes knocked him to the ground. At the same moment, the red-bearded gunman barked a command.

Colts and Winchesters roared, sending the echoes crashing across the basin. Powder smoke swirled in a hot mist, streaked through by spitting tongues of red flame. Splinters flew from the sides of the wagon.

One of the mules, struck by a glancing bullet, lurched upward, and the team would have run away if one of the killers hadn't seized the lead animals.

Old Luke, trying to get to his feet, fell again, never more to rise. His two pardners died with him. One, killed instantly, slid forward on his face, clawing in the sand; the other, pierced by several slugs, grabbed at the spokes of the nearest wheel of the wagon, clung there for a dreadful half minute, then slowly collapsed like a bag of rags.

"Heave 'em into the wagon," said the whiskered man, with a brutal laugh. "The boss might want to look 'em over afore we throw 'em to the buzzards. Jess," he ordered one of the murderers, "you git in and drive to headquarters. Cut the dead

mule out of the harness and tie yore own hoss to the end gate. Let's be movin'."

He was just holstering his smoking Colt, when an exclamation from one of the others made him turn his ugly head with a quick jerk.

"Look, Austin! Over yonder!"

A lone rider, evidently attracted by the sound of the shots, had popped into view on the summit of a barren hogback about three hundred yards away. At that distance, it was impossible to make out his identity, but the "death patrol" could see that he was astride a black-and-white pinto cayuse. He had halted abruptly, as if sizing up the situation.

"Who in blazes——" grunted one of the Circle-tail crew.

"Never mind who he is. Git 'im!" snarled the bearded hombre, furiously roweling his black bronc with his spurs. "Bring him down!"

The whole band followed, leaving their three stiffening victims stretched out by the wagon where they had fallen. Several of them opened up with their Winchesters. The range, for rifles, was not difficult. Another tragedy, it seemed, was about to take place there on the steep slopes of Caliente Basin.

Their quarry, however, had whirled his pinto and was off like a shot. The Circle-tail band soon discovered that he was not going to be easy to bring down, or to catch.

The pinto was as wild as an antelope, and as sure of foot. Its master was an expert rider, as his pursuers quickly found out. He dropped low over his saddle horn and sent his cayuse through a series of spins that fairly dazzled the sharpshooters who were cracking away with their Winchesters. The pinto, small and wiry, waltzed and zigzagged like a cotton-tail rabbit, cutting back and forth

over the rocky and treacherous mountainside with dizzying speed.

None of the gang's bullets came near him. Within two minutes, he had increased his lead to more than a quarter of a mile, and still continued to gain. One by one, he shook off his pursuers, until only four or five remained on his trail, the whiskered man being among them.

"It's—no use!" rasped the leader, when the rider on the pinto had finally disappeared entirely. "He's made his git-away, blast 'im!"

Swearing, the last of the pursuit drew up their winded horses.

"Mebbe we'd better not tell the chief about him gittin' away from us," grunted one of the cutthroat crew. "I wonder who in blazes he was."

"Thet," snarled the whiskered hombre between clenched teeth, "is what I'd like to know!"

CHAPTER II.

A MEETING.

IN a little mountain meadow, near a tiny bubbling spring, a tall and lanky waddy was cooking his supper. The western sky was aflame with the almost terrifying splendor of an Arizona sunset; reds and yellows mingled with fiery orange, all flecked through with specks of purple clouds, while the zenith overhead was of a luminous green. Its reflection lighted the clearing with a weird glow. Gradually, however, the colors faded, and it grew dark.

There was something furtive about the movements of the lean waddy, and from time to time he rose to his feet as if listening intently. His cooking fire was so small that he could have put it out with a few flops of his shabby sombrero.

His horse, a rangy roan with a white forehead, was hobbled and grazing contentedly, but it was still saddled, and its owner could have reached it in a few strides.

The little meadow, though, was well concealed. Cliffs rose on three sides of it, and on the fourth, the view was blocked by a fringe of matted cedars. Any one who penetrated the thicket would have to make considerable noise.

As the odor of coffee began to float from the blackened can on the fire, the lanky hombre began singing to himself in a cracked and unmusical voice:

"The sheriff done got me,
Put mah guns up fo' bail,
Sho' thought they'd hang me
In the El Paso jail."

He was twenty-eight or thirty years of age, and looked like a tramp. His shirt was a ruin; his calfskin vest was split up the back, and his boots were sadly run over and shapeless. At his hip, in a russet leather holster, was a Colt .45 with a chipped stag handle.

"Crime doesn't pay, pards,
So mah luck I bewail,
Forty years the judge gave me
In the El Paso jail."

"Aftah thirty-five years, boy,
'Cause yo' look kind of pale,
We'll make yo' a trusty
In the El Paso jail."

Suddenly the song broke off. The lanky waddy, who had been crouched at his little fire, straightened to his feet, his eyes on the thicket. He had heard a crackling, the snapping of branches. The gathering darkness prevented him from seeing anything.

The tall hombre's face, covered with a little fuzz of beard, tightened strangely, and his pale-yellow eyes

half closed. With a quick motion, he reached inside his shirt, pulled a stubby gun from a hidden shoulder holster, and tossed it to the ground at the camp-fire edge. A cautious kick with his booted foot covered it from sight among the pine needles.

Then he waited, and he was not kept long in suspense. Into the little park came a rider on a black-and-white pinto pony.

"Howdy!" the lean waddy sang out. His voice was cheery, but his eyes were still narrowed to shining slits.

"Hello," replied the newcomer, slowly riding toward the fire.

The hombre on the pinto seemed to be just a kid, not much more than twenty. His youthful bronzed face was innocent and apparently trustful. One cheek was marked by a deep dimple, and his eyes were of a mild blue. A wisp of blond hair curled from the rim of his pushed-back cream-colored Stetson.

"What's chances of me waterin' my bronc, amigo?" He smiled boyishly.

"Alone, are yuh? Why, yeah, light down," the lean ranny invited cordially. "Help yoreself to some chuck. I ain't got a big variety—jist warmed-over biscuits and frijoles—but thar's plenty, and yo're welcome."

"Thanks. That coffee shore smells good."

The kid dismounted and the lanky hombre noted that he did so without once taking his eyes from his own. They were quite remarkable eyes. They seemed to look through and beyond whatever they were fixed on.

He was much better dressed than the man at the fire, though his outfit had seen much hard use. He wore a blue-and-white-checked shirt, brown leather chaps, and

small, tall-heeled Coffeyville boots. A Colt .45 was thonged low to each thigh. A two-gun man! About his trim waist were sloped two cartridge belts, the loops half filled.

The little pinto cayuse drank at the spring and then began to crop the coarse but wholesome grass that grew in patches about the clearing. The saddle, by no means new, was decorated with medallions and tiny butterflies of beaten silver.

"My name's Paso Jim," said the tall hombre with the yellow eyes.

"Glad to know yuh, Paso," replied the younger hombre agreeably. He did not, however, give his own name.

"You work fer the Circle-tail spread?" asked "Paso Jim" in a careless tone, squatting down by the fire opposite his young guest.

"I never heard of that spread," the kid said, shaking his head.

"It's in Caliente Basin, down yondah," explained Paso, jerking his thumb toward the north. He spoke with a slight Texas accent, and his humorous drawl seemed lazy and somewhat odd. "I thought I heard some shootin' down thet a way this aftahnoon."

The boyish waddy didn't change expression, but his sky-blue eyes were probing Paso Jim's yellow ones. The lean hombre took the bubbling coffee from the fire and set it in the sand to cool. His lips moved in his tuneless song:

"Says the turnkey to me, boy,
Get yo' mop and yo' pail,
'Cause we've made yo' a trusty
In the El Paso jail."

"Oh, crime doesn't pay, pards,
Pay heed to mah tale,
Or yuh'll do all yore ridin'
In the El Paso jail."

The ranny in the checkered shirt chuckled at his gangling host. It was easy to see how he had come

by the name of Paso Jim. There was something likable about the tall saddle tramp.

"Help yoreself out o' the coffee can, younker. Reckon it's cool enough by now," said Paso.

He reached down toward the edge of the fire, as if to pull the warmed beans from the coals. His hand, however, darted under the pine branches.

The dimpled youth lifted the blackened can to his lips, murmuring his thanks. He started to drink.

Then the long right arm of Paso Jim snapped upward. Clenched in his bony hand was something that glistened, blue and metallic, in the ruddy fireglow—the Colt that Paso had hidden out!

"Stretch 'em!" barked the tall hombre. "Yore name's Sonny Tabor, and I've got yuh!"

It must have been a paralyzing and terrible moment for the kid, but he didn't betray his agitation by so much as the tremble of a finger as he laid down the coffee can. He even smiled a little, smiled at those narrowed yellow eyes that were glaring into his own.

"Yuh've got me, I reckon," he said softly, as he raised his hands.

"Darn tootin', Tabor, I've got yuh," said Paso. "Turn around. If yuh make one bad move, I'll have to kill yuh. Stand still!"

Expertly, he stripped off his prisoner's gun belts with his left hand, holding the Colt muzzle against the small of the young waddy's back with his right.

"Who are yuh?" The kid's voice was quite cool.

"An Arizona Rangah," said Paso brusquely. "And yo're not denyin' who *you* are."

"I'm Sonny Tabor," the young ranny admitted.

Paso showed his long white teeth

in a not particularly pleasant grin.

"The most 'wanted' outlaw in the Southwest, eh? I reco'nized yuh from the first, Tabor. Didn't know I was goin' to be so lucky to-night. It's jist too bad fer yuh. I've been carryin' yore description in mah head fer the last two years. Yuh answered to it, even to thet bullet crease in yore cheek thet looks so much like a baby dimple." The Ranger jerked his head toward the grazing pinto. "I even knowed thet cayuse." He grinned.

"I suppose yo're goin' to take me over to Las Tablas," said the outlaw resignedly.

"To town? Not much, I ain't!" grunted Paso. "I didn't happen to be hereabouts on the lookout fer you, Tabor. I got othah work to do, and yo're goin' to help me do it."

"Meanin'?" Sonny Tabor shrugged slightly.

"Meanin' thet yuh lied when yuh said yuh wasn't with the Circle-tail outfit," accused Paso Jim. "An outlaw like you not in with thet gang o' killers? Think I was born yisterday? Yo're goin' to lead me to their headquarters, Tabor, and to-night!"

CHAPTER III.

AMBUSHED!

AT moonup, a couple of hours later, Sonny Tabor and the Ranger left the little mountain meadow, bound for Caliente Basin. Sonny Tabor was astride his own pinto, and Paso Jim rode a few yards behind him on his roan. The outlaw's gun belts were draped across the Ranger's saddle pommel.

"Remember, now," Paso warned coldly, "I'll shoot yuh, and shoot to kill, if yuh try and make a break fer it. I won't miss."

Sonny had tried to tell the Ranger that he had nothing to do

with the mysterious Circle-tail Ranch, but Paso had refused to listen. The outlaw told of seeing the murder committed near the pass, explained how he had been pursued by the killers, but he might just as well have spoken to a stone wall.

"I don't doubt thet thar was a murdah," growled the officer, "but if so, kid, yuh was a party to it. Let's move along. I've been sent up yere to see what's at the bottom of this trouble, and I sho' aim to find out. Lead me to yore pards, and I'll do the rest!"

"Not much yuh can do," Sonny told him grimly. "There's thirteen-fourteen men in the bunch that I saw."

"What are yuh tryin' to do—skeer me out by such fool talk?" the Ranger scoffed. "If theah's more than five or six of you Circle-tail gunnies, I'll put in with yuh. And with you as a hostage, Tabor, I'll git the rest. All I'll have to do is tell 'em I'll kill *you* if they open fire. Fer yore sake, thar'd better not be no shootin'."

"Yo're makin' a big mistake; that's all I can say," the outlaw muttered as he guided his pinto out of the clearing. "Those rattlers are no friends of mine."

Sonny Tabor was, of course, telling the truth. He was an outlaw with a "dead-or-alive" price on his youthful head, but he was a lone wolf, and never cast his lot with gangs, especially with such a gang as the Circle-tail killers. Fugitive from justice though he was, he had no sympathy for murderers. The butchery that he had accidentally seen that afternoon had sickened him.

And what was he to do now? He had no idea of where to find the gang's headquarters. This was a stretch of country new to him. All

he could possibly do, it seemed, was to go ahead into Caliente Basin and trust to luck—luck that would almost certainly be bad. Paso's bull-headedness would probably end in getting them both killed.

It took them a good hour to descend to the floor of the great circular valley, for Paso kept the pace down to one not much faster than a walk. The moon was very bright; each clump of mesquite, swaying gently in the night wind, was sharp and distinct; the mountains that rimmed the vast bowl loomed like icebergs against a sky of star-sprinkled ebony. From somewhere in the distance, a coyote yapped hungrily.

"I'm tellin' yuh again, Ranger, that I don't know where I'm goin' any more than you do," said the outlaw.

"Never mind the talk," sniffed Paso Jim. "Ride on!"

Sonny Tabor ran his hand through the mane of Paint, his faithful little bronc. Even Paint seemed to realize that something was seriously wrong, and once or twice he snorted uneasily.

As the dead of night approached, the air became stinging cold. Paso Jim began to sing again in his cracked, unmelodious voice:

"Aftah thirty-five years, boy,
'Cause yo' look kind of pale,
We'll make yo' a trusty
In the El Paso jail."

It was a good forty miles across the Caliente. What had seemed an almost level floor from the heights above now became a tricky and uneven bottom land, cut by many arroyos and dry washes. Sand dunes alternated with freak rock formations. Once, they crossed a wide field of volcanic ash, where nothing whatever grew, and where the steel

shoes of their broncs clinked and rang against the clinkers and lava.

"How did yuh happen to be sent here, Ranger?" Sonny asked. "What's wrong on the Circle-tail?"

"Folks have been disappearin', thet's all," grunted Paso. "Hombres have started acrost the Caliente recently and ain't never been heard from ag'in. I'm yere to investigate. But you know what's goin' on yere better'n I do, Tabor, so why play innocent?"

It was useless to argue, so the outlaw remained silent. His mind, though, was busy, and occupied with something more than his own troubles, which were serious enough. He himself was in the hands of the law, and for him, that meant the hangman's noose. The mystery of the Circle-tail, however, perplexed him more than his own plight.

Finally, the eastern sky began to pale with approaching dawn. The lesser stars faded, and presently a delicate pink glow heralded the returning sun. A jack rabbit shuttled through the creosotes and went bobbing into the distance.

Sonny began to see cattle; the basin seemed thick with them. They passed close enough to some of the bunches for the outlaw to make out some of the brands. Strangely enough, he saw few of the Circle-tail burns, although he saw Diamond 7s, a Turkey Track, a J Bar Connected, an Hourglass, and a Triple 8. It appeared to Sonny Tabor that the Circle-tail was a receiving ground for rustling on a gigantic scale.

Paso Jim's eyes, too, were busy. "So this is the game, is it, Tabor?" he laughed dryly. "Who's the kingpin of yore outfit?"

Sonny could only shrug his shoulders wearily. It was no use trying to talk to the Ranger.

"What gits me," growled Paso, "is

thet the owner of this spread is supposed to be an honest and respected man. Frank O'Hara, his name is, and he's been runnin' an honest cattle business hereabouts fer thirty years. I never met him myself, but he's allus been spoken well of. Hey, you, Tabor!" he sang out sharply. "What's the matter with yuh? If yo're aimin' to try an'——"

They had been following the course of a steep-sided, winding barranca, or small canyon, but the outlaw had suddenly turned sharply away from it. His eyes were fixed intently on a prickly-pear-dotted ridge ahead.

"There's trouble ahead, Paso," said the outlaw in a low voice. "Paint smells it, and Paint's hard to fool. When I saw him lay back his ears——"

"No stallin', Tabor!" barked the Ranger, rolling back the hammer of his drawn gun. "Yo're goin' straight ahead. And remember, I'm a-watchin' yuh."

The Ranger should have been watching something else, was Sonny's thought. He had no choice, however, but to go ahead. An icy chill passed down his spine. It was bad enough to be dry-gulched, but to be forced to ride right on into an ambush unarmed was——

It happened—just as they came alongside the outjutting ridge! Eight-nine riders came sweeping out from thir hiding place with drawn guns. Among them was the shaggy-bearded desperado.

"Keep back, you men!" yelled the Ranger, after an amazed gasp. "Back, or I'll kill yore pard!" His gun was on Sonny Tabor.

The Circle-tail gunmen, however, kept coming. It looked like the finish!

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN IN THE MASK.

SONNY TABOR would have roweled his pinto and made a break for it if he could, but he had no chance. At any moment, he expected to feel the pang of hot lead, either from the Ranger's gun or the guns of the gang. Before either happened, however, Paint's bridle was caught up by one of the Circle-tail killers.

"Our pard?" bellowed the whiskered ruffian contemptuously. "He ain't our pard! You git up yore mitts, feller!" he yelled at the Ranger.

Paso Jim's lean face showed its bewilderment. He saw that he had no choice but to surrender. Nine men had their Colts and Winchester leveled at him. He was no coward, but he was sensible enough to raise his hands.

"Well, well!" rumbled the copper-bearded hombre, his evil glance passing from Sonny to the Ranger and back to the outlaw once more. "Danged if it ain't thet trail-burnin' pinto rider ag'in! Git his guns, men!"

"He ain't got none," announced a weasel-faced gunman. "But thar's en extry pair hangin' from this other hombre's saddle horn."

"Thar's somethin' queer about this," mused the red-bearded giant. "Who in blazes are you jaspers, and what are yuh doin' in the basin?"

"Let's give 'em the works, Austin, and git it over," grated one of the gang before either the outlaw or the Ranger could answer. "I don't keer who gits the roan, but I want the pinto. What are we waitin' on, Mike?"

Mike Austin—the bearded desperado—shook his head. "No, we'd better take 'em to the chief and let

him question 'em. Tie their hands behind 'em."

While their wrists were being securely bound with lariat rope, Sonny exchanged a glance with Paso Jim. The Ranger managed a faint and wondering grin.

"I should've listened to yuh, kid," he admitted.

The gang gathered close around the two prisoners, and the party started on at a trot. Although Sonny Tabor's picture and description had been on many a reward poster, none of the gang had recognized, in this smiling youth, the most "wanted" outlaw in the Southwest. But then, Sonny's innocent blue eyes and boyish manner were always deceiving.

As they rode on, Sonny noticed that a bank of sullen dark clouds was rolling up to obscure the rising sun. The wind had died down, and it was oppressively still. A storm was brewing.

Without being aware of it, Sonny had come within a few miles of the gang's headquarters, for at the top of the next rise, he made out the ranch house toward which the bleak-faced party was heading. He eyed it curiously as they approached.

The layout was much like that of any other large ranch, and looked innocent enough. The yard and corrals covered some five acres, but the house itself—a long, white-painted frame, with a porch the full length—was rather small. On one side was a high fence of closely woven ocotillo, and on the other a square pond shaded by cottonwoods.

"Ride on ahead, Blue, and tell the chief thet we got a couple of prisoners," Mike Austin ordered one of the Circle-tail crew.

As the rest of them drew up alongside the house, a few minutes later, the door swung open, and a tall,

powerfully built hombre stepped out onto the porch, or gallery. His face was carefully masked by a red bandanna in which eyeholes had been cut.

From the way he carried himself, Sonny judged that he was about forty. He wore a wide belt, decorated with Navajo silverwork, and expensive chaparajos.

"Good work, Austin," he cracked out in a sharp, hard voice. "Bring 'em up yere on the porch, and we'll hold court."

Sonny and Paso Jim, their arms still bound behind them, were taken from their broncs and marched up on the gallery. The other desperadoes gathered close around, leaving their horses standing. They had snickered at their leader's mention of "court."

"When we picked 'em up, boss," Austin explained, "this tall crow-bait had the young kid's guns. I cain't savvy it."

The glittering eyes behind the mask probed the two captives like steel drills. The air was oppressively still, and it was darker now than it had been before sunrise. The storm would soon break over the basin.

The rustler leader's evil glance passed from Sonny to Paso Jim. He pointed with an accusing forefinger, and as he did so, Sonny noticed that his hands were covered with warts.

"Yo're a Ranger!" he snarled at Paso.

Paso thrust out his bony jaw defiantly. "Yes, I'm a Rangah, and proud of it. Not ashamed to show mah face, eithah, like you are!"

"Yo're goin' to be shot in about two minutes," sneered the masked man, "and then we'll see what yore face will look like, Mr. Ranger. Well, young un," he rasped at Sonny, "who are you?"

"My name," said the outlaw quietly, "is Sonny Tabor."

The masked hombre stiffened and took a step backward in his surprise. The other desperadoes, some on the porch and some standing on the ground, gave gasps of amazement and disbelief. The name "Tabor" was well known throughout Arizona.

"Yuh mean thet yuh—yo're the hombre thet's been makin' monkeys out o' the law fer so long?" cried the rustler chief. "Untie his hands, men!"

While one of the desperadoes unknotted Sonny's bonds, the masked hombre laughed in uproarious amusement.

"Welcome to Circle-tail, Tabor!" he roared. "Why didn't yuh say who yuh was, in the fust place? I kin use a gunny like you, young un! From what I hear, yo're plenty fast with a pair o' hawglegs, and them's the kind of men I need yere."

Sonny's face had whitened under its tan, and his eyes, no longer so boyishly mild, took on a frosty tinge. The thought that these ruthless killers took him for a professional murderer like themselves made his pulses gallop with fury.

His hands were free now, and they itched for the masked man's throat. He knew that a few fawning words on his part would save his life, but he'd rather die than speak them. There was nothing of the sneak in his make-up. What could he do, though, against ten armed men? And how could he save the Ranger from being shot? Those questions raced through his mind like an electric current.

"Yuh'll join up with my outfit, Tabor?" demanded the masked unknown man.

Sonny had noticed that the ranch-house door, scarcely a stride away

from him, was half open. As quick as thought, he acted!

"No, yuh low-down skunks!"

He seized Paso Jim by the slack of the shirt, and leaping toward the door, he yanked the Ranger in after him. Kicking out like a flash, he slammed the door shut and dropped the heavy bar in place before the flabbergasted gang realized what was taking place.

CHAPTER V.

RANGER'S LAST TRAIL.

THERE were two rooms in the house, the kitchen—where Sonny now found himself—and the long bunk room beyond. There were no other doors to defend.

This door, which the outlaw had taken advantage of so unexpectedly, had recently been reënforced by plates of boiler iron. Sonny noticed, too, that loopholes had been cut through the walls at several points, and that the window shutters had also been plated with iron on the inside. The ranch house had lately been made over into a stronghold.

All this he saw at a glance, even before the loud bellow of fury and astonishment had gone up from the rustlers on the outside.

Paso Jim was almost as amazed at Sonny's action as the Circle-tail gunmen were. His yellow eyes were bulging like marbles, and his mouth was agape.

"What the——"

In the middle of the kitchen was a dirty, half-cleared table covered with unclean tin plates, morsels of food, cigarette stubs, playing cards, and a whisky bottle. Sonny snatched a knife from among the débris, and with one stroke cut Paso free of the rope that bound his arms.

"We'll have to fight for it, amigo!"

the outlaw panted. "If we can find guns——"

"Gee! I had yuh wrong, Sonny," Paso gasped. "Golly, I——"

Kicks and blows were sounding furiously on the heavy door, but it held securely. The rustlers were all yelling and clamoring profanely. Among the voices was that of the masked leader, insane with rage.

"Open thet door, blast yuh, or we'll——"

"Keep low, Paso!" Sonny warned.

As he expected, the Circle-tail crew began shooting. The frame walls of the house were not thick enough to stop lead, and bullets started coming in like angry bumblebees.

Sonny dived into the sleeping quarters and reappeared again with what he'd hoped for—guns. There were several Colt .45s among the soiled clothing, blankets, and gear, as well as a Winchester .45-70 and a ten-bore double-barreled shotgun. They lost no time in returning the gang's fire.

"Let's give 'em blazes, Sonny!"

Paso began working the rifle like an alarm clock, jerking the loading lever up and down with the regularity of a machine. Smoke, stinging and acrid, began to fill the house like a blue-gray fog. Armed with a pair of .45s, Sonny Tabor bared his teeth and swept the porch clean.

He dropped two men on the sagging boards of the gallery. Paso accounted for another, sending his victim tumbling over the low rail to the ground. The two defenders meant to sell their lives dearly at any rate!

They had one advantage, anyhow. They had the shelter of the house, slight though it was, and could shift from loophole to loophole. Their hot fire had driven the desperadoes to a respectful distance from the

house and had forced them to take refuge behind the near-by buildings and the embankment by the pond.

The desperadoes, however, sent volley after volley crashing through the ranch house. The slugs ripped through with a deadly *z-z-z-z-zring*, occasionally with a deeper *b-r-r-r-r* that meant the bullets were glancing end over end. Those were the most dangerous of all; half spent, the wound they might inflict could be terrible. In another gun fight, Sonny had once seen a man's entire jaw torn away by such a bullet.

Both he and Paso fought coolly and systematically. The lanky Ranger's eyes shone through the smoke like yellow topaz. Unable to find more .45-70 ammunition, he was using one of the Colts now.

During a short lull in the shooting, Sonny heard the masked leader shouting orders, then the sounds of a galloping bronc going away.

"He's sent for the rest of his men—reënforcements," said Sonny grimly. "There's half a dozen more, Paso, just as I told yuh."

"We're sunk, then, I reckon." The Ranger grinned mirthlessly. "But we're agoin' to give a good account of ourselves, me and you, Sonny!" And Paso lifted his unmusical voice in his favorite ditty:

"Oh, the coffee's sho' bittah,
And the bread it is stale,
Yo' don't eat chicken pie
In the El Paso jail.

"Mah gal brought a file,
And a tenpenny nail,
But I couldn't bust out
Of the El Paso jail."

A bullet burned its way through Sonny's checkered shirt, just grazing his ribs. Firing in return, he sent a brace of slugs toward the spot from which the missile had come. One of them, at least, took good ef-

fect, for he heard a shriek of agony from behind the tool house, fifty yards away.

Another hail of lead swept the shack. Some of it glanced viciously from the iron of the door and window shutters; some droned through the splintering walls. A tin kettle on the stove sprang into the air like a thing alive. A long splinter of wood struck Sonny in the neck, and for a moment he thought he'd been seriously hurt. Paso was still singing—and shooting.

Sonny hurriedly searched the next room for ammunition, but although he ransacked the place desperately, he could find no more. Not many rounds remained now between him and Paso. They couldn't hold off the rustler crew much longer, and when those reënforcements arrived, there wouldn't—

"Look, pard!" yelled Paso. "Yere they come with a wagon tongue! They're goin' to try and bust in the door!"

"We'll have to stop it," said the outlaw coolly, as he punched smoking empty shells from the hot cylinder of his six-guns. "We've got to go easy on the ca'tridges, though. Don't waste any."

Sonny longed for a shot at either the masked leader of the desperado band or Austin, his bearded straw boss. Both were out of sight, and directing their men with shouts. Four of them had appeared in the open, carrying the wagon pole for a battering-ram, and were approaching the door at a trot.

"Let 'em have it, Paso, ol'-timer," snapped Sonny Tabor, thumbing the hammers of his own guns when the wrecking crew was within thirty yards.

B-r-r-r-rooom! Blended with the reports of Sonny's .45s was the ter-

rific, ear-shattering thunder of the ten-bore. Paso had let go with both barrels of the scattergun.

The hombre in the lead was fairly blown in two by the blast of buckshot. With his clothing almost blown from his body, he fell, a huddled, reddened mass. Sonny stretched out the second man with a bullet through the head; the other two turned and scampered for their lives.

In the meantime, the red-bearded Austin and his leader, who had located themselves behind the pond embankment had continued shooting. One of them—probably Austin—had a .30-30 high-power, and judging from the sounds, he was shooting jacketed, soft-pointed cartridges. He was keeping his aim low, and Sonny knew that sooner or later, he would score.

And he did, in less than a minute. Sonny heard a queer, choked intake of breath from Paso Jim.

"Amigo! Are yuh——"

Sonny bent over the lean Ranger, who had doubled up on the floor. He felt a dragging ache at his heart. As an officer of the law, Paso was his sworn enemy, but Sonny had never considered him that. Ranger or not, he liked Paso, admired him much for his stubborn courage.

"My stummick!" muttered Paso Jim. With an effort he sat upright and with a shaking hand reached behind his back. His hand came away crimson.

"Gone clean through," Paso said, showing his long white teeth in a grimace. "Dang those dum dum bullets! The hole in front's no bigger'n a nickel, but the one—in my back—yuh could—stuff yore hat in. I'm shore——"

He was dying, but in spite of what Sonny could do, he tottered to his

feet, pulling himself up by means of the table, and leaving a red pool on the floor. He took a firm grip on his Colt six-gun.

"Open the door—jist a crack, Sonny, and let me out thar," he coughed. "I'm goin' to git one or two of them skunks afore I die."

Sonny's powder-grimed face was as gray and streaked as Paso's own.

"No, Paso, yuh'd better——"

"I'm agoin'," said the dying man decisively. "Might as well—gonah, anyhow. Sonny, if yuh should git out o' this—don't think yuh will, but anyway—this ring."

He took a cheap ring from his finger, a ring made of two twisted horseshoe nails, and put it in Sonny's hand.

"If yuh *should* git through, pard," Paso whispered weakly, "show thet to mah brothah. His ranch is ten miles north of Las Tablas. Tell him—what happened yere. Have him—send the Rangers yere to wipe these coyotes out. Will yuh—Sonny?"

Unable to speak, the outlaw could only squeeze Paso's icy hand. Small chance he would have of getting out of this alive, but if he did, he'd not forget Paso's request.

"Don't go out there, *compadre*," Sonny pleaded as the Ranger moved toward the door.

Paso Jim took the bottle of whisky from the table and emptied it in a few gulps.

"It ain't—thet I need Dutch courage, Sonny." He grinned. "It's jist that I sho' hate to see thet lickah go to waste. Adios, pardnah!"

Unbarring the door, the Ranger staggered out across the porch in plain view of the hidden marksmen, straightened himself with an effort, and strode slowly and deliberately out into the ranch yard, his head up

and his gun gripped in a steady hand.

"The mountains are callin',
I'm jumpin' mah bail,
And I'll nevah go back
To the El Paso jail."

Guns roared violently. Sonny clenched his teeth as he saw puffs of dust fly from the tall Ranger's clothing. Paso swerved, went down to his knees, and then, making a terrible effort, supported himself with one hand and swayed to his feet again.

He walked on, straight toward the embankment. By that time, there must have been a half dozen bullets in his body, but he went ahead like a man in a dream.

For a brief second, one of the desperadoes exposed himself in order to shoot once again at the terrifying figure of Paso Jim. The Ranger was waiting for that. His gun streaked flame and smoke and the rustler rolled down the bank with a hole between his eyes.

Then there was a deadly fusillade. With the thunder of the Colts came the sharper crack of the .30-30.

Paso Jim's lean legs wavered under him, and then gave a convulsive leap, as if hurdling an invisible fence. Falling heavily, he rolled over on his side. Stretching out his long legs and arms, he quietly composed himself for his eternal sleep.

The first few drops of the rain fell in the ranch yard—like tears.

CHAPTER VI.

THE STORM.

WITH a bitter cry, Sonny kicked the door wide open, a half-empty .45 in each hand. His one thought was to avenge Paso Jim, to die doing it.

According to his count, only three

of the desperadoes were left, and one of these badly wounded. Among them were the masked leader and the whiskered Mike Austin with the .30-30. If he could only line his sights on those two killers—

But before he could spring into the open, he heard the hammering of hoofs. The reinforcements had arrived on the scene! Four riders galloped in, yelling hoarsely.

Sonny banged the door again, panting for breath and thinking hard. No use for him to throw his life away so recklessly; he could get more of the rustlers by waiting for their rush. Here, at least, he had the shelter of the house. If they rushed him—well, he still had a few more cartridges in the chambers of his Colts.

Then the storm that had been threatening for two hours struck with sudden force. There was a crashing among the limbs of the cottonwoods by the pond, a shriek of wind, then a deluge of blinding rain.

The downpour was almost a cloud-burst. Lightning flashed with a brilliance that stung the eyeballs, and peal upon peal of thunder went echoing across Caliente Basin.

"If I'm goin' to get out of this," the outlaw thought, "it's now or never."

The loose horses had galloped away when the battle had first begun. Sonny peered through the loopholes in the wall, but saw no sign of Paint, his own cayuse. The little pinto, though, was near to him, he was quite sure, waiting somewhere for the expected summons. Sonny had trained it well.

There was no shooting just then. Evidently, the gang was waiting for the storm to pass before renewing the fight. The rain was coming down harder than ever.

As Sonny forced open the shut-

ters at a window opposite the door, he suddenly straightened. He'd heard something—but what? Something that seemed in the very room with him.

There! Between thunderclaps he heard it again. It sounded like a moan, a rattling groan that might have come from the throat of a dying man.

Sonny looked about him, the hair tightening on his scalp. He was alone, of course. Nobody was in the bunk room beyond, either. There was only that little pool of crimson where Paso had got his death wound.

A shiver passed down the outlaw's spine. He couldn't let his nerves give way, now! He'd only imagined that sound. It was just the let-down after the exciting strain he'd been under, he reasoned.

He threw open the shutter, and a gust of rain-laden wind struck his face. It freshened and stimulated him, and he filled his lungs with it. From the window, he could see only the vague outlines of swaying trees through the curtain of falling water.

Sonny gave a long, keen whistle, following it with another. He waited then, but only for a few moments. There was an answering whinny, and he made out Paint splashing from the timber fringe.

With his heart in his mouth, Sonny jumped through the window; in another moment, he had thrown himself bodily across his saddle.

"Good boy, Paint! Let's—get gone——"

The rustler gang, however, weren't napping. As Paint's little hoofs began hammering into a sprint, Sonny heard a warning yell go up from the masked hombre:

"Thar he is! Git him, yuh num-skulls! He's——"

Br-r-r-ang-bang-bang!

The four newly arrived riders came pounding from the alley between the pond embankment and the granary. Austin and the chief, too, popped into view, their guns blazing viciously.

Sonny turned in his saddle and returned the volley. Shooting from the hurricane deck of a galloping cayuse through a curtain of wind-blown rain is no easy trick, but the outlaw was one of the finest shots in the Southwest. At the roar of his guns, one of the riders went backward over the rump of his horse, killed instantly.

Pam! Sonny relaxed his grip on his guns, would have dropped them if his forefingers hadn't contracted about the trigger guards. He'd been hit. A wave of sickness passed over him.

"Yuh got him, men! Give him some more! Run him down!"

Sonny managed, with leaden arms, to shove his guns into the slack of his Levi overall pants and grip the saddle horn with both hands. He felt a warm, saltish taste in the mouth, and there was a singing in his ears like the sound of violins. He'd been shot up before, and he realized that he was badly, perhaps fatally hit.

"Paint—run—boy——"

They were still shooting at him, following him, but the wiry pinto was going like a tornado, its silky mane and tail streaming in the wind and rain.

Sonny clung on desperately, fighting against the unconsciousness that was overwhelming his tired brain. Looking back, he could see nothing except sheets of pelting water.

"Keep—agoin', pard!" the outlaw murmured drowsily.

After that, everything was a blurred dream.

CHAPTER VII.

NIGHTMARES.

[T was the storm, fully as much as the spotty bronc's speed of hoofs, that saved Sonny Tabor's life that morning. When he drifted out of his half sleep, the skies had cleared, the sun was shining, and it was afternoon. The pain of his wound had aroused him.

At first, he had no idea of where he was; then he discovered that he was near the south rim of the basin. He was amazed to find himself still uncaptured and still in the saddle. He must have kept his seat by instinct alone.

Paint had settled down into a steady lope, and every time the pony's hoofs touched the ground, a pang of torture passed through the outlaw's body. He'd been hit in the right side, but whether or not the bullet had penetrated the lung or any vital organs, he couldn't tell.

They were nearing the top of the divide, and were not far from the spot where he'd first met Paso Jim. It was hot after the rain, and he was dizzy and ill. There was a queer emptiness in his head, and a gnawing, ever-increasing pain under his shoulder.

As carefully as his aching eyes would allow him, he searched the basin behind and below him. He could see no signs of any pursuit. The rain, he knew, had washed out his tracks, and the country was so vast and rugged that there wasn't much chance of the rustlers finding him.

At the sky-line rim of the gigantic bowl, Sonny turned his bronc's head in the direction of Las Tablas.

"We've got to get word to Paso's brother—on that ranch," he muttered.

Many weary miles of rough-tim-

bered country lay between him and his goal, a journey that would have been difficult even for an uninjured man. Sonny was soon to learn that he was overestimating his strength, underestimating the seriousness of his wound.

Examining his guns, he found that he had only one cartridge left.

"Reckon I made good use of some of 'em, though," he muttered.

He was soon in a forest of pines, a wild and utterly lonely land. Paint went tirelessly on, and the outlaw was forced to keep his teeth tightly set to endure the misery of it. But he *must* reach poor Paso's brother. He'd promised that.

Besides, Sonny Tabor would never rest until the survivors of that murderous band had been wiped out.

Reaching a little spring that gurgled from among the rocks in a wooded hollow, Sonny stopped to let Paint drink and graze a little. He was badly in need of water, himself.

But when he tried to get back into his saddle again, he found that he hadn't the strength to stand, much less drag himself aboard his bronc. Putting the Colt that contained his one cartridge alongside, he stretched out on the grass and slept.

It was night when he awoke, and he found himself weaker than ever. Pain darted through his side with every breath he took, and he was bathed in icy sweat. Unable even to rise, he again closed his eyes wearily.

"This is trail's end for me," was the thought that drifted through his numbed mind. He was almost too ill to care.

How long he lay by the dripping spring, whether it was two days and nights or three, he never knew. The ever-faithful Paint stayed close by

his side, sometimes anxiously nudging his master with his velvety muzzle. Some of the time, Sonny was conscious, but for most of those terrible hours, he was in the grip of hideous nightmares.

Over and over again, in his uneasy, troubled dreams, he fought the rustlers in Caliente Basin. Many times, he thought he saw Paso Jim's dead and smiling face.

He awoke one night in a sort of delirium. It was very black, but he saw Paint looming near him. Over the pinto, in a tree, he thought he saw two points of greenish light, like staring eyes.

"I must be losin' my head," Sonny mumbled. "I'm loco."

The eyes came closer. Paint was uneasy, too, and Sonny fancied that the animal was trembling with fear. The outlaw reached out for the Colt. He had one bullet left, he remembered.

"Those eyes ain't real—I'm a-seein' things," Sonny thought. "It's like that groan I thought I heard back in the shack."

But he impulsively lifted his arm, aimed at the center of those moving points of baleful light, and fired. The echoes of the shot rang dismally among the trees.

"I'm crazy in the *cabeza*." He grinned faintly, and floated off to sleep again.

But in the morning he saw, stretched out on the ground twenty yards away, the tawny carcass of a dead mountain lion! He hadn't been so light-headed, after all. He was going to get well!

"Paint, yuh fool *caballo*," said the outlaw tenderly. "Yuh knew about that lion, and yuh didn't run. Yuh was scared stiff, but yuh wouldn't leave yore ol' trail pard. Won't yuh ever get no sense?"

Sonny felt wonderfully better,

though weak from lack of food. Paint put his intelligent head down, and Sonny clutched the animal's neck and dragged himself to his feet. In the saddle pockets were a few provisions, and the outlaw ate ravenously and drank again at the spring. He'd come through, thanks to his tough and wiry physique.

He rested for most of the day, feeling better and stronger with each passing hour. He even managed to give Paint a much-needed rubdown before starting again in the direction of Las Tablas. By sundown, he was miles away from the spring where he'd almost cashed in.

That evening, shortly after nightfall, he saw the expected glimmer of lamplight. He was near journey's end, at last. Without a doubt, this was the ranch of Paso Jim's brother.

"Reckon our troubles is over for a while, Paint boy," sighed the outlaw.

If he could have guessed what fate had in store for him, he wouldn't have been so confident.

CHAPTER VIII.

SURPRISES.

FRED BOWMAN, the brother of Ranger Paso Jim Bowman, had only a small ranch, and at that slack season employed no cowhands. A grim, lantern-jawed hombre of almost forty, he lived a lonely bachelor existence in his two-room shanty at the foot of Marble Mountain.

He was not lonely, however, that night. Bowman had plenty of company. The little kitchen was thick with tobacco smoke, and an earnest consultation was taking place.

Sheriff John Rankin—a short and heavy-set hombre with iron-gray hair and a bristling mustache—was there from Las Tablas, and with him

were two members of the Arizona Rangers, Cliff Bell and Frank Myers. Both were keen-eyed young men in the twenties.

Bowman's fourth guest had accompanied the officers from town. He was Neal Stream, a cattle shipper and buyer from Las Tablas—a middle-aged but powerfully built hombre, attired in a suit of dusty black. Whenever he talked, he showed a line of gold teeth.

"No, he ain't showed up yere," Bowman was saying nervously. "Paso's allus been able to take purty good care of hisself. Think thar's anything really wrong?"

"Well, Paso's been gone on this mission for three-four days now, and we haven't heard from him," said Ranger Myers, flipping away his cigarette.

"What do yuh reckon could've happened?"

Sheriff Rankin shrugged his heavy shoulders. "It's what *we* want to know. Several folks have disappeared, dropped clean from sight, somewhar between yere and the north side of Caliente. It's mighty suspicious. The Rangers and me was talkin' it over to-day in town. Mr. Stream, yere, offered to come along."

"Yes, I want to git at the bottom of this—whatever it is." Neal Stream nodded vigorously. "All this hocus-pocus is hurtin' my business."

"Do yuh really think thar's anything wrong on the Circle-tail?" Fred Bowman questioned, puffing at his pipe.

"We've decided to go thar and find out," Ranger Bell snapped. "Want to come with us, Bowman?"

"I guess so," hesitated the rancher. "I dunno what to think about Paso. I cain't hardly believe, though, thet thar's anything wrong

with Old Man O'Hara and his Circle-tail spread. Why, he's as honest as the day is long. If he ain't, then I've allus been badly fooled."

Neal Stream heartily agreed with him. "I've done business with the old man fer ten years," he said. "He's square, all right. But I agree with the sheriff about wantin' to see what's wrong in the basin, if anything."

"*Bueno*, we'll start early in the mornin', then," Bowman agreed.

"No, we've decided to ride to-night," Stream said. "Thet'll bring us to O'Hara's at about sunup. Then——"

He broke off, cocking his head in a listening attitude. A horseman was entering the little ranch yard; they all heard the beating of shod hoofs.

"Now who the Sam Hill could thet be? I don't git a visitor once a month," Fred Bowman ejaculated.

The three officers rose to their feet. "We'll jist step into the other room," said the sheriff, his brow wrinkling. "You entertain this yere night rider, Bowman, while we give him a sizin' up."

Neal Stream accompanied the officers into the adjoining bedroom. They left the door partly ajar, and as there was no light in the sleeping apartment, they could see without being seen. They had just concluded their arrangements when a rap was heard.

"Come in!" Bowman grunted.

Spurs jingled across the threshold. In the mellow glow of the lamp, Bowman saw a clean-cut, blue-eyed hombre stepping into the house, a young fellow the rancher had never seen before. Bowman's taut muscles relaxed. The sheriff's precautions had been unnecessary. No harm in this waddy. Just a saddle tramp

after a job or perhaps a bite to eat. Bowman grinned a welcome.

"Howdy, youngster," he greeted.

His visitor did not smile; there was something somber in his expression.

"Yuh had—yuh've a brother named Paso Jim? A Ranger?" he inquired soberly.

"Why, yes, kid, what about it?" demanded Bowman anxiously.

The newcomer handed him a horseshoe-nail ring. "Paso told me to give yuh that," he said gently. "He's—well, somethin's happened to him. Paso is—dead."

In his agitation, Fred Bowman gave a shocked cry. As he did so, the young stranger whirled catlike on the toes of his boots. His hands had dropped toward his guns. Then they went upward.

"Thet's right, Tabor!" boomed the voice of Sheriff John Rankin. "Keep 'em thar! We've got yuh!"

The law—and Neal Stream—swarmed into the kitchen with guns drawn.

"Whew! Tabor himself! What do yuh know about thet?" cried Ranger Cliff Bell.

"This *is* luck!" Myers echoed. "Are yuh *shore*, sheriff, thet this baby-faced kid is really——"

"It's him, all right," the sheriff jubilated. "I've had his pictur' tacked over my desk fer a year, and I ought to know! Take those guns from him, Fred."

Bowman, still dazed from the news he had received, did as he was told. Then one of the Rangers put the prisoner's hands behind his back and snapped on a pair of handcuffs.

"I suppose yo're goin' to tell us yore name's John Doe." Cliff Bell grinned.

"Oh, I'm the hombre yuh want, all right," admitted the outlaw wearily. His gloomy eyes were fixed

on Fred Bowman. "I promised Paso I'd come here. He——"

"If he's dead, you killed him!" accused the rancher, his face white and twitching with fury.

Sonny Tabor's shoulders drooped a little. "I wish yuh'd let me tell my story," he said. "If I'd killed Paso, do yuh think I'd come here with his ring? We fought those rustlers together, him and me, and I hope that when my time comes, I can die as game as he did."

"Spin yore yarn," grunted the sheriff impatiently. "What rustlers are yuh talkin' about?"

"Rustlers in Caliente Basin," the outlaw shot back. "I saw 'em commit three murders, and they killed Paso. The Circle-tail——"

"Thet's a likely story!" sneered Neal Stream.

Sonny Tabor whirled to stare at him with narrowed eyes. That voice! Where had he heard it?

"This kid's lyin', thet's plain to see," the Las Tablas cattle shipper went on. "Thar's nothin' wrong at O'Hara's ranch. He's jist tryin' to pull the wool over our eyes."

Stream began to roll a cigarette. Sonny looked at his hands. They were covered with warts!

"Why, you—yo're the leader of that murderin' outfit!" Sonny shouted, a wave of rage sweeping over him.

Neal Stream leaped toward Sonny, his face distorted with hatred. He smashed the outlaw full in the face, with all his force.

"Accuse *me* of bein' a rustler, will yuh?" he snarled rabidly.

Unable to defend himself with his manacled hands, Sonny went down, crimsoned at the lips.

"Neal Stream in with a rustler gang?" sneered the sheriff. "Thet's a good one! What have yuh been doin', Tabor—smokin' *marijuana*?"

Sonny was silent. What was the use to try to make the officers believe his story? It was hopeless.

"Shall we take Tabor over to jail at Las Tablas, sheriff?" Myers asked. "Guess we'd better postpone the trip to the Circle-tail, eh?"

"I dunno. I hate to," began the sheriff. "We ain't so very far from thar now, and——"

"Thet's what I say," chimed in Neal Stream. "Let's git the Circle-tail business over with. We kin leave Tabor a prisoner in the shack yere. He'll keep."

"Good! Tie Tabor's feet, Myers," Bell told his fellow Ranger.

"Can't yuh see," the outlaw cried desperately, "that this Stream hombre is just tryin' to lead yuh into a trap, so his men can shoot yuh down? He's——"

"Shut up!" he was told curtly, and Myers took a fancy coiled reata from the wall and securely bound the outlaw's ankles together. When the job was finished, the men prepared to leave.

Fred Bowman buckled on a gun, and slipped into a leather vest. One of the Rangers took the lamp from the table and put it on a shelf, turning the wick down low.

"For the last time, won't yuh listen?" Sonny begged. "Yuh'll be walkin' right into a dry-gulch, shore. This Stream hombre——"

"Adios, Tabor man," leered Stream, kicking the prostrate outlaw heavily in the ribs. "Come on, now. Let's be hittin' the trail."

They tramped out, the lock clicked on the door, and presently Sonny heard the rattling of bit chains and the squeak of leather as they got their horses and mounted. Hoofs clattered and finally throbbed off into silence. More victims for the killers on the Circle-tail, going like sheep to the slaughter!

CHAPTER IX.

NIGHT RIDE.

WHEN making Sonny Tabor a prisoner, the officers hadn't stopped to consider that they were dealing with the slipperiest hombre in the Southwest. The outlaw had made more desperate escapes than he had fingers and toes, and had broken out of some of the strongest jails in Arizona.

A fugitive since his earliest teens, Sonny knew all the tricks. That was one reason why he had managed to elude the noose for so long. He was hard to hold.

The cuffs that had been snapped on him were of the old pattern, of a type with which Sonny was well acquainted. Given time, he was sure that he could free himself.

Sonny Tabor's hands were small, and he had learned how to compress the bones and tendons of his hand and thumbs almost to the point of dislocation. And his hard muscles were as supple as those of an acrobat.

The fact that the cuffs were behind him made his task more difficult. His wound, too, pained when he exerted himself. He wondered if, after all, he would be able to free himself.

With sweat pouring from his face, he tugged and squirmed to get the encircling bracelets over his hands. The dragging minutes seemed like hours. Time after time, he almost succeeded, only to have the steel hands slip back onto his wrists again.

"I've got to get loose! I've got to!" he muttered.

Finally, making a superhuman effort that tore the skin from his thumbs, he succeeded. Hurling the cuffs from him, he sat up, got his breath, and then with numbed fin-

gers unknotted the reata that bound his legs. He stood up dizzily, clutching at the table for support.

He got the .45s that had been taken from him and ransacked the place for ammunition. On a dusty shelf in the bedroom, he found a fresh box of fifty cartridges. After loading his guns and filling the pockets of his chaparajos, he broke a window in the kitchen and crawled through.

At his sharp whistle, the spotty bronc came trotting toward him out of the darkness. With a chuckle of relief, Sonny climbed into his saddle.

"We got to go far, Paint, and fast. Can do?"

The pinto's bit chain jingled "yes." Sonny started north, toward the distant Caliente Basin.

Few hombres on the outside of the law would have done what Sonny was doing. He was free, able now to make good his escape from the district for good and all. The sheriff and the Rangers were his natural enemies, and in riding to their aid, he was risking his life and liberty.

It didn't even occur to him to leave the men to the fate they'd brought on themselves. They were going to be trapped, and Sonny meant to spike Neal Stream's evil plans, at no matter what cost. Lawmen or not, he couldn't let them die without doing all in his power to save them. Besides, Paso Jim's brother was with them.

The moon was obscured by flying clouds most of the time, but Sonny knew the way well, and he extended Paint to the limit. The sheriff's party had a long start on him.

"I've got to beat 'em to the Circle-tail, that's all there is to it!" he gasped.

Uphill and down grade, through timber and over rocky hogbacks

flashed the hammering pinto. Miles streamed by. By midnight, they were at the top of the divide, and the great basin was a black gulf beneath them.

After making the perilous descent to the bottom of the bowl, the going became easier. Sonny remembered the night he had traveled over almost the same route, at gun's point, with Paso Jim. And it seemed to the outlaw that he could hear that chanting tune of Jim's "The El Paso Jail."

The horizon on his right flushed with the first pale colors of the dawn, and as the light brightened, Sonny looked searchingly about him. He was still several miles from the Circle-tail headquarters, and he saw nothing of the sheriff's party. Could he have passed them during the long night gallop?

He cut a little to the left. Only one more ridge now cut off a view of the ranch house. As he passed it, he gave a low whistle.

There they were, only a few hundred yards west of him—the three lawmen, Paso's brother, and Neal Stream! The little party were riding straight toward the Circle-tail headquarters, and were less than a quarter of a mile from it!

All was peaceful and quiet about the ranch house, but Sonny was not deceived. A murderous ambush was waiting. Stream was riding a little apart from the men he was betraying, to be out of the line of the gunfire when it came. There was no time to lose; Sonny roweled his pinto to head the party off.

"Stream!" he shouted, whipping out one of his Colts.

The rustler leader wheeled his horse about, stiffened in his stirrups, and yanked quickly at his own gun.

Br-r-rang-bang! Once, twice Sonny's .45 flashed flame.

A scarf of blue smoke whipped out behind the running pinto.

His first shot missed, Paint having joggled his aim by hurdling a mesquite bush. At the second shot, however, Stream squirmed half about in his saddle, squalling with agony. He clutched at his saddle horn, missed it and thudded to the sand. From the way he had fallen, Sonny knew that he would never rise again.

It had all happened in a few seconds, before the rest of the posse had time to realize what was taking place.

"It's Tabor!" bellowed Sheriff Rankin, collecting his scattered wits.

They had more to think of, however, than Sonny Tabor just then! Guns flashed venomously from the loopholes in the ranch-house walls. Bullets began to whine among them.

"Get behind the corral fence—quick!" Sonny shouted as he galloped up.

If Sonny had been a minute later than he had, even half a minute, that first volley of rifle fire would probably have wiped them all out. As it was, the outlaw had forced the rustlers' hand, made them open up before their victims were within effective range. The surprise was premature.

The four hombres who had been saved from the gun trap didn't hesitate long, but followed Sonny's advice. Jumping from their horses, they took refuge behind the corral fence, three hundred yards from the house. The young outlaw was right with them as they dug in.

"Tabor, looks like yuh've—yuh've saved us in spite of ourselves!" stuttered the sheriff. "Stream was shore leadin' us intuh—intuh a hornet's nest. But how in dangnation did you—you—"

"Never mind, sheriff. Just keep yore head down," drawled the outlaw.

CHAPTER X.

SETTLING ACCOUNTS.

THE men in the shack kept their Winchesters going steadily, but by taking advantage of every bit of cover, Sonny Tabor and the others worked their way alongside the corral to the shelter of the tool house and granary. Thus far, the gang was burning powder to no avail; none of the lawmen had received a scratch.

For the time, the fact that Sonny was an outlaw—a "wanted" man with a price on his head—was forgotten. They were all in it together now! And somehow, although they couldn't have told why, they seemed to look to him for leadership.

"Not much use for us to shoot at the house," he told them. "Let's lay low a minute and figure this out."

"How many do yuh reckon are in thar?" Cliff Bell demanded.

Sonny made a swift calculation. "Five, I think—and I believe one of 'em was wounded the other day."

"Well, thar's five of us; it's even Steven, looks like," the sheriff growled.

The rustlers had the big advantage of shelter, though, and Sonny knew that a rush would be disastrous. He considered carefully. In the alleyway was the heavy wagon tongue the rustlers had used in their unsuccessful attempt to batter in the door when he and Paso had defended the house.

"There's no loopholes in the back of the house," he told his companions. "We'll take that pole and try to knock one of the shutters down at the rear. If the gang had tried that the other day on Paso and me,

they'd have got us quick. Come on! We'll circle through the trees by the pond."

"Seems a good idea," agreed Ranger Cliff Bell. "Wow! *Thet* was a close one!"

A high-powered bullet had kicked up a volcano of sand and gravel near them with a loud *spa-a-a-n-ng!* Austin's .30-30 again! Sonny set his jaws grimly.

"Old Red-whiskers is plenty good with that long gun," he warned them. "Watch out for him. It was him that got Paso Jim."

"The murderin' cutthroats!" choked Fred Bowman. "Let's go! Let's wipe them stinkers out!"

"First, let's decide exactly what we're goin' to do, and how we're goin' to do it," the outlaw counseled.

They made swift plans; then, with the heavy pole, they circled the pond embankment, careful to keep out of sight. They emerged from the timber thicket forty yards from the rear of the house, and some distance higher above it on the side of a knoll.

There were two iron-shuttered windows. It was agreed to ram the one on the right. Four of them would be enough to use the pole; Ranger Cliff Bell's job would be to blaze away at the one on the left to keep those inside from shooting out.

"Here goes! Ready?"

They charged down the slope. Sonny and Ranger Myers held the front of the wagon tongue; Fred Bowman and the sheriff balanced the other end. They gained speed at every stride.

Crash! A combined weight of nearly half a ton smashed against the shutter. Reënforced though it was, its fastenings burst asunder.

"In we go!" cried Sonny Tabor as the obstruction fell inward.

He heaved his lithe body through the opening, guns drawn.

Myers scrambled after him, and Bowman and the slower-moving sheriff were right behind.

A hurricane of lead, aimed too high, came bursting from the rustler guns. Sonny Tabor, as he dropped to the floor inside, leaped to one side and crouched low.

He was in the kitchen—the room where Paso had got his death wound. All was murky with smoke, but Sonny had targets, and plenty of them. His guns roared.

Three of the men were Mexicans, and he caught a glimpse of Mike Austin's cruel, bearded face in the flash of guns. By this time, three of Sonny's companions were in the house, and Cliff Bell was just leaping through the window.

"Drop yore guns!" bellowed the sheriff.

The five crooks chose to fight, instead, and they fought with all the insane ferocity of cornered animals. At such close quarters, the battle was practically hand to hand. Guns were used as clubs as well as fire-arms. The noise was deafening. Shrieks and yells were added to the uproar of exploding Colts. Sonny heard Fred Bowman laughing wildly.

Br-r-r-rang-bang-br-r-rang!

One of the Mexicans went slumping down, shot through the heart, his shirt on fire from the close-range gunpowder flash.

Myers tore a bowie from another swarthy rustler and blasted him down with his Colt. Another desperado screamed and fell.

A weasel-faced hombre and Mike Austin rushed for the doorway that led into the bunk room, but only the whiskered Austin made it. "Weasel-face" was nailed in his tracks by a shot from Sheriff Ran-

kin's gun, and somersaulted to the floor.

Sonny leaped in after Austin. There was no door for the red-bearded ruffian to slam shut, only an opening in the partition. As Sonny jumped through it, Austin whirled on him, his .30-30 aimed from his hip. Screaming an oath, he pulled the trigger.

But he was too close to his intended victim. Sonny knocked the barrel aside as the Winchester cracked savagely. He fired in return—twice—three times.

"That's for Paso, yuh whiskered sidewinder!" the outlaw cried, his eyes frosty, his white teeth bared.

All of Sonny's shots took effect. Austin, his beard parting in a laugh of agony, fell like a hamstrung buffalo. He landed in a bunk, with his ugly head twisted under him. With a long *ah-r-r-r-r-r*, he breathed his last, his death rattle clacking like a broken pump.

With a crimson-spotted sleeve, Sonny wiped the sweat and powder stains from his face and, staggering a little, returned to the other room. He hadn't been hit this time, but his old wound was throbbing a little.

A yell went up from the sheriff and the others. The fight was over, and only Ranger Myers had been wounded, his hurt being a bullet-pierced arm and a cut on the left hand he'd received from a knife.

"Good work! Good work, all of yuh!" cried the sheriff, as excited and elated as a tot with a new toy. "We wiped 'em all out, by jeebers! Tabor——"

But Sonny was doing a curious thing. He was stamping at the kitchen floor—and listening.

"What's eatin' yuh?"

Ever since the day he'd made his escape from that very room, Sonny had been puzzling himself over those

groans he'd heard, or thought he'd heard. It occurred to him now that there might be a cellar underneath the house. Some of the boards gave back a hollow echo under his feet.

"I'm lookin' for some kind of a trapdoor," he explained quickly. "When I was here last——"

Cliff Bell pushed the smashed table aside. "By golliess!" He whistled.

They all pushed forward eagerly at the sight of an iron ring, flush to the floor. There *was* a cellar beneath. The body of one of the Mexicans was rolled aside. Bell got his fingers through the ring, and with an effort raised a good-sized door.

"Any one down thar?" demanded the sheriff warily, his hand on the butt of his holstered gun.

There was no reply from the black opening in the flooring—only a faint sound that might have been made by a scampering rat. Sonny, though, thought he detected the sound of breathing.

"I'll go down. Seems to be a ladder," grunted Cliff Bell, striking a match.

He descended carefully, his light flickering in his hand.

"Ain't very deep," he told them, his voice echoing back weirdly. "Nothin' yere but a lot o' canned stuff, an'—— Oh, m'gosh!"

"What do yuh see?" yelped the sheriff.

"Come and help me! Thar's a man down yere! It's old O'Hara! I don't think he's dead, but he's mighty near it!"

Bowman and the sheriff hurriedly climbed down the ladder, and after some difficulty, they managed to bring the occupant up into the daylight.

Sonny was shocked at the sight of him. He was an old man of perhaps

sixty, with long, unkempt white hair. He was practically a skeleton; his tatters of clothes were filthy, and his sunken eyes were half closed.

"He's unconscious, but I think I kin bring him around," panted the sheriff when O'Hara had been placed on one of the bunks.

He took a flask from his pocket, poured out a quarter cupful of whisky, added sugar and water, and held it to the old ranchman's lips.

When O'Hara was finally able to swallow, he took a few sips, and a little color began to creep back into his waxy face. It was some time, though, before he could talk, and then only in a whisper. He recognized the sheriff, but for a while, he seemed delirious.

"Have they—they gone?" he quavered at last. "I—I've been through—through turrible——"

"I know, O'Hara," soothed the sheriff. "Yere, take a little more of this, and then try and tell us about it. Have them skunks been keepin' yuh down in thet hole?"

"Yes, for weeks, I reckon. Have they gone?"

"Yes, they've gone to a place they'll never come back from," Rankin snapped. "Did Neal Stream do this to yuh?"

"Yes. When I wouldn't consent to him usin' my spread fer his stolen stock, he took my ranch anyhow," groaned the old man. "He had his gang murder the three punchers I had a-workin' fer me. I'm near starved—ain't had one meal fer nigh a week."

"How come he didn't kill you right out, too?"

"Wanted me to sign—some papers. I wouldn't. I been turrible weak. Thar was fightin' goin' on the other day—onless I dreamed it. I tried to yell out, but I was too weak. I'd have been dead in an-

other day, I reckon, if yuh hadn't got yere."

"I'd shorely *never* thought sech a thing o' Neal Stream!" the sheriff said, shaking his head in bewilderment. "Why, everybody thought he'd been carryin' on a respectable cattle business. I'd never have dreamed——"

"Tabor was right, all the time," ejaculated Ranger Bell. "He—— Hey! What the dickens, Tabor?"

"Reach!" commanded the outlaw in a quiet voice. "All of yuh get yore hands up!"

They'd all been so interested in O'Hara's story, they'd almost forgotten that Sonny was among them. And now they found themselves staring into the muzzles of a pair of Colt .45 single-actions!

"Don't worry," Sonny drawled whimsically. "I'm not goin' to hurt any of yuh."

"But—but——" Their hands had gone up, and their faces were white, as white as O'Hara's on the bunk.

"I just want to say adios to yuh, that's all," Sonny chuckled, "and when I say adios to three lawmen—well, I have to be careful, yuh know, how I say it."

The tension relaxed a little, though they were careful to keep their hands aloft, and one by one they broke into wide grins.

"Good-by, Sonny! Do yuh keer if we wish yuh good luck?" they chorused.

The scar in Sonny Tabor's tanned cheek looked more than ever like a dimple.

"Just to make *shore* it's good luck," he said, "yuh'd better stay in the house until Paint and me have hit the trail. Adios, every one!"

And backing toward the door, Arizona's most "wanted" outlaw whistled cheerily for his pinto pony.



Killers For Ranch Guests

By William A. Todd

Author of "Buckskin Scabbards," etc.

THERE had been no sound of an approaching cayuse in the black night outside of "Slim" Ward's log hut. As he lay on the plank floor reading by the light of the fireplace, he was taken completely by surprise.

At the click of the door latch, Slim lifted his head, thinking it was a trick played by the wind. The entrance suddenly whipped open. A blast of icy air carrying flakes of snow swooped across the room, striking him full in the face.

Then, Slim saw the bearded hombre who was covering him from the

outside darkness with two cocked six-guns.

Slim's own gun belt hung from a bunk post. The rifle resting on the deer horns over the mantel piece was too far away. Trapped like a bear cub in a cave, he remained perfectly quiet, studying the night prowler, and listening to the crackle of flaming logs and the whoop of the norther.

"Aire yuh alone?" the bearded stranger demanded harshly.

Slim caught the odor of cheap whisky being borne along by the wind into his hut. He could see

gleaming icicles on the man's beard. His blue-and-green mackinaw was torn, and his leather chaps were stiff from the freezing temperature of the high bench land. He looked as if he had come a long way—in a big hurry. Perhaps his horse had foundered on the cliffs.

"I'm alone," Slim said evenly. "You better come in an' close the door."

The night prowler's lips cracked in a mocking grin as he stepped into the cabin. For a moment, he stood eying the room, making sure that no trap had been set for him. And Slim waited for his verdict.

"Right nice joint fer a homesteader," the man said. "Do yuh know me?"

The stranger's pitch-black eyes and hawkish beak seemed vaguely familiar. His right ear had been shot away long ago, and that identified him. The man's cruel face decorated many a "wanted" poster in cow-town post offices. He had an evil reputation as a rustler and train bandit, and more than one sheriff had branded him as a cold and dangerous killer.

"You're Blacky Toon," the young waddy said slowly.

The outlaw scowled. "Scared?" he asked in a menacing tone.

"What for?" Slim asked coolly. "I ain't done you no harm. I ain't got anything you want."

For a moment, "Blacky" Toon studied the young tow-headed young puncher, as if unable to savvy him. Men usually flinched before the outlaw. Only expert gunmen had ever looked him straight in the eye as this waddy did, and those trigger artists had regretted it.

But the cowboy before the glowing hearth was no hard-case gunman. He looked like a rube, a

grown-up kid who didn't know enough to be afraid. He was gangly, just rid of his freckles.

"Listen careful," Blacky Toon growled, "an' don't make no mistakes. I want ter know if yo're expectin' anybody. Next, I want a buckboard. Yuh'll drive it down the cliff from the bench to the prairie. When we git back, we'll need hot water, bandages, an' grub. If yuh play along with me, yuh may live ter see another day."

Slim closed the book on the care of cattle that he had been reading and laid it on the floor away from the heat of the fireplace. He had always been a methodical person. The misfortunes of life were no mystery to him. He had rooted for himself ever since he could remember.

As a bronc rider, Slim had made a good reputation for himself on the rodeo circuit, only to lose the championship when an easy cayuse stumbled and rolled on him. He had lost a good stage business when a landslide carried his team and rig over a cliff. Hoof-and-mouth disease had wiped out a ranch he had built in the Panhandle. And hard luck was still dogging his trail.

Only the autumn before, a fire had cleaned his range of grass, and he was trying to keep his small herd alive through the winter until spring by borrowing and begging hay. This last venture had to succeed.

So the appearance of Blacky Toon could not be the worst luck, and it could not terrify Slim Ward. The puncher read desperation in the outlaw's face, and many more things. It wouldn't be wise to buck him.

"You've got some friends who are shot up," Slim said, rising to his feet. "It's a bad night outside; I can't let them suffer, nor let you kill my team

going down the cliff. I'll play square. But I'm asking the same of you."

Blacky Toon swerved his guns to keep an aim on the waddy, who strode to a wall peg for a mackinaw and hat. Slim seemed altogether too cool.

"What do yuh mean by that?" the outlaw demanded. "What aire yuh askin' from me?"

"You'll find out," Slim replied, lighting a lantern.

"Put out that light," Toon ordered harshly.

The waddy turned to look at the nervous gunman. "I'll need the lantern for the team," he said, confident of his explanation.

"Then, I'll carry it," Toon snarled. "Douse the lamp on the table. I don't want no back talk."

Slim turned low the lamp wick, then blew down the chimney, so that the only light in the cabin came from the lantern that the outlaw picked up off the floor. As the puncher turned to the front door, Toon stepped behind him, prodding a six-gun barrel into his spine. Slim opened the exit, and stepped into the howling wind. Toon closed the door, his lantern wavering in the black night, threatening to go out.

There was less than an inch of snow on the ground, and it would melt at the first sign of the morning sun. But it was freezing up on the high bench land now. The wind had a bitter edge to it.

The night would be hard on the cattle that were huddled behind log drift shelters for warmth. Some of the late calves might die, and Slim couldn't afford to lose one if he was going to make a success of his home-stand ranch.

He started across the slippery ground, with Blacky Toon following

him close with lantern and six-gun. They were almost before the shed when both were brought to a quick halt by a hair-raising howl that rose higher and higher in the wind and then died away. It came from the northwest, not a mile away, and it certainly must have been a giant of a wolf that had voiced it.

"That's Apache," Slim said aloud. "He's found the venison I put out for him."

"What did yuh say?" the outlaw demanded angrily. "That was no Injun. It was a killer lobo wolf."

"I call him Apache," the puncher explained, unlatching the doors of the shed. "He's got about one eighth dog in him, but he's bad clean through. The ranchers down on the prairie have been trying to shoot an' poison him for years. But Apache is too smart for them."

Blacky Toon followed the waddy into the shed where several broncs lay asleep on fresh pine boughs in stalls. Straw had been too expensive for Slim to buy. By the light of the outlaw's lantern, the waddy spat two of the animals to their legs.

"Do yuh mean ter tell me that yo're feedin' that wolf?" Blacky Toon asked sarcastically.

Slim walked to the harness pegs, replying: "If I didn't put stuff out for Apache every night, he'd go after my calves. The wolf is sort of a star boarder with me. Live an' let live is my motto. It's cheaper for me to feed Apache than to let him feed off my stock."

"Yuh must be loco," Toon growled. "Why don't yuh shoot the varmint?"

"It can't be done," Slim chuckled, throwing harness on the broncs. "That wolf is a smart outlaw, Toon. I wouldn't want to run into him in a

tight spot if he was hungry. He's as fast as chain lightning."

"Aire yuh tryin' ter be smart?" the gunman demanded angrily. "Aire yuh meanin' that that varmint is like me? Yo're talkin' yore-self into a fine case o' lead pizen, younker. Hurry up with that team."

"I don't mean no offense," Slim said, buckling bellybands and breeching straps. "You asked me about Apache. I'm only telling you that I can't let the wolf-dog go hungry. If you stay long at my cabin, I'll have to feed him to-morrow night."

"Yuh'll do no more feedin' wolves, yuh simperin' idiot!" Blacky Toon cried. "I think yo're goin' loco, stayin' up hyar all alone. Get that team outside afore I take it myself."

Slim turned, fists clenched, eyes narrowed. He noted the cocked weapon in the outlaw's hand and the wolfish cruelty in Toon's face. Slim might at that moment have been staring at Apache in some blind canyon. Toon's lips curled in a snarl, and the puncher took the warning.

"You never could drive the brones down to the prairie, hombre," Slim said slowly. "An' I can't afford to die with a lot of helpless stock on my hands. All I'm asking of you, is what you ask of me, that you play square. I do the same with Apache."

"Shut up about that wolf!" Toon roared. "Yuh give me the jim-jams."

Wheeling about, Slim took the horses by the cheek straps and led them outside into the snow-laden wind. The outlaw closed the shed doors, then followed the puncher to another shed with an open front. The flickering lantern revealed a buckboard, into the singletree of which Slim backed the team, and then began snapping the traces.

It was close to midnight when they started out, Slim driving. Blacky Toon lay in the box behind the seat, where he could keep the puncher covered. Toon was taking no chances on sitting beside Slim, who might make a grab for the weapon. There was going to be no fooling Blacky Toon. Slim knew it and meant to obey orders.

II.

Slim Ward knew the road across the bench as well as he did the first spelling book that he had studied. But he kept the team at a slow trot, letting them get the feel of the slippery ground. Now and then, he tried the brakes, making sure that they were secure.

He reined the animals to a walk as he neared the cliff that overlooked the black prairie beyond. There was a drop of almost a thousand feet. Slim figured that Blacky had climbed the crags by hand and foot, not being able to find the trail.

Slim picked out the big pine that marked the head of the ledge down the cliff, and turned about it.

"Yuh watch careful now, rube!" the outlaw shouted at him.

"I don't mean to kill my team," the puncher replied, levering the brakes back a notch. "If you want, you can go ahead on foot with the lantern. Otherwise, put it out. The light does no good shining behind me."

"I'm stayin' with the rig," Toon growled, extinguishing the lantern.

Slim gave the team a slack rein, and the animals moved onto a steep ledge. The trail was white with snow, but the cliff that rose on one side was sheer rock and no flakes had caught on it, so that the stone was black. To the right, over the

rim of the edge, the darkness seemed bottomless. Down the white band of ledge, the horses walked, slipping and stumbling, dragging the buckboard with brakes screeching on the wheels.

It was nerve-cracking business. A dozen times, Blacky Toon cried out in alarm when the rig slid perilously close to the precipice. Slim would shift his weight on the seat and check the team, then drive on again. The puncher forgot about the outlaw and everything else but his horses. His mind was intent on remembering every rock and turn in the trail.

Halfway down the ledge, he had to make a turn at a switchback, and halted the team. He climbed down from the driver's box. Toon yelled at him, threatening to shoot him. Slim paid no heed and took the team by the bridles, leading them around the dangerous turn. Then, he climbed back up to the buckboard seat again and drove once more.

A half hour later, they reached the prairie, where there was no snow. A cold drizzle of rain made the night blacker than ever. Toon lighted the lantern again, and ordered Slim to drive southwest, off the road.

The puncher let the broncs have their heads to find their way around cactus and greasewoods. He didn't like this kind of travel, and feared constantly that his rig would break a wheel on a boulder, or one of the broncs would step in a hole and snap a leg.

Now and then, Toon bellowed into the darkness. And it wasn't long before the thud of a horse's hoofs sounded. Out of the darkness came a rider in a slicker, who answered the outlaw's call.

Slim halted the team.

"Good work, Blacky," the

stranger rider said. "I see yuh got that homesteader from off the bench."

Blacky Toon stood up in the wagon box. "He's kind o' loco," the gunman replied. "He's the same hombre we saw, two days ago, when we came this way. That cabin up yonder is jest the place fer the boys. Where are they?"

"Down in the arroyo where yuh left us," the rider replied. "I'll show the way."

Black Toon prodded Slim with a gun. "Foller him, rube."

As the team moved out, Slim felt a slow anger kindling in his veins. He was doing his part in the game, perhaps against his will, but he had yet to make a false move. All he wanted out of it was his life, so that he could continue to nurse his herd through the winter.

If these riders were outlaws fleeing from a holdup, Slim could not tackle them, unless they gave him a break. It was too big a risk for him to attempt escape. They might burn his sheds and cabin, and perhaps shoot his stock out of vengeance.

Trying to keep cool, he drove the team on to the brink of an arroyo, at the bottom of which a fire flickered. Halting the broncs, the waddy could see two men lying in blankets at the bottom of the defile. Their pale faces told of bullet wounds. There were exhausted horses standing near the fire, heads drooping, tails between their legs.

"Get down an' help us up with the gents," Blacky Toon ordered.

The waddy climbed down from the buckboard. Followed by Toon, he descended the cliff, and halted by the fire, gazing down at the wounded.

He could see that the two men

were badly off. The odor of whisky told him that they had been drinking heavily to numb their pain. One was a burly sawed-off fellow with a bulldog face. The other was tall and hollow-cheeked, with icy-blue eyes, and it was he who spoke to Slim.

"Hello, kid," the tall gunman said feebly. "Do yuh know anythin' about doctorin'? My pards are plumb ignorant."

Slim bit his lips. "I've studied a book or two," he said. "It might help."

Blacky Toon poked him with a gun barrel. "Stop braggin' an' get hold o' Sharp's shoulders."

As Slim lifted the tall hombre called "Sharp," the man gasped in agony, stiffened, and went still. He had passed out. Slim and Blacky carried him up the cliff and placed him in the buckboard. They turned to find the other wounded outlaw being helped along on a game leg by the last gunman. They all climbed into the wagon. It was a pretty heavy load to be drawn up the ledge, and Slim frowned.

"My team might not be able to pull you all on that slippery trail," the waddy said to Toon. "We able men had better walk."

"I ain't walkin' nowhere," Blacky Toon snarled. "Tie them saddle horses ter the tailboard, an' stop talkin' so much."

"My advice is for one of you to lead the saddle bronses," Slim replied in an expressionless tone. "I'll lead the team. You can walk beside me to keep the gun ready."

Blacky Toon's face went purple in the light of the lantern on the buckboard seat.

"Aire yuh givin' me orders!" he cried, stabbing his gun into the puncher's ribs. "Don't forget we

don't need yuh no more. I'll blow a hole through yuh big enough ter drive the team."

Slim's features froze in a hard mask. He was having a time to keep from losing his temper. But he couldn't forget his stock up on the bench land. He had to control himself.

"I'm just suggesting the only way to get back to the cabin," the waddy replied tonelessly. "I doubt if you could drive my horses up the ledge, Blacky. What's more, those wounded men need a bit of surgery, which you can't give them. You said something about playing square. When do you mean to start?"

Blacky Toon trembled with rage. His nerves seemed to be on edge. But he didn't shoot. The cool words of the young waddy seemed to sink into his thick head. The outlaw stepped back, swearing, and Slim went to the head of the team, Blacky Toon following him with a ready six-gun, and the lantern.

They started back to the cliff, Slim leading the harness bronses, guided by the light of Toon's lantern. Behind the buckboard, the other able outlaw led the saddle horses, while the two wounded gunmen lay groaning in the wagon.

Slim found the foot of the ledge easily.

"Put out the lantern," he advised. "The dancing light on the rocks might scare the team. You'll be able to see me in the dark."

"I'll be seein' yuh over the sight o' my gun, smart-Aleck," Toon snarled. "Get goin' up the trail."

It was a hard journey for the team over the slippery gravel and frozen earth. Slim took the reins and walked ten feet ahead of the animals, letting them follow him at will, snorting at the ledge, blinking at the

cliff and the precipice. Up, up, and up, the buckboard creaked and rattled, while the wounded men called for more drinks or cigarettes.

A dozen times, the team halted to get wind, and Slim put his shoulder to a wheel to keep the rig from sliding backward. He got no aid from Blacky Toon or the other able outlaw.

The pair stood back from the rim of the ledge, as if expecting to see the buckboard vanish any moment. No accident was going to catch them unawares.

The higher the buckboard ascended the cliff the colder the wind blew, until once more the brones were slipping over snow-covered rocks. Slim talked to the animals, urging them on, warning them, guiding them. The horses seemed to know that safety lay at the top of the bluff, and that there was no turning back.

It was long after midnight when the bench land was reached. The team grunted wearily and halted. The gale seemed to be dying down, and snow no longer fell. A dead silence wrapped the mountain world. Slim leaned against the buckboard with Blacky Toon and the other outlaw, resting, saying nothing.

Then that weird howl echoed from the distances again—a mournful cry that sent cold chills down every man's spine. It rose higher and higher, and halted abruptly.

Slim looked at Blacky Toon, who had fallen into a crouch, gun jutting.

"Apache," the waddy said. "I reckon he found my venison was frozen, so he wouldn't touch it. He's hungry. That's dangerous."

"Shut up, yuh fool!" Blacky yelled savagely. "If yuh hadn't kept that varmint around hyar by

feedin' it, we wouldn't be pestered now. Get that team going ter the cabin."

In the darkness, a grim smile tugged at the corners of Slim's lips. He took the reins of the brones and started walking across the bench. He wasn't afraid of the wolf, as long as it was not hungry.

In a way, the lobo had been of service to him, by keeping cougars and bears away from his herd. Slim had seen the big white animal several times, but never close enough to take a shot at it.

The wolf had drifted up to his bench because of the traps and poisoned carcasses left by the ranchers on the prairie below. Slim had no money for traps or poison. It was cheaper to board the lobo, just as he was going to have to board these outlaws who would destroy if he did not obey them.

Striding into his small ranch yard, Slim halted at the front door. He watched Blacky Toon light the lantern. The two wounded men in the wagon box reared up to look the cabin over. The last outlaw turned toward the shed to put the saddle horses up.

III.

Nothing had been disturbed during Slim's absence. His six-gun still nestled in its holster hanging from a bunk post. The rifle rested in the deer horns above the mantel piece.

There was a glow in the ashes of the fireplace, so Slim walked over and put some logs on the fire, and fanned them until the flames caught.

"All right, rube," Blacky growled. "Now we get the boys in."

But the sawed-off husky outlaw was already limping through the door, aided by the able outlaw. It

was no job to go out and lift the hollow-cheeked gunman out of the wagon box, and carry him into the cabin. Slim laid him on a bearskin rug before the fireplace, then looked up at Blacky Toon.

"I'd like to put my team up," the puncher said.

"Jake will do it," Toon snapped. "Yuh start doctorin' Sharp."

"I'd much rather put up my own hosses," Slim argued.

"Yuh do what I say!" Blacky Toon roared. "I'm sick an' tired o' yuh. Jake will put up yore spavined bronses."

"Shore," the unshaven Jake said from the doorway. "I already put our saddle bronses in all the stalls. The team will have ter sleep in the runaway behind."

Slim stood up, hot with anger. "I'm doctoring nobody until I see that my hosses are warm an' snug!" he flared. "If those bronses catch cold, I won't be able to haul hay with them. I've only got two saddle ponies beside them."

The wounded Sharp on the floor looked up. "Go see about yore team, kid. I know how yuh feel. Blacky an' Jake ain't got no sense."

Slim saw the bearded Blacky sink into a crouch, finger on his gun trigger. The outlaw glared down at the wounded hombre.

"Listen ter me, Sharp!" Blacky snarled. "Yuh ain't boss o' this gang no more. I am. What's more, I'm gettin' the lion's share o' the loot this time. I brought yuh up ter this cabin ter save yore life. Yuh ain't fit ter ride with us. So don't go runnin' off at the mouth."

Slim tensed as Sharp's cold blue eyes looked at the big Blacky Toon.

"Don't try ter scare me, hombre," the wounded outlaw said. "Yuh

ain't got brains enough ter pull a train holdup, nor nothin' else. Yo're nothin' but a gunman. I told the kid ter put up his team. He's the one who brought me up from the prairie, not you. Yuh never would have come up ter this cabin, if we hadn't made yuh at the point of a gun. Yuh wouldn't run out on us, because yuh don't know where Pete an' me buried the loot. Yuh never will know, if yuh get shootin' notions."

Slim saw Blacky chewing savagely at his lips. The puncher realized that the two wounded outlaws had done most of the work on the recent holdup that the gang had pulled. The pair who hadn't been shot must have protected the flight of Sharp and the man called Pete. And if Sharp and Pete had buried the loot to get rid of the evidence, then Blacky Toon and the other able gunman couldn't ride out now.

Slim turned to the door, and Blacky followed him, growling under his breath. The waddy un-snapped the team traces and led his bronses to the shed. There, he scattered pine boughs on the floor behind the stalls. After blanketing the weary animals, Slim went back to the cabin, with Blacky still following him.

Inside the log hut, the able-bodied Jake had a kettle of water on the fireplace crane, and the two wounded men undressed. All of Slim's guns had been removed from sight. He saw that a medicine chest had been emptied, and the bottles were on the floor.

"Get to work," Blacky ordered gruffly.

Scowling, Slim took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and washed his hands. He picked up a book from a shelf, opened it to a diagram, and

laid it on the floor beside the tall, hollow-cheeked Sharp. Then, he examined the outlaw carefully.

"That slug in your left side has got to come out," Slim said, as if to himself. "It looks like another bullet broke a right rib. That hole in your thigh has begun to fester. You shouldn't have used the leg."

A grim smile twisted the wounded Sharp's lips. "How long will I be laid up?" he asked.

Blacky Toon hovered over them. "The kid ain't no doctor. Yuh've got ter ride back fer that loot to-morrow, Sharp. We can't hang out hyar. It's too dangerous."

As if Blacky hadn't spoken, Slim said: "You won't be riding for two weeks, Sharp. I can see that you were a sick man before the shooting. You've got lung trouble."

Sharp frowned. "Forget about that an' patch me up, kid. No matter what happens, I won't live long."

Slim went to work with a keen-edged knife, hot water, and bandages. He referred constantly to his book, and Blacky Toon demanded to see every page that Slim studied.

It was a long job, but the wounded Sharp never whimpered. Beads of sweat appeared on his brow, and he asked twice for whisky. Sharp was a limp rag when Slim had finished. The outlaws laid him on the one bunk, and he dropped off to sleep.

The other wounded gunman was an easy problem for Slim. It was a mere matter of taking a bullet out of his thigh. But the puncher advised the patient not to use the leg for a few days. A bed was fixed for the man in a corner, and he lighted a cigarette, grinning at Blacky and Jake.

"The kid knows his stuff, boys,"

Pete said to them. "Too bad yuh fellows ain't packing lead. He'd fix yuh up. I've had lots o' doctors that made yuh feel worse than yuh was at the start."

Slim saw Blacky staring at Pete. Something was on the bearded outlaw's mind. He glanced at the bunk to make sure that the tall hollow-cheeked Sharp was asleep, then Blacky said in a low tone:

"I reckon that Sharp won't never be no good ter us, Pete. He's better off by himself. He won't do no more ridin'. It's different with yuh. Can't yuh take us down ter the swag to-morrow? We'll divvy up an' fan the wind."

Pete's eyes glinted. "Sharp has been my pard fer years, Blacky," he said coldly. "I wouldn't run out on him fer anythin'. He an' me have held up more than one train, but we never murdered nobody. We liked the excitement. I ain't afraid ter die at any time. I'm forgettin' what yuh suggested. Go ter sleep."

Slim Ward stepped back to a chair, his nerves tingling. He watched the bearded Blacky's face turn purple. The outlaw's gun was in his holster, and he drummed his fingers on the butt. Then, turning, he glared at Slim.

"Yuh know more than is good fer yuh," Blacky snarled. "We'd be better off shootin' yuh."

From the corner, the sawed-off Pete called: "Calm down, Blacky. Take a drink an' go ter bed. We need the kid ter cook an' doctor us. He's all right."

Dawn was coming in the windows, and it surprised Slim that he had been working so long. He had performed every part of his bargain with the outlaws, if it could be called a bargain. And now he remembered that it was their turn to play fair with him. It was hard to speak of

it, for Blacky was eying him dangerously, as if deliberating a ghastly deed.

Slim drew a deep breath. "I've got to scatter hay for the stock," the waddy said bluntly. "I'll do your cooking. an' your doctoring. But my cattle have to eat, too."

"Hah!" Blacky laughed at him savagely. "I knew somethin' like that was comin'. I reckon yuh want ter feed the wolf, too. Waal, the moo cows don't eat ter-day, nor fer the next week, if we stay that long. One more pip out o' yuh, an' I'll bust yuh on the head ter keep yuh quiet. Savvy?"

A wave of anger swept Slim, and he fought to keep his head cool.

"If I don't feed those cows an' steers," the waddy said, "they'll start drifting to-day. They'll wander down the cliffs to ranges on the prairie below. Punchers down below will see them an' think that something has happened to me, Blacky. Riders might come up here."

"I don't believe yuh!" the bearded gunman roared. "Yuh've got an answer ter everythin'. I don't believe about that wolf, either. It's a trick ter try ter sneak off."

Slim had a good grip on himself.

"You heard the wolf howl because he was hungry," he said. "He might be after my calves right now. I've got to put out more venison for him. I'm telling the truth about my stock drifting. If you want to see the critters huddled behind my log wind breakers, follow me. It ain't far. I've got one small stack of hay left in a shed near the cattle shelter."

Blacky's eyes glinted, and a snarl twisted his lips.

"That's a good idea," he said. "I'll foller yuh. I figure yuh want

ter run off. Mebbe it will give me an excuse ter shoot yuh."

Slim cast a glance at the corner, where the wounded Pete had fallen asleep. On the bunk, Sharp was snoring. Neither of them had heard Blacky's threat. Neither of them would hear the shot that might sound outside the cabin.

Blacky would return to tell the wounded men that Slim had tried to run off, and that he had been killed. It would be a simple way of getting rid of the waddy without an argument with the two wounded gunmen.

Slim looked at the able Jake, who grinned at him.

"Adios, kid," Jake taunted.

Drawing a deep breath, Slim walked to the wall pegs and took his mackinaw and hat. His spine was tingling. He turned and looked around the cabin, as if he were to see it for the last time. Then, opening the door, he stepped outside into the rising sun.

Behind him came Blacky Toon, chuckling.

"Whar's them log breakers?" the outlaw asked.

Slim looked south at a log wall built for a hundred yards across the bench. At one end of the shelter stood a shed in which his last hay lay. It was not quite enough to get Slim through the winter, but he hoped to borrow a few loads more from the prairie ranchers.

He thought of that now. Those ranchers below the cliff would be glad to take over his range, if he didn't make the grade. Slim suspected one of them of having set fire to his grass, last autumn, but that was another fight. To-day, he must turn the tables on Blacky Toon or die in the attempt.

He started walking, Blacky behind him, gun in hand. Each step

might mean death. Slim kept on, wondering how far the outlaw would let him get.

They paced off fifty yards, then another fifty. Neither of them spoke. They were within a hundred yards of the log shelter, and they could hear two hundred head of cattle, now groaning with stiff joints from the cold night.

Slim began to slow down, wondering if he stood a chance by whirling and leaping at the outlaw behind him.

"Keep goin'," Blacky ordered. "I'll let yuh scatter the hay, so that stock won't drift down the cliff ter warn the ranchers on the prairie."

Slim made no reply. His eyes were on the log barricade behind which his herd was sheltered from the north wind. His keen ears had caught a warning note in the voices of the stock. Something strange was happening. The cattle seemed alarmed.

Suddenly, the piercing squeal of a calf went up from behind the log breaker. It was followed by bellows and the click of horns and thunder of hoofs. Around both ends of the long wind shelter, cattle stampeded in panic. And all the while the calf was squealing.

"Apache!" Slim cried out. "The lobo wolf is after fresh meat, because that venison froze. Apache has stalked a calf."

IV.

Leaping out, the puncher raced for one end of the log breaker. He heard Blacky Toon yell at him, but he didn't halt. Slim was shouting himself, hoping to scare the wolf off.

He had no weapon. But he didn't think of what he'd do if he ran into the lobo. His heart was intent on saving the calf from the outlaw wolf

that had double-crossed him, just as Blacky Toon meant to do.

"Apache!" Slim yelled. "Get out, you murdering traitor!"

Slim's eyes were on the right end of the log barricade, around which there suddenly shot a big white body, leaping at a calf to hamstring it. The puncher shouted in rage.

The wolf paid no heed. It was trying to avoid the kicking heels of the calf and the swinging horns of a cow that was protecting the young one.

Then the roar of Blacky Toon's six-gun drowned out the pound of hoofs and the bawl of stampeding stock.

Bang-bang-bang! Three times, Toon fired at the wolf, missing every shot.

Slim saw the lobo whirl away from the calf and turn its head looking at Blacky, dodging the outlaw's lead. And Blacky fired again and again.

And he hit the varmint. Slim caught his breath as the lobo tripped and fell sprawling. But it got up again, teeth bared in the morning sunlight. And Blacky Toon fired for the sixth time, knocking the lobo down to ground again.

"I got him!" Blacky yelled excitedly. "I beat the varmint ter the trigger."

Slim turned to eye the bearded outlaw, who glared at him.

"You believe me now, eh?" the waddy said.

Blacky's lips curled. "Sure, I do. But it don't do yuh no good. I'm like that lobo, kid. I got a killin' streak in me. An' I ain't eaten my full. Now, it's your turn."

Slim fell back as Blacky's smoking weapon lifted into aim. The waddy saw the outlaw thumb back the hammer. And then Slim remembered something.

It had taken Blacky Toon six shots to down the lobo. But Blacky had forgotten that, just as the wolf had forgotten that men could go after it with guns. The lobo had been living off the fat of Slim's range for so long without danger that it had grown careless. And that was what had happened to Blacky Toon.

Slim didn't hesitate. He sprang at the bearded outlaw. He saw Blacky's gun hammer fall, clicking on an empty shell.

Slim's left hand slapped the barrel of the spent weapon aside. The puncher's right fist swung hard for Blacky's face, and struck with a force that staggered the outlaw backward. Before Blacky could recover, Slim smashed him in the nose with a left. The outlaw went down, Slim on top of him, pounding him in the eyes and the nose.

"Skunk!" Blacky cried out, trying to chop the waddy with his gun barrel.

Slim caught the weapon as it came at him, and held it with his left hand. He had Blacky under him now. Slim's right arm curved in a deadly uppercut that exploded on the outlaw's jaw. There was the crack of breaking bone. Blacky's eyes bugged. A gasp tore from his throat, and he was still.

"Blacky!" a voice yelled from two hundred yards away at the cabin's exit.

Slim threw up his head to see the ugly unshaven Jake coming on the run, a six-gun in hand. The puncher tore Blacky's gun away, ducked low, and felt for bullets in the gun belt under the bearded outlaw's mackinaw.

Crash! Jake's gun roared, and a slug tore through Slim's hat.

The waddy had two cartridges in his fingers now. He hugged the ground, trying to reload Blacky's

weapon. He watched the outlaw Jake coming on, trying to get aim again.

Slim closed the chamber of the weapon in his hand.

"All right!" the waddy shouted. "I'm ready."

Rearing up from the earth, Slim stabbed his gun into aim, thumbing the hammer down on the firing pin. He shot from the hip, and he saw Jake's gun flame at him. Slim felt the impact of a bullet in his left side. It spun him around, and dumped him earthward. As he went down, he fired again at Jake.

A scream tore from Jake's throat. The outlaw sprawled headlong and lay still.

Slim gritted his teeth and crawled over to Blacky's unconscious body. There the waddy reloaded his gun again from the outlaw's bullet belt.

He was almost finished with the task when yips sounded behind the cabin. Raising his head, Slim saw a dozen horsemen come pounding past his home. There was a glint of sunlight on a badge decorating the coat of the leading rider.

"Slim!" the sheriff called. "What's up?"

Slim Ward drew a breath of relief. He couldn't get up because of the bullet in his leg. He sat waiting for the posse to arrive.

"Howdy, lawman," the waddy greeted the man with the silver star. "You're late, but welcome. Blacky Toon just killed that lobo wolf, Apache. It was a fine piece of shooting. I hope you won't go too hard on Blacky. He's got a hundred dollars bounty money coming to him."

The sheriff took off his hat, wiped the sweat-band, and grinned.

"Yuh've got almost two thousand bucks bounty money comin' to you, Slim," the lawman said. "It seems

like four gunmen held up the Santa Fe Express yesterday afternoon. Two got shot bad, but this hyar Blacky Toon an' Jake Smiler beat it too soon. There's rewards out fer 'em. Too bad yuh didn't nail the other pair. We followed the wagon tracks up the cliff."

Slim frowned. "Sharp Williams an' Pete Riley are in my cabin, sheriff," the puncher said. "Sharp ain't got long to live. Yuh best let them off with light sentences, if you ever want to find the buried loot. They

did me a good turn, an' I'd like to help them if I can."

"That suits me, Slim," the sheriff said. "I'll do my best in the court. How's the ranch going?"

"With some money to buy hay, an' no wolves to support," Slim chuckled, "I reckon I'll make the grade this year."

"I reckon you'll always make it from now on, Slim," the lawman added. "There's one thing about you, hombre—you always play square with the world."



GUARDED BY A BEAR

A PROSPECTOR, Arthur Gammon, after chopping a tall pine tree, near Burns Lake, British Columbia, got a broken leg when the tree fell on him. This was on October 3 last. Gammon lay unconscious for a time, then he managed to crawl about a hundred yards to his mackinaw. Tearing the lining out, he splinted the broken leg, and tried to drag himself to his cabin.

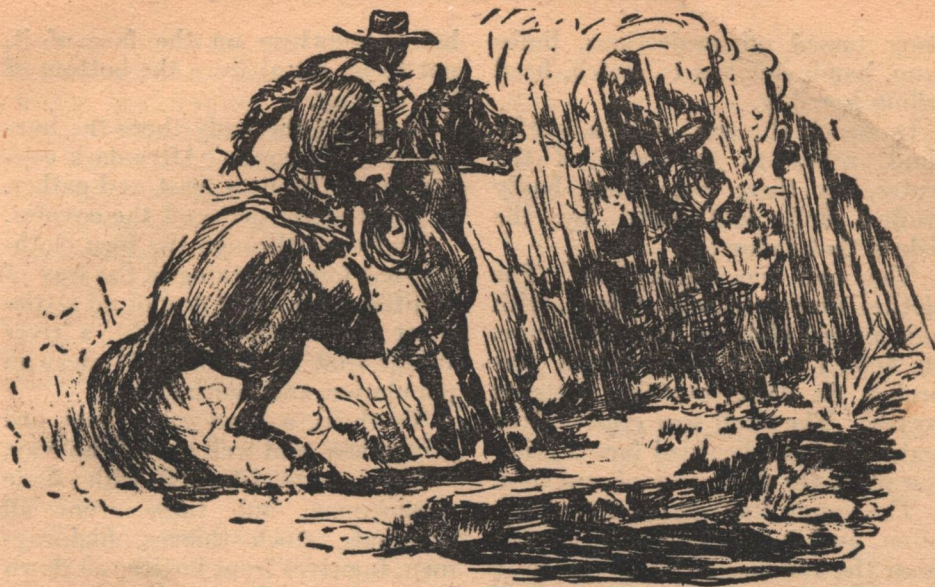
For four days he crawled toward the cabin, when a heavy snowfall drove him to seek shelter under a spruce tree, where he found a cave. When he entered it, he saw that it was occupied by a yearling black bear, but the animal made no move at sight of the visitor.

After several days, Gammon crawled from the bear's cave and resumed his slow progress toward his cabin, followed closely by the bear. He appeased his hunger by picking what berries he could find, and quenched his thirst by licking the moisture from leaves.

After a whole week, Gammon had crawled to within half a mile of his cabin, with the little black bear close by his side. On the tenth night, he became faint and almost lost consciousness, when he saw that he was surrounded by a ring of coyotes. They were afraid of the bear that was keeping faithful guard and would not approach near it.

The prospector could move no farther. He was found by another prospector on October 17th, in an exhausted condition. All that he could remember was seeing the coyotes in front of him, and his bear standing guard by him.

A trapper, Carl Levy, went over Gammon's two-week trail to verify his story. He picked up the bear's tracks, which led back to the hollow under the spruce tree. Levy went into the cave. The bear was there, enjoying its winter sleep. Gammon's torn mackinaw was there, too. Levy left the bear to slumber in peace.



Dead Hombre's Silver

A "Bud Jones of Texas" Story

By J. Allan Dunn

Author of "The River Raid," etc.

THE Ranger's big bronc stopped short in its stride as the first fragment of rock came bounding down the side of the cliff, hit the rough trail that followed the creek in the bottom of the canyon, and with a final hop, splashed into a pool.

It was followed by others in a small avalanche, falling in a cloud of dust. There were dislodged boulders and broken stone smashed on the jutting outcrops. The roan bronc backed up smartly on the uneven footing, snorting more in resentment than fear, although it was a narrow escape for both horse and rider.

Many of the tumbling masses were big enough to have killed both

of them instantly, or far worse, to have left them crippled and helpless in that desolate region, seldom traveled, where Wild Creek flowed through the gorge on its way to the Rio Grande.

"Bud" Jones, the Ranger, spoke to the roan, soothing it. He was about to wheel and retreat until the slide was over, when he saw the body of a man come hurtling over a hidden ledge, high up.

The man must have started the slide, following the rocks that fell faster than his body, which now and then caught for a moment, hung up on a shallow-rooted tree or a crevice.

But the fall was too rapid to be stopped. Bud saw the helpless

body tossed off projections, limbs limp, hands helpless to clutch, head lolling horribly.

It struck the trail with a fearful thud, rolled to the edge of the water, lay there like a big, badly stuffed doll, half-buried by the débris that followed.

The man was quite dead. The clothes were torn and stained, with hideous red blotches here and there. It looked as if every bone was broken in that terribly battered corpse. The skull was crushed, the features of the bearded face a crimson pulp, the flesh bruised and torn.

The young Ranger had seen death often, and in many forms. He slid from the saddle and drew the body free, after he had removed much of the litter of stone and dirt.

One hand lay palm upward. It was horny and calloused.

Bud judged him American. The skin was bronzed, but the staring eyes were gray, the beard was too profuse for a Mexie, whose Indian blood would keep down a heavy growth of whiskers.

The Ranger thought the dead man had been a miner. There was cinnabar in these wild hills, also silver, much of the latter pure and easily mined—horn and wire silver, sometimes in large masses of several hundred pounds, lying above the ore that was usually below ground water-level.

This was new territory for Bud. Company F, Texas Rangers, a force of thirty-odd troopers—Captain Halstead commanding—was extending its patrol. It had a big territory to clear of outlaws and smugglers, to make fit for American settlers. It was on the border between the United States and Mexico.

Bud looked at the cliff. He supposed the dead man had a prospect

hole somewhere on the face of it, not to be got at from the bottom of the canyon.

If he left the body there the buzzards would come. After dark coyotes would scent a feast and gather. A puma might drive off the coyotes.

Bud went through the torn clothing, but found nothing in the way of identification. He knew of no settlement nearer than Ganado, a river village that was entirely Mexican in population and sentiment.

To them, a dead gringo was one gringo less, and well out of the way.

They were friendly with some *Americanos*, but these were all criminals, stock thieves, highwaymen, fugitives from justice, set down in the private "Book" of the Rangers as "wanted." They spent their ill-gotten gains in Ganado, and so long as the Mexies profited by them, they protected them.

Bud, youngest corporal in the Rangers, was on his way, alone, to look over Ganado. There was a ford there, used by rustlers and smugglers, if his information proved correct.

And now he had come across a dead American miner.

It looked like an accident, perhaps from a prematurely exploding blast of giant powder. Bud had heard nothing like that, but the rush of Wild Creek, swollen by recent rain, close to his ears, would have blotted out such noise.

He decided to build a cairn of loose boulders over the body, to protect it from mutilation by birds and beasts of prey. This was the frontier where coroners and public officials were few and far between.

The dead man wore neither coat nor vest. His shirt had been ripped away from a hairy chest. Bud started to compose the broken limbs

as best he could, to make the body as decent as possible.

Halfway through his task, he stopped. There was a wound exposed in the chest that did not look as if made by contact with rock. It might have been made by the limb of a tree. It was a deep hole, and to the Ranger it seemed more like a bullet wound.

He looked at the back of the body. The wound went right through. It was far larger at back than front. He searched the clothing more thoroughly, and found a leaden slug, distorted by having struck bone. It might be a .45. It might be from rifle or six-gun. Hard to judge exactly the caliber, or the source.

But it told a definite story: The man had been murdered.

He could hardly have been shot in a fight, for he wore no cartridge belt or holster. A prospector would probably carry a weapon, but he would discard it while working, keeping it fairly handy as he swung his pick or hammered in his drill.

"Reckon we won't hit Ganado tonight, hawss," he said to the roan. "I got some cracked cawn fer you, an' I kin make out on jerky, an' a smoke. Thet gully a ways back might git us 'top the cliff. We'll go take a look-see."

It was getting on toward dark when Bud, making his way with the sure-footed Pepper down the narrow, treacherous trail, came to where a burro stood braying in a niche, tethered to a mountain piñon.

The place where the man had gone over the cliff was plain. Bud read the sign in the failing light. The miner had staggered back, fallen over the edge, torn out a dwarf cedar by its roots. There were

crimson spots to mark his death trail.

Opposite that spot was a cavity in the face of the cliff, handmade with pick and blasting. It went in about fifteen feet.

Bud did not know much about mining, but he saw where the cliff had been ripped up for treasure which the prospector must have traced from float. There was still some native silver, blackened by sulphide compounds, left about a gap where the nature-made hoard had been exposed.

Motive enough for murder.

Native silver ran, at that time, close to eight dollars a pound. A treasure trove!

Bud looked for a spent shell, found none. He figured a six-gun had been used, but he could not be certain. But he saw the dead man's cartridge belt, with its holster and long-barreled .45, with unfired shells, a clean barrel. His coat, a canteen, scraps of a lunch.

It was all hard rock on the trail. What little footsign he discovered was hard to read, confused as to whether made by man or beast.

But he made sure that the killer had followed the dead man, though he might have waited for him. But all trail ended at the mine.

Mexicans usually preferred cold steel, but not always. And Americans were few. Soil settlers along the fertile bottom lands were widely scattered. It was hard to think of them committing such a crime.

The darkness gathered. The sun drifted below the ridges on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande. The canyon was flooded with the shadow of night.

Far below, the dead man lay beside the creek, whose wild song was hushed by the height. The stars came out. An owl hooted.

The Ranger left the shallow mine, gave the impatient burro part of Pepper's corn, after watering it from the crown of his sombrero with the contents of the dead man's canteen and his own. Pepper had drunk his fill at the creek.

"We'll wait till it's light, old-timer," he said to Pepper. "Might find some clew, come mornin'. Then we'll drift on to Ganado, an' look fer some hombre thet's tradin' native silver."

He knew such information would not be easy for a Ranger to uncover. If all gringos were natural enemies to the Mexies, a Ranger was a special foe, to be feared and universally deceived.

It was hard sledding for a Ranger along the Rio Grande.

But it was the danger and the adventure, the difficulties of the job, that attracted Bud Jones, as it had all the members of the hard-riding, straight-shooting organization.

II.

When morning came, Bud made a more thorough investigation, inside the cave and out. Despite the slight sign, he felt he had fairly well reconstructed the crime. Finding the murderer was another matter.

The dead man must have told about his discovery. He had most probably been followed, and then had deliberately been shot down without a chance to defend himself, as he turned to meet the intruder.

It was very doubtful if the claim had been registered. That meant a long journey at high cost. In any event, it did not much matter when the find was of this sort—native silver that, once uncovered, could almost be cut out with a knife, except that its masses were irregular in shape, with the edges chinked into

cavities of the rock, as if the precious metal had been deposited in liquid form, flowing into the crannies.

The main mass had been taken, most likely in several trips. The burro could not pack much more than a hundred pounds of dead weight for any distance.

It seemed strange the killer had not used it. He might have brought a pack animal of his own, used his horse for the purpose.

He might have fled in the swift revulsion of realizing he had killed a man, that his own life was forfeit to the law.

There might have been no silver left, save the little there was in sight, perhaps thirty pounds in all, which would have to be scooped out of the honeycombed rock bit by bit. That would take time and skill.

The Ranger examined the main cavity carefully, hoping to find some shred of cloth left that would not match the clothes of the dead man, and must therefore belong to the murderer. He did not find cloth, but he found one distinctive clew that made it necessary for him to return to the cairn he had piled above the dead miner.

He saddled Pepper, untethered the burro. The animal could not be left to starve. It probably had no owner now. Bud meant to turn it loose. For the time he let it carry its pack saddle. It went ahead of Bud and the roan up the stiff, narrow trail to the rim of the canyon sedately. It might feel linked to Bud by the corn he had fed it.

It was very likely it realized what had happened to its master and was grateful for being rescued. A burro had more brains than a smart dog, in Bud's estimation.

There was a little spring on the rim rock, and both beasts drank there. Bud was not thirsty and de-

cided to wait until he got down again to the creek. That was his best route to Ganado, in any case.

He sat in his saddle looking across the canyon. There was a growth of dwarf cedars that came close to the edge on the far side with some underbrush. Bud thought he saw a movement there, watched, wondering if it was a deer.

Out of the cedars there came a spurt of flame, bright in the shade of the squat trees. A tremendous blow struck Bud over the heart as the crack of the weapon sounded, and a light drift of gun smoke hazed through the cedars.

The force of the blow was almost enough to send him out of his saddle. He loosed his knee grip, his feet came from the stirrups, he slid over the cantle, letting himself slip over the roan's rump to the ground, falling limp and relaxed, with his head well up, the breath out of his lungs.

He lay prone and motionless, save for one instinctive move that brought his hand to his hogleg. Pepper stood there, well trained but troubled.

Bud could not speak for a moment. The slug had fairly struck the shining target of his silver star. It had almost eliminated the engraved word "Ranger," denting the metal, leaving a bruise on Bud's flesh that was going to be purple, and painful, before it disappeared.

He could not see the opposite rim now, as he had fallen, and he dared not stir. He could imagine the marksman crouching there. He might be convinced that he had killed. He might shoot again into the body to make certain, or he might come around the head of the canyon for closer inspection. It was not far.

Bud hoped he would do just that. He was ready for him.

He had no doubt this was the murderer.

He had come back, as murderers often do, to the scene of the crime, perhaps to try for the remaining silver, perhaps for the burro he might have overlooked or forgotten in his first flight. He might want to see what had happened to the body.

Then he had seen the burro, seen the roan and its rider, seen the Ranger's silver star, and smitten with cowardice and fear, resolved to get rid of Bud.

Whatever weapon he had used on the miner, he had a rifle with him now. Bud's six-gun was no match for that at the range.

Bud got back his wind, spoke in a low tone to the roan.

"Git out of here, old-timer. Move along the trail. I'll fetch up with you later. *Vaya!*"

He knew Pepper actually understood many of his master's orders, by sound if not by actual words. He got the sense of them.

The Ranger feared that the roan might show, by keeping near him, that he was not dead, provoke another long-range shot. If he moved off, anybody knowing horses, would think Bud dead beyond question. Especially a trained troop horse.

That would not bring the murderer within range of Bud's .45, but it might prevent more shots. On the whole it was the best thing to do.

Slowly the roan moved off, playing its part well. The burro was uncertain, but finally followed Pepper. Bud lay still. It was not a pleasant thing to do, feeling that every second might bring another frightful blow, with this time no shield to act as armor. His back was toward the canyon as he had fallen.

It seemed to him he played possum for half an hour, watching the dawn shadows marking time. He knew Pepper would not stray far. And he hoped the burro would stay with the roan.

Now he was not going to let it go loose. He had a definite use for it in the plan that came into his mind as he lay there, provided he got the chance to carry it out.

And he felt he would. The killer was not going to shoot again from across the canyon after this interval. If he came round the canyon head, Bud would have a fighting chance, and he meant to make the most of it.

The main point was that the murderer knew that a Ranger had been close to the scene of the murder. Such killers did not have much conscience, but they were yellow enough always to imagine the worst. He would believe that the Ranger had found the body, knew he had visited the mine because of the burro.

It would never do for any Ranger to arrive in Ganado as such, whether the killer thought Bud dead or not. The murderer would escape at the first sign or hint of that news, and probably go across the Rio Grande into Mexico, where a Ranger could not follow.

There had been occasions when Bud had ignored regulations, but this man must not know he was being hunted, must believe himself safe. He might even cook up some tale about the miner having fought with the Ranger, both men being killed.

But it was most likely he would leave evil enough alone.

At last Bud risked a move. Little by little he shifted until he could look across canyon. There was movement in the cedars.

And this time it *was* a deer. Sure sign there was no man close by.

Bud looked toward where the canyon began. There was nothing in sight. He drew the obvious conclusion that the killer had decided that flight from the scene of his double crime was the best thing for him, after all.

Thirty minutes later Bud had rejoined the roan, patiently waiting for him in the shade, where the burro was cropping at some rank herbage which the troop horse disdained.

He rode down into the canyon, herding the burro ahead, and uncovered the corpse. He examined the hands once more. Then, with his face grimly set, he once more raised the cairn that would keep off the beasts and birds.

He knew now for certain how he could tell the killer when he came across him, if that meeting were not too long delayed. Bud did not mean it to be.

"You 'n' me'll hev to part com-ny fer a spell," he said to Pepper. "I'll find you a good place, an' I'll keep in tech with you."

The roan nibbled at him. It understood. It was not the first time they had pulled off such a stunt.

He watched the Ranger transform himself with clothes he took from his blanket roll. Pepper's eyes were wise and filled with true affection.

III.

A Mexican lad, brown of skin, clad in worn peon clothes, his bare feet in straw-soled sandals, an ancient straw sombrero with a broken brim and battered crown on his head, herded into Ganado a mouse-colored burro, almost hidden beneath a big load of firewood. The

wood was all crooked, and would have to be chopped into stove lengths, but it was dry, and it was the only fuel used for cooking along the Rio Grande.

A load like that took all day to collect and bring down from the mountain. Delivered, it fetched between sixty and seventy cents.

But woodchoppers lived cheaply. Some frijoles and *tortillas* kept them alive, their burros cropped their own food. And this peon knew that, according to custom, if he sold his load at the inn, which was practically a certainty, he would be fed free in the kitchen. The meal would be more or less scraps, but it would be plentiful, and there would be meat—beef, goat, or even chicken—with *chili salza*.

Such a meal was almost worth all the labor and the long hike.

Bud was feeling hungry enough to eat cold porcupine as he took the burro around to the back of the *posada*, or inn. As a peon, he would not be permitted to go through the arch to the patio. He would deal with the cook for his money, and the cook would chisel off a few cents in cash to offset the food that cost him nothing.

Ordinarily, the woodchopper would not even see the *posadero*, or innkeeper, but Bud had a plan and something wrapped up in a cloth stowed inside his ragged, faded shirt that he felt sure would get him an audience with not merely the innkeeper, but eventually with the man who had murdered the miner, stolen the silver, tried to kill Bud.

And then Bud would change from humble peon to avenging Ranger, in the twinkling of an eye.

For Bud was quite certain he would know this man, though he had never glimpsed him, had not been able to cut sign to trail him.

There were three other things Bud carried to help him complete the job in hand. One was his Ranger's star, buckled and bent and marred by the rifle bullet. That was in a pocket, with spare cartridges for the *second* thing, Bud's private and special derringer, for particular occasions.

It was little more than six inches long, all told, the butt was barely curved, the whole could be hidden in the hand. It had two barrels, one above the other, and it fired only two shots without reloading.

The Ranger had taken that weapon from a dead bandit chief. The caliber was only .32, but the firing chambers held long cartridges, with sufficient explosive to make the little gun dangerous at close range.

It would not halt a man by sheer impact, but its lead, rightly aimed within five paces, would go to a vital spot with deadly precision.

Moreover, it could be concealed easily on the person. Bud's own, long-barreled .45 could not be hidden in a peon's clothing. Neither could his bowie knife. And neither weapon would go at all well with such a rôle as Bud was playing. Perfect though was his disguise, coupled with his knowledge of Spanish, a six-gun or a Ranger's knife would give it away.

The derringer was tucked beneath Bud's waistband, in the hollow of his lean stomach, covered by the apology for a sash he wore, once red, now faded and frazzled.

The third thing took but little room. It was the merest scrap of a clow, of evidence, yet Bud believed it would hang a murderer.

The cook was in a good humor. He needed wood, and Bud's wood was good wood. He sold it cheaply, and the *cocinero's* heart expanded at Bud's praise of the food.

Bud had a stock of Mexican folk stories, not all of them quite respectable, but all of them funny. He was a good yarn spinner, and he soon had the *cocinero* and his *mozos* holding their sides with laughter. The cook even offered Bud a small glass of brandy, a special favor.

Bud got rid of that while they were roaring over his last tale. He would not drink it, and he dared not refuse it, therefore it went, unseen, into a slop bucket.

When Bud asked if he might put up his burro in the corral and sleep, himself, in the stable that night, his request was graciously granted.

He stayed in the kitchen while the evening meal was served to regular patrons of the inn. He helped out with scraping and washing dishes until the cook suggested that, some day, he might find a job for him.

The meals were served in the big room of the *posada*, where small tables were set out at one end, with a bar and gaming layouts at the other.

Business increased at the bar, decreased in the kitchen. Bud found his chance to get the cook on one side.

"Do you know anything about rocks, señor?" he asked respectfully. "I mean such rocks as gold or silver or cinnabar?"

"There is no gold in this State," said the cook, "though some claim to have found it in the creeks. Cinnabar there is, and I have seen plenty of it. Also I have seen silver ores. The best silver is free silver."

Bud could see that the man was already wondering, covetous.

"I thought a man like you would know, señor," he flattered. "This is something I have found. I did not want to show it to everybody."

The cook took him into a corner, and Bud unwrapped the specimen

of horn silver he had pried from one of the crevices in the mine.

He saw the cook's eyes widen, as he made a great to-do of testing the silver, tasting it, wetting it, weighing it. At last, he took a knife and cut into it. The native ore gleamed brightly at the incision. Bud was pretty sure the cook had seen mineral like this before, perhaps recently.

"It cuts like lead," he said. "Is it lead?"

"I am not sure. Where did you get this? Is there more of it? How far away?"

"It is not far. Yes, there is more. I do not know if I could describe the place well enough for you to find it. Of course, I could take anybody there, but I would not want to do that unless I was sure I should not be cheated out of my share of what it is worth."

"You are right," said the cook, with a look in his eyes like that of a wolf which sees an unprotected lamb. "Leave all to me. I will show this to the *posadero*. You can trust him as well as you could me," he added, with what he meant for a smile, but which looked more like a hungry grin. "Wait here."

Bud did not have to wait long. It seemed that the chunk of silver ore, as he had expected, was like a touchstone, with magic qualities. The cook took him to a small office under the slant of the inner stairs that reached to the second story. There, the *posadero*, Luis Calvado, was looking at the mineral through a magnifying glass.

"You may go, Emilio," he said to the cook. "If anything comes of this I shall not forget you."

The cook went unwillingly. Bud thought that he might regret having shown the silver to his employer, yet had feared not to do so. Cal-

vado looked more like a crook than a peaceful innkeeper. Bud did not doubt that he was mixed up with plenty of villainy.

Calvado examined the ore closely. He knew something of such things, more than the cook. He was remembering an American miner, a man with a beard, who had come into the *posada* a month ago, claiming he had made a strike. He had shown just such soft gleaming metal.

The *posada* was the only place where he could get liquor, and he was bent on celebrating. He got partly drunk, swapping chunks of the ore for what he consumed over the bar and for the jug of *tequila* he took with him.

No doubt he had known, without any question, that he was not popular, as a gringo, in the inn, and he was cagy enough to shake off the two men Calvado had set to follow him, after learning that the silver he had brought was only a sample of what he had found.

For two weeks, he hid his trail so well they could not even guess which way it ran. In two weeks, he came back again.

A man known only as "Storm" was there that night. He had heard about the find, was asking about it.

Storm's mother had been a Mexican; his father an American. The mother's Spanish-Indian ancestry showed in his swarthy face. He was an outlaw, a robber, anything that would bring him easy, quick money. Not stopping short of murder.

Storm had tried to make friends with the miner, but the American was too foxy. Once more he left, and shook off trailers.

Two nights before Bud's arrival at the inn, Storm had come swaggering in. He had sold Calvado a mass of silver, just like this specimen the peon lad had brought.

Storm was not a man to answer questions.

"What do you care?" he asked Calvado. "I have struck it rich, my friend. You cheat me with what you pay for it. You will get most of your money back, one way or the other. The wise man is the one who sees just enough, does not hear too much, and speaks only what is necessary."

Calvado believed that Storm had found the mine and killed the miner. But he was making a good thing out of it himself. Storm gave good advice.

Storm said he had not cleaned up, that there was more to come.

And now this *muchacho* arrived, with the same stuff.

Had the lad found the mine? If so, what else might he have found? And how could Calvado make the most of it all? Storm was a bad man to cross. It might be best to let Storm see this mineral, handle the lad, feel that Calvado had done him a favor.

Calvado liked to live off those who preyed on others. He liked to keep clear of the law. The fact that Storm was a murderer did not disturb him, so long as Storm was friendly and could be milked. Nor did it for a moment bother Calvado that Storm might make away with this young peon.

Of course, there might be two strikes of horn silver in the same locality. It was not very likely. But if there were, and Calvado could keep one to himself—

He looked at Bud. Emilio had said this lad was a smart one. He would know whether the ore came from a mine. But would he say so?

He could be made to talk.

"Where did you steal this from?" Calvado demanded of Bud.

"If that is stolen, señor, it was not

I who stole it. Did you say it was of value? I am a poor youth, señor."

That was true enough. At Ranger pay, Bud was far from being rich.

"I will buy it from you, when I know where it came from."

"A place in the mountains, señor—a place that is well hidden."

"If you will take me there, I will buy all we find there, at a good price."

Bud thought that Calvado would be much more likely to try to cut his throat, if he could find the courage to risk the gallows.

"It sounds like a fair offer," he said. "I think I should sleep on it, señor."

IV.

Calvado was not the man Bud wanted. Bud hoped the news would spread. He had a hunch that Emilio would talk, not satisfied with the way Calvado acted. So he played for time, but found it was not needed.

The door to the office opened, and a man came in, short and swarthy, with broad shoulders and narrow hips. Eyes and mouth, with the high cheek bones, proclaimed a half-breed.

It was Storm.

His glittering eyes took in the scene, before Calvado could cover up the specimen of silver.

He looked at Bud with his thin lips twisted into a cruel line. He had killed the miner, killed the Ranger, and now it seemed that a peon lad had blundered onto the mine, too.

What else must he have found?

He must have seen one, at least, of the murdered men. And here he was, closeted with Calvado, who would betray his grandmother as a

witch, if he thought there was money in it.

Bud looked back at Storm quietly. But his veins throbbed. For this was a man described and badly wanted in the Rangers' private "List of Fugitives from Justice."

A big fish had swum into the net he had cast.

He had heard rumors that Storm was somewhere in the neighborhood. Now he stood before him, frowning.

"What's that you're tryin' to hide?" Storm asked Calvado.

"It's a piece of the same silver you sell to me, Señor Storm. I show eet to thees *muchacho*. He trails the mountains often. From heem I buy wood. So I ask heem eef he ever see some rock like thees."

"You're a liar, Calvado. Let me see it. An' don't *you* lie to me," he added to Bud. "I'd jest as soon cut off your ears an' make Calvado here eat 'em."

Bud's eyes widened, then narrowed, as he watched Storm's hands examining the silver specimen. He had found his man.

In the Rangers' "Book," Storm was not set down for murder, save as a suspect. Now the Ranger had him dead to rights.

"I ain't goin' to lie to you," he answered Storm.

Both the men stared at Bud, startled by his sudden shift to English.

"Where did you git this?" demanded Storm.

"Same place I got this," said Bud, and fished in his pocket for a scrap of evidence he had wrapped in cigarette papers.

They watched, puzzled, as he untwisted the brown tissue, and the sliver of horny substance dropped to the table.

"What's this?" growled Storm. "If

you think you're makin' a monkey out of me, I'll——"

He seemed to choke as Bud produced his Ranger's star.

"You've seen *this* before," said Bud cheerfully. "Over your sights, Storm. Quite a crime to try to kill a Ranger, but I'm after you fer the killin' of the miner. Thet bit of finger nail is goin' to hang you, Storm. It got torn off when you was grubbin' up the silver. Likely you didn't notice it right away. But there it is, an' there on your finger is where it got snagged off."

Storm looked at the slim youth, who was now standing, hands on his hips. He looked at Calvado, and his face was entirely evil.

"Sellin' me out, was you?" he said to Calvado. "I'll settle with *you*, later. As fer you, you young snipe, I allus heard they recruited the Rangers out of cradles. You'll wish you stayed in yours. Hang me, would you? Long before I'm hanged, the river catfish will be tryin' to git at what's left of you in the quicksands. Think to hold me on *thet*?"

He flicked the piece of finger nail to the floor. He did not notice Bud's hand slip beneath his sash.

"They'll take my word fer it," said Bud. "I jest used it as my own identification. You comin' quietly, Storm?"

Calvado had backed to the far end of the office, with its slanting ceiling. Suddenly he ducked, disappeared through a swinging or sliding panel.

Storm was wearing a six-gun, tied low on his leg. The ivory butt seemed to leap from the leather to his hand. The long barrel lifted to a deliberate sight. He meant to make short work of the Ranger, to bore him through the brain between his too steady, mocking eyes. Then

to attend to Calvado. He was convinced Calvado had double-crossed him.

For a moment Storm's wrist was exposed. He started to bring the Colt to a level and suddenly his face stiffened.

A pellet of lead had sped through his wrist, between the small bones, severing a vein. The strength had gone out of his hand, but he strove to pull trigger, to maintain his aim.

The little derringer cracked again, spitting fire, it seemed from between the Ranger's fingers.

This time the big Colt fell. Crimson spurted from Storm's ruined wrist. The curse on his lips died, as Bud stepped in, and crashed a left uppercut full to the bandit's jaw.

He staggered, reeling, his eyes hazy, his knees wobbling.

Bud dropped the little pistol on the table, and came up with his right. Connected.

Storm wilted, like a plant in a hailstorm.

Bud knelt beside him, trussed him with his neckerchief and the handy awl strips the Ranger always carried.

He picked up the torn scrap of finger nail. It was not absolutely necessary to convict, but it was a nice touch. It would put the noose about Storm's neck without the shadow of a doubt.

Then he picked up Storm's six-gun, made it his own.

He walked out into the main room. Emilio poked a nervous head out from the kitchen. The bartender craned over the counter.

Bud was pinning on his star.

"Where's Calvado?" he asked.

"Señor, I do not know."

"Find him, pronto," said Bud. "Ranger talkin'. Sabe? If Calvado wants to keep on runnin' this *posada*, he'd best come clean."

"Señor Rangero," panted the bartender, "I tell heem, pronto."

The man departed. He had seen Calvado bolt into the bar from his office like a scared rabbit. He had heard the two shots from the deringer after Storm had entered. And Storm had not come out.

These Rangers were devils! This one—who would have thought it, coming as a woodchopper?

Bud looked at his battered star, and grinned.

"Might git you straightened out," he told himself. "But I reckon I'll

buy me a new one, if the cap won't issue it free of charge. Seems to me there was quite some reward fer this Storm. Rangers' Fund could use it. Mebbe it'll run to a brand new star, an' I kin keep this one as a souvenir."

Reckon Bud put a bad crimp in the crooked business thet's been goin' on 'round Ganado, when he dabbed his loop on thet Storm jigger. An' thet *posadero* ain't so li'ble ter git clubby with any more crooks, now thet the Rangers have got his number. Don't miss the next story about Bud Jones. The same will appear in an early issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

FO
T BARO

THE HUNTER RAN AWAY

A MAN who had never seen a musk hog got the surprise of his life one day when he was out hunting deer in the mountains of west Texas. These wild animals, called by the Mexicans *javelinas*, are seldom found on level ground or on the open plains, but keep to the mountainous regions.

When the hunter first saw a group of several strange animals coming down a hill toward him, he thought they might be small bears, although they were not the right color for that, being of a bluish gray.

He waited until they were within range of his gun, and was about to shoot, when he noticed three very small pigs among them.

These were beautifully striped, and as they gamboled along they looked so playful and so "cute" that the huntsman determined to capture them alive and take them home for pets.

One of the grown ones he took to be the mother of the pigs, and fired at it. It fell, and he found he was mistaken, for the young ones dashed into the brush with the real mother and vanished.

The hunter then decided to kill the leader. Approaching the thicket cautiously and silently, he peeped in to take a look at them, when they all charged him at the same instant, snapping their sharp tusks at his legs, and tearing his clothes at every jump.

He ran down the mountain at top speed, forgetting all about his gun, and his pets. As soon as he was out of danger, he went home, having no more desire to secure a wild hog for a pet.

As he strode quickly through the timber, every time his foot broke a stick, he would jump to one side, thinking that the hogs were snapping at his legs.



Skunk Bait

By Lee Bond

Author of "Owl-hoot Double Cross," etc.

CHAPTER I.

DRY-GULCHED.

WHEN Ray Vernon awoke, he was lying face down on the rocky earth, his head throbbing as if his skull had been caved in. The earth seemed to rock crazily beneath him, and for several minutes he was too sick to think of anything else.

But the nausea passed finally, and Ray twisted his lithe body sidewise in a slow roll. His tawny eyes stared glassily up into pale light, and there was a sick pallor beneath the healthy tan of his lean, youthful face. His mind reeled uncertainly,

yet certain thoughts were beginning to hammer at his throbbing brain.

He remembered coming into this little lava-ringed sink before sundown and preparing to camp for the night. He remembered bathing his face and hands in the tepid water that was held in a basin beneath the lava bluff that now looked strangely dim.

Ray kept blinking his eyes, trying to see better. "Wonder what happened," he croaked, and was shocked at the thick, raspy sound of his own voice. But consciousness was returning swiftly now, and his mind worked a bit more clearly.

He remembered squatting beside

the water hole after washing the film of Arizona alkali from his face. He remembered distinctly that he had taken the precious money belt from beneath his shirt to sit counting the four thousand dollars hard cash the heavy belt held.

He had just sold his RV spread over in New Mexico, and was heading for Bannock town, up on Salt River, in search of a new location. He had been counting the money with which he had meant to buy up some good little spread on——

Ray's thoughts jarred to a halt, and he sat up with a muffled cry of alarm. His lean hands had gone instinctively to his waist, feeling for the comfortable bulge of the money belt. But the belt was gone!

And now Ray got another shock, for he saw that the pale light into which he stared was the cool, white light of a huge moon that rode high in the sky.

"Good gosh!" the youth gasped. "I—I've been asleep for four-five hours. It wasn't sundown when I set countin' that dinero. What in blazes?"

Ray was thoroughly awake now, and staring in dumfounded amazement at the lean fingers of his right hand. He had lifted that hand to his throbbing head. And now he was staring at his fingers, which were sticky with crimson!

The truth dawned upon Ray then, and he groaned as his fingers went back to his scalp, probing through matted wads of yellow hair that were stiff with dried crimson. His fingers found the raw edges of a deep gash that slanted along his skull above the right ear.

"Bullet done that!" he gasped. "I've been shot an' robbed!"

The discovery was like a plunge into icy water. It left Ray Vernon numb and shaken for a moment,

while he stared unseeingly into the moonlight about him. Then he was on his feet, snarling in rage as he reeled toward the water hole.

He ducked his throbbing head several times, then made a crude bandage of strips torn from his undershirt. That done, he found his hat, stared briefly at the two bullet holes in it, and wedged it on over the clumsy bandage.

"Robbed!" he kept choking. "Some skunk seen me countin' that money, an' bowled me over from ambush."

Ray's rage died to a smoldering anger, and his brain began working smoothly once more. He had heard no gun roar, yet a bullet had grazed his head, knocked him cold. Which meant, he knew, that the shot had come from a long distance, and had been fired from a rifle. The slug had hit him, knocking him cold, before the sound of the gun sifted down into the sink.

"I'll bet a hoss some snake was watchin' me through powerful glasses an' seen me take that dinero out to look at it," the youth rasped. "But the skunk can't be far. I'll find——"

Ray had turned as he spoke, knowing exactly where he had left his saddle. But he did not finish speaking. He stood now with jaw lax, new terror gripping him. His saddle was gone, and he knew without further investigation that his big roan would not be in the sink. But he started out instantly, whistling to the horse, stopping now and then to listen.

After half an hour he was back at the water hole, trembling with such a rage as he had never before known. "Afoot, an' no tellin' how many miles from the Salt an' Bannock town!" he growled. "An' while

I set here, mebbe for days, waitin' ontill some wanderin' cowpoke or prospector rides past, that bush-whackin' snake will blow the dinero I aimed to buy a spread with!"

The thought prodded Ray, caused him to whirl to the spot where he had left his saddle. He had seen the canteen come unhooked from the saddle horn as he laid the gear aside, and almost ran now to the spot. But whoever had gathered up the saddle had also taken the canteen.

He realized then and there that his plight was next to hopeless. He was stranded no telling how far from a ranch or mine, afoot, and without means of carrying water. Not even the hardest desert rat would have tackled that searing, waterless land without at least one canteen.

But Ray Vernon was entirely too mad to consider the consequences. He went to the water hole, drank all he could, then marched straight up out of the sink, tawny eyes slitted and hot, hands hovering suggestively above the butts of his guns.

When he finally cooled down enough to realize just what he had done it was much too late to turn back. The rage within him ebbed somewhat, yet his tawny eyes remained slitted, and there was a hard twist to his lips. His feet became blistered, for high-heeled cow boots are poor footgear for hiking across the desert.

But Ray set his teeth against the pain of blistered heels and scalded toes. He tramped on and on, trying to tell himself that Salt River could not be far away, and that he could reach it easily by noon.

Yet in the back of his brain the lanky puncher knew that he could never reach the river and its life-giving water by noon. He knew, too, that he had done a foolish thing in leaving the little sink where the

water hole was. But when he thought of the water hole and what had happened there his anger flared, driving him on.

The moon grew pale, and through weary eyes Ray saw that daylight was breaking. "Have to hole up durin' the day," he rasped grimly. "No man could stand to walk through the heat without water. But when night comes again——"

He left the sentence unfinished to plod on and on. It would not be hot for a few hours yet, and he was heading toward some tall hills that loomed starkly through the coming light.

There was the thousand-to-one-shot that he could stumble onto a water hole in hills of that size. He realized that he was already thirsty, and tried not to think what that thirst would be by night.

He plodded to the top of a ridge, crossed through brush and jumbled rock, and started down the far slope. From below came a shrill whinny, and Ray Vernon stopped short, head jerking up, swinging to the left.

Below him he saw a small house of some sort, with a barn and corral out back. With a glad cry on his lips he started down the slope, realizing that a horse had whinnied somewhere about the place. He saw smoke curling from the chimney of the little house, and realized that he had by sheer accident, come upon some isolated ranch.

But as he neared the place he felt his enthusiasm suddenly wane and realized that there was a tingling something playing along his nerves. Ray slowed to a walk, frowning, trying to understand that danger signal that went playing through him.

Then he heard the horse whinny again, and glanced toward the corral. He stopped dead in his tracks,

eyes fairly popping out. There was his own big roan, breasting the pole fence, whinnying a greeting to him!

CHAPTER II.

"YOU WILL DIE!"

RAY VERNON'S first impulse was to call out to the horse. But he darted into a stand of mesquite, hands slapping the butts of his guns. From somewhere in the house had come a loud voice, and Ray realized that some one besides himself had been attracted by the roan's whinnies.

Ray burrowed back into the thorny brush a few feet, fighting the desire to charge madly down upon the house and settle this thing once and for all. It stood to reason that the man or men who had robbed him were down there.

But that, he knew, would be the action of a fool. The thing to do was wait his chance, then sneak up to the house and see just how many men he had to deal with.

"No ordinary rancher or cowboy would shoot a man from ambush, then rob him," Ray growled. "I've likely blundered onto a regular bandit hang-out. In which case I'll have to walk careful if I get my dinero an' my hoss back."

He heard a door slam, and a moment later a short, bow-legged man came snooping around a corner of the house, a cocked six-gun gripped in each hand. Ray watched the sunlight play over twisted, evil features, and knew that the short jasper was plenty salty. The man prowled about the place only a minute or two, however, then disappeared around the corner again.

Ray waited until he heard a door slam, then went streaking toward the back wall of the house, guns out and ready for action. The roan in

the corral spotted him and began whinnying, yet Ray kept on, never once glancing back.

He reached the wall of the house, breathing hard as he flattened against it. From within came the shuffling of feet, and the coarse laughter of men.

Ray saw a window and began working toward it carefully, making sure that his clothing did not rub the wall or that his boots did not slap the hard ground too loudly.

"Better hurry it up, old woman." Ray heard the voice so plainly that it stopped him. "Wolf an' me ain't got all day ter set around waitin' fer our grub."

"Si, señor," came a tired voice. "I hurry weeth your breakfast."

Ray was at the window now, raking the bullet-punctured Stetson from his bandaged head. He peered in cautiously, eyes squinting to pierce the gloom of the room.

He saw two men seated at a table and recognized one of them instantly as the short jasper who had been outside prowling around. The other man was lean, with an evil beak of a nose that hung above a gash of a mouth that seemed cast in a permanent sneer.

That lean-looking jasper had a pair of pale, unwinking eyes that were boring into an aged Mexican, who sat slumped in a chair in the center of the room.

"Yuh shore that hoss didn't have no cause ter be whinnyin' like it is, Wolf?" the cold-eyed man asked, switching his gaze to the evil-looking jasper who had come out of the house to prowl around not long ago.

"I'm plumb certain, Lon, that it was only that roan's way o' askin' fer his breakfast." The evil-looking "Wolf" shrugged. "Heck, feller, we ain't got nothin' ter worry about. My bullet shore fixed that——"

"Shet yore face, fool!" Lon snarled harshly. "Save yore gabbin' ontill we see the boss."

He gave his head a sharp jerk toward the aged Mexican, who seemed little interested in what went on. The squat Wolf laughed broadly, slid a hand down under the table, and brought a huge six-gun into sight which he cocked and aimed at the old Mexican.

"If yo're skeered o' this ol' buzzard talkin' any, Lon, I'll fix him hyar an' now," Wolf leered evilly. "Say the word, an' I'll blast his haid off."

Lon answered, but Ray Vernon was not there to listen. Knowing now that the old Mexican was no friend of those evil-looking hombres who sat at the table, Lon went racing along the wall of the house on tiptoe.

He came to a kitchen door, holstered his guns, and pulled the door open. He saw a gray-haired little Mexican woman standing over the stove, and lifted his hand quickly to motion for silence.

"No word, little mother!" Ray said softly in Spanish. "Those two gringos in there are not welcome here, are they?"

The woman's hand shook as she placed a coffeepot on the hot stove. Wide-eyed, she stared up into Ray's lean face.

"Hey, old woman, how about that grub?" came a snarling voice from the adjoining room. "Yuh git a hustle, hear?"

"Silence, please!" Ray hissed at the Mexican woman, and turned swiftly toward a middle door. He crossed the room on the balls of his feet, hands dangling above the butts of his guns.

"It's about time!" a voice grated as he stepped through the middle

door. "Yuh're lazier than— What the——"

"So yuh two want breakfast, eh?" Ray Vernon's voice was deadly calm as he halted just inside the little dining room.

Wolf and Lon were staring up at him, mouths open as if they were trying to yell and couldn't.

"Yore slug didn't do much damage to this hard head o' mine last night, Wolf." Ray grinned, but there was not mirth in the grin.

From listening at the window he had heard enough to know that Wolf was the jasper who had tried to kill him the evening before. But neither Lon nor Wolf knew just how Ray had come into possession of such knowledge, and his words drained their faces of color.

"It—it's him!" Lon gasped, and let one shaky hand slide toward his middle, fingers groping.

Ray Vernon saw the motion, and knew that his own money belt was hidden there beneath the greasy shirt of that pale-eyed rascal. But Ray had no time to see much else about Lon just then.

With a scream of fear and rage, the squat Wolf heaved himself backward from the table, hands clawing at holstered guns. Those guns came out roaring thunderously, and Ray Vernon felt a slug rake skin from his side.

But Ray's own hands had licked down, and from the level of his hips came twin streamers of flame and smoke. Wolf lurched, dropped his guns, and clamped both grimy hands to his round middle. He screamed an oath, skidded along the floor for a foot or two, then lay gagging and moaning weakly.

Ray whirled, and was just in time to see Lon jumping through a side window. Ray's guns rapped out a string of shots, but he felt pretty

sure that his slugs all missed. He ran to the window, but hesitated short of peering out, realizing that to do so was to make of himself a perfect target.

"The door, son!" a shrill voice called. "That Lon Trent hombre will run for his horse at the corral. If you make the haste——"

Ray spun toward the aged Mexican, who had sat in the chair as if dazed. The old fellow was very much alive now, and had snatched Wolf's fallen guns from the floor.

Hard on the heels of the old man, Ray Vernon raced to a far end of the room, where a door opened out into the yard. They went through the door so swiftly that Ray, unaccustomed to the place, tripped on steep steps and fell sprawling against the old Mexican.

Ray heard bullets slapping the adobe wall above them, and scrambled frantically to his hands and knees. He saw a horseman leave the corral, and lurched to his feet, guns snapping up. The rider was the gangly, pale-eyed Lon, lying flat along the neck of a bareback horse.

Ray's guns steadied, then sagged down slowly. That Lon jasper had his money belt, of that Ray was certain. Yet to get Lon now he would have to shoot the horse, and Ray Vernon could not bring himself to do that.

"But you are the clumsy one!" A disgusted voice jerked Ray around as Lon dipped into heavy brush beyond the corral. The old Mexican stood there, looking up at him out of smoldering eyes.

"I—I'm sorry I run smack over yuh, amigo," Ray drawled. "But I kind o' tripped on them steps, seems like."

The old Mexican shrugged, tossed the two big guns aside and stood looking Ray up and down out of

thoughtful eyes. "You have the hurt head, an' you have walk the long distance," he said at last. "For why you fight weeth those two so evil ones, *muchacho*?"

"Because the snake-brained pair stole my roan hoss yonder an' my money," Ray snarled, and told swiftly what had happened the night before. "I don' savvy the play none a-tall," he finished hotly. "But I aim to have that dinero back. Yuh know who them two are?"

"Lon Trent ees the one which got away," the old Mexican said. "The fat-bellied one you shoot ees Wolf Haskett. They work, those two, for the mighty Anchor."

"Never heard o' the spread," Ray growled, swiftly reloading his guns. "But I'll look it up. An' that white-eyed Lon Trent will fork over my money or——"

"You never hear of Tom Bradford an' the mighty Anchor Rancho which is his?" the Mexican cut in swiftly.

"Never did," Ray gritted. "But I aim to. Come on, señor. We better see about that skunk I had to drill."

Wolf Haskett was lying flat on his back, sightless eyes open and staring. The round-paunched jasper had bushwhacked his last man.

The old Mexican stood beside Ray Vernon, looking down at the dead man. "It is too bad, my son," the old fellow said slowly.

"I had to do it," Ray said grimly. "It was me or him, that's all."

"I did not mean that," the Mexican answered grimly. "What I mean, my son, that it is too bad that such a boy as you must die."

"Die?" Ray echoed in honest surprise.

"Si, my son," came the grim answer. "Those who cross the mighty Tom Bradford, they die very quickly. An' you have cross the

mighty Bradford when you shoot this evil one here. Besides, the one you make run away—Lon Trent—is foreman of the whole Anchor Rancho. It is sad, but you will die!”

CHAPTER III.

RAY GETS THE DROP.

RAY VERNON ate a wholesome breakfast there at the little ranch. He learned that the owners were Juan and Anna Amado, who had once owned a fine big rancho which had been taken from them by Tom Bradford, who owned the big Anchor spread.

Ray talked little, but listened much, and when he rode away from the two aged Mexicans he knew much of the country's history. He knew, too, the trail to town, and put his big roan at it.

His guns were loose in their holsters, and never had those tawny eyes watched brush and boulder patches more sharply as he galloped through the still, cool morning.

But nothing happened, and he came into the squalid little town of Bannock shortly before noon. Ponies dozed here and there in the shade of huge cottonwood trees, for the town was built on the very banks of Salt River.

Ray's eyes follow the sweep of the fertile valley as he galloped down the last slope, and he felt his pulse race. Cattle country, this! A man with a little capital could get a start in this new country, build himself a spread that would be a regular paradise.

But Ray's capital had been taken from him, and the thought brought his eyes sweeping back to the one dingy street that was flanked on either side by squat adobe buildings. He could see the long sand bars at the ford below town, where stage-

coach and freight wagon crossed Salt River.

But he was more interested in his immediate surroundings and began glancing at the horses bunched here and there beneath cottonwood trees. He saw the Anchor brand on several animals, and was shunting his own mount into the shade of a big tree when loud voices caused him to glance across and down the street.

A group of men came boiling out of a saloon's doors, to bunch and stand peering back into the room. Ray dismounted, ground-tied his bronc, and went across the street.

“Better not go in there, hombre,” a man called as he approached the doors. “Tom Bradford is drunk an' huntin' trouble. Him an' his foreman—— Hey, hold on!”

Ray had heard enough to make him suddenly interested in what was happening inside. He shoved almost roughly through the crowd, wide shoulders swinging men right and left. He reached the saloon doors, pushed through them, and stepped calmly into a long, cool barroom that smelled of stale tobacco smoke and sour beer.

At the long bar stood two men, facing each other over leveled guns. Ray recognized Lon Trent instantly, and let his own hands sink swiftly to the butts of his holstered weapons.

The man facing Lon Trent was a big, rawboned hombre, with bristly black hair that had been cropped close to his flat-skulled head. That head jerked around now, and Ray saw thick lips, a flat, fleshy nose, and evil little black eyes that stared with the fixity of a snake's eyes.

Ray grinned thinly, for those two jaspers were not fooling him in the least with their little horseplay of wanting to drill each other. When he stepped into the room those two

had been talking swiftly, earnestly, despite the fact that they were leveling guns at each other.

"They wanted the barroom cleared, while Lon Trent made his report," Ray thought swiftly, as he paced easily down the floor.

Lon Trent's head swung now, and the lanky coyote jumped as if prodded with a hot iron.

"Steady!" Ray snarled. "Either o' yuh sons make a bad move, an' I'll let yuh have a slug to chew on. Just keep yore guns goug'in' each other if yuh want to stay healthy!"

Ray's guns had flicked out, were trained on the pair before the bar.

Lon Trent licked at his lips, cursing under his breath. The big jasper began grunting like an uneasy hog, and Ray saw reddish lights flash in those ugly black eyes.

"You're Tom Bradford, owner o' the Anchor outfit." Ray spoke flatly, yet his voice carried outside the doors, to where a throng of more than curious men were watching him.

"Has Trent told yuh yet how him an' another o' yore skunk-scented heel dogs tried to kill me last night?" Ray went on grimly. "Well, they did, Bradford. An' from what I hear that's nothin' unusual for Anchor men to pull."

Ray walked steadily forward as he talked. He stopped within two feet of the men, holstered his right-hand gun, and reached out. "If yuh even flinch, Trent, I'll kill yuh!" he said grimly. "I'm takin' that money belt o' mine, which is likely still inside yore shirt. Yuh both stand hitched if yuh want to keep on thinkin' up murderous schemes."

"So this is a holdup!" Tom Bradford's voice came at last, and it was like the bellow of a gorged bull. "Feller, I don't know who yuh are. But you're shore a pilgrim in these

parts, or yuh'd know better than ter meddle with me."

"Tough, are yuh?" Ray snarled. "Wait until I snake this belt o'—Ha! Thought so!"

Ray suddenly jammed his hand inside Lon Trent's greasy shirt front. He brought the hand back out now, and with it came the well-filled money belt.

Lon Trent made a whining noise in his long neck, face chalk white and twitching. Tom Bradford wheezed an oath, bunched his muscles slowly. But the look in Ray Vernon's tawny eyes warned him to forget whatever resistance he might be thinking of.

"One o' yuh hombres out there come on in," Ray called without taking his gaze from the Anchor men. "Any gent out there got the sand to step in here an' do a little chore for me?"

For a long moment, there was utter silence, and Ray was beginning to feel that he was to have no help when he heard a stir somewhere beyond the saloon doors, and a calm voice asking for room to walk. Then boots thumped the floor, and a moment later old Juan Amado was beside him, grinning faintly as he looked at the snarling, uneasy pair.

"But, Señor Bradford!" old Juan called loudly. "You and Señor Trent make the mistake. You hold the gons on each other, not thees *muchacho*."

A snicker lifted from outside the doors—a snicker that swiftly became a patter of laughter.

"Smart, are yuh?" Tom Bradford choked. "Now yuh listen ter me, Mex. I've had trouble with yuh afore an' been lenient. If yuh help this blasted stick-up man any, yuh'll pay fer it."

"I do not wear the gons, Señor Bradford," the old Mexican an-

swered calmly. "If you should shoot me, it would be murder. An' even Tom Bradford might hang for murder."

"Juan, open this here money belt," Ray Vernon called loudly, wanting to make his voice carry to the men outside the door. "There ought to be four thousand dollars, even, in it. There also ought to be a letter with my name on it. The name is Ray Vernon."

The aged Mexican took the money belt, opened it, and began piling currency out onto the bar.

"Si, *muchacho*," he nodded a few minutes later. "There is here the four thousand dollars. An' here also is a letter, addressed to Ray Vernon, Ratoon, New Mexico."

Tom Bradford and his Anchor foreman were trembling now, terror and anger in their eyes.

"Yuh two will pay fer this!" Bradford snarled. "Yunker, yuh an' this ol' Mex has robbed——"

There came a commotion at the door, then an authoritative voice snapped commands as booted feet thudded inside the room.

Ray Vernon dared not glance around, for he had seen Tom Bradford and Lon Trent both tense, waiting for him to give them a chance to use the guns they were still gripping.

"Ah, Señor Sheriff Brill Kerry!" Ray heard old Juan Amado pur. "You are jus' in time, sheriff. This *muchacho*——"

"Git the drop on these two snakes, Brill!" Tom Bradford's bellowing voice cut in. "This hyar kid got the drop on Lon an' me an' made Lon fork over that money belt there. This is a holdup, sheriff!"

Ray Vernon stepped swiftly away from the snarling pair of Anchor toughs, but kept his guns and his eyes on them. He risked one swift,

sidelong glance, however, and saw a lank, grizzled man stalking grimly forward, tugging at a holstered Colt as he advanced.

"Drop them guns, young feller!" the lank old hombre ordered. "An' if yuh try anything funny yuh'll wish yuh hadn't!"

Ray lowered his guns, jammed them quickly into holsters, and backed away a pace, eyes swinging to search the grim face of lanky old Sheriff Brill Kerry.

As Ray turned, Tom Bradford slanted his guns, thumbs hooking at the hammers. He had those guns trained squarely on Ray Vernon's broad back, and the spiked hammers were lifting, ready to slam forward against waiting primers.

CHAPTER IV.

RAY TAKES A SPILL.

[T was Lon Trent who saw Tom Bradford's play and leaned swiftly forward. Lon Trent snarled an oath from one corner of his gash mouth and brought his long right arm ripping down. Trent's arm struck Tom Bradford's thick wrists, causing his guns to slant toward the floor a split second before they exploded.

Ray Vernon whirled, his hands streaking for his own weapons. But there was a gun muzzle gouging his back, and he left his weapons rest in their soft holsters.

"Next man that tries anything gits shot!" Sheriff Kerry advised grimly. "Bradford, was yuh aimin' ter drill this kid through the back?"

Tom Bradford's thick lips were skinned back from a row of gold-crowned teeth in a snarl of insane rage. He lifted a gun as if to strike at his foreman, but seemed to catch himself suddenly, realize just what sort of a mess he had let himself in for.

"Aw, I stumbled over my own big feet an' bumped into the boss jist as he was lettin' the hammers down on his cutters," Lon Trent sneered. "Heck, sheriff, yuh must be loco ter think Tom Bradford would try shootin' any man in the back."

"I—er—that's right, sheriff." Tom Bradford tried to grin, but the snarl refused to leave his twitching face. "Lon bumped into me, an' my guns went off accidental. Nary bit o' harm done that I kin see."

"Just what is this ruckus, no-how?" the sheriff demanded, eying Bradford sternly. "What was it yuh said about a holdup?"

"Yuh seen it with yore own eyes, Brill Kerry!" Tom Bradford rasped. "This youngker that calls hisself Ray Vernon come waltzin' in hyar, stuck a gun on Lon an' me, an' made Lon fork over that money belt."

Ray Vernon frowned, glancing quickly at old Juan Amado. Ray was badly puzzled, for he could see no way for Tom Bradford to wiggle out of this tight after admitting that he and Lon Trent had had that money belt in their possession. And it was plain that old Juan was puzzled over the same thing, for he was frowning, watching Bradford narrowly.

There were a dozen or more men yonder at the front door who could swear that Ray had snaked the money belt from inside Lon Trent's shirt and told exactly what was in it without so much as a chance of looking beneath the flaps. Therefore it certainly looked as if Tom Bradford was letting himself in for some serious trouble by admitting what he had.

Or did the ornery jasper mean to let Lon Trent take the full blame for the whole thing? That angle occurred to Ray just as Tom Brad-

ford began laughing hoarsely as if enjoying some good joke.

"What's funny?" the lank old sheriff asked sourly.

"Why, it jist occurred ter me that this hyar money belt might really belong ter this youngker," Bradford chuckled thickly. "If he kin prove that he's really Ray Vernon, I reckon the belt an' dinero is his."

"What do yuh mean?" the sheriff snapped.

Ray saw that Lon Trent was staring uneasily at Bradford, as if he half expected the Anchor owner to play him some ornery trick. But Tom Bradford had a much slicker trick than that up his sleeve. Grinning broadly now he leaned back against the bar, hair-matted hands well away from his holstered guns.

"Why, Lon, hyar, found that money belt beside the ashes of a camp fire over yonder in Coyote Sink," the Anchor boss said easily. "Lon fetched it hyar an' told me about findin' it. We was jist ready ter come an' turn the thing over ter yuh, sheriff, when this kid come waltzin' in an' made his play."

Ray Vernon went pale with rage, yet he was forced to admire Tom Bradford's quick thinking.

"Coyote Sink would likely be that place where I was camped last night when Lon Trent an' that Wolf Haskett snake jumped me," Ray thought swiftly.

Yet he said nothing aloud, for he caught old Juan Amado's eyes, and saw that the old fellow was trying desperately to pass him some sort of warning.

Juan lifted a bony hand, pressed one finger quickly to his lips. Ray knew then that he was being asked to say no more and decided to obey.

He saw that Tom Bradford and Lon Trent were eying him narrowly, waiting tensely for him to

speak. But it was the sheriff who spoke. The old officer had reached over to the bar with his free hand and lifted the money belt.

"Come on, young feller," he said gruffly to Ray. "I reckon I'll have to give yuh free lodgin' fer a while."

"Yuh—yuh mean to slam me in jail?" Ray spat the words through locked teeth.

"I do," the sheriff grunted. "An' if yuh're smart yuh'll not go raisin' a fuss."

"But what in blazes do yuh want to arrest me for?" Ray flared. "These two Anchor buzzards here wiggled out of a tight corner. I could mebbe throw a little more light on——"

"Yuh've went about far enough with me, younker!" Tom Bradford cut in, and his voice was flat, dangerous cold.

"Keep that lip o' yores buttoned an' yuh'll be a sight healthier, kid," Lon Trent warned. "The boss, hyar, might try ter help yuh out o' the jug if yuh behave proper."

"To blazes with yuh an' that bloated toad beside yuh, Trent!" Ray snarled in a sudden flare of temper. "Yuh an' me have got a few things to settle between us, feller."

"Come on!" the sheriff grunted, and leaned forward to grasp at Ray's arm.

But the now thoroughly aroused youth spun with the lithe movements of a huge, powerful hands reaching out. He grasped the sheriff's gun wrist, gave one swift, twisting yank, and the officer's weapon went spinning from numbed fingers. Ray's other hand snatched the money belt from the sheriff. Then he was backing away, the money belt dangling from his left hand, a cocked Colt gripped in his lean right fist.

"Steady, sheriff!" Ray warned.

"An' that goes double for yore two skunk-scented Anchor friends. First man makes a bad move gets leaded some!"

"I'll hang yore hide on the fence if it takes me ten years!" the lean old sheriff thundered. "Dang yuh, come back here!"

"Bein' slung in jail for takin' back what was mine don't set well, Mr. Star-toter!" Ray snapped. "This money is mine, so I'm robbin' nobody when I take it. But yuh'd rather believe that pair o' snakes there beside yuh than listen to reason."

"Who said I was believin' anybody?" the sheriff countered. "Yuh crazy young galoot, this only gits yuh into a worse mess."

"Mebbe so," Ray admitted thinly. "Just the same, sheriff, I don't aim to be arrested an' slammed in yore jail, yet a while. Adios, an' try to have a better excuse next time yuh set out to jail a man."

Ray had been backing down the room as he talked. He managed to stuff the money belt inside his shirt, then drew his second Colt. The doors were at his back now, and he leaned against them, spun suddenly, and was outside, leaping through a scattering crowd.

He raced to his big roan, vaulted into the saddle, and spurred behind a building just as a gun crashed from somewhere in the crowd. A slug whistled dismally past his ear, slammed against the adobe he was riding behind. Then he was out of range, letting the big roan level out. He made a thicket of mesquite and finally worked down into a draw that would shelter him.

"Whew!" he whistled. "Looks like settlin' in this neck o' the woods is out o' the question, hoss. I reckon the best thing we can do is——"

Ray Vernon never finished mut-

tering the words into the breeze which was whipping his lean face. He heard the dull *whack* of a bullet striking, and felt the big roan beneath him swerve sharply aside. Then the roan was pitching end over end.

Dimly Ray Vernon heard the distant report of a rifle, and knew in that split second that some pursuer from town had got on the brush rim above him in time to see him riding up the draw. But Ray had only a split second to realize that, for he was hurtling over his falling bronc's ears, arms waving helplessly. Then he went crashing into thick brush—to land head-first against the bole of a sizable mesquite.

He groaned once, then went limp, unaware that two men came swarming down toward him from the rim above. And those two men were Tom Bradford and Lon Trent!

CHAPTER V.

"YO'RE YELLOW!"

RAY VERNON expected to find himself in jail when he awakened. There was gloom about him, and to his quivering nostrils came a dank odor, as if he were in a room that had seldom been filled with clean air.

Ray's head throbbed, and his groping fingers found trickles of sticky moisture along his forehead and cheeks. The crude bandage was gone, and he wondered just how long it had been since his horse had taken that spill. Memory of what had happened brought anger surging up within the puncher, and he sat up slowly.

"Some skunk shot my hoss from under me," he snarled into the gloom about him. "If I ever find out who done that job, I'll make the jasper wish he had never learned to

sight a gun. Anybody that's low enough to deliberately kill a good hoss——"

"Your *caballo* is not dead, *muchacho*," came Juan Amado's familiar voice. "The bullet hit a mesquite bole beside your horse, made him jump. The horse, he is not hurt."

"Juan!" Ray cried excitedly. "What in blazes did they jail yuh for, amigo?"

"I think," the old fellow answered slowly, "that they aim to hang us both, my son."

"Hang us?" Ray echoed. "What in blazes would the law have to hang us for, Juan?"

"The law?" came with a grim chuckle from the old Mexican's lean throat. "But surely, *muchacho*, you do not think we are in the regular jail?"

"Huh?" Ray gasped, thoroughly aroused now. "If we ain't in jail, then we're in a mighty good imitation of one."

"Si, this is what you say a good imitation of a jail, since jails are supposed to be strong places," Juan Amado chuckled thinly. "Me, I should know about this particular place, *muchacho*, for I built it."

"Yuh built it?" Ray gasped. "Just what are yuh drivin' at, ol'-timer? I shore don't foller yore drift. If we ain't in Sheriff Kerry's jail house, then where in blazes are we?"

"We are at the Anchor Rancho, son." The old Mexican's voice sounded tired, dull. "Once, this was my place. It is the great house I built, years ago, when I was young, like you. This room, it was the place for valuable things to be kept. It is a strong room, one that cannot be broken into easily. Nor can we break out of it easily."

"The Anchor, eh?" Ray gritted. "Then we've got Bradford an' his bunch to deal with, eh? How many

men has the skunk got here yuh reckon?"

"Twenty men, at least," Juan Amado answered slowly. "And our chances with them are what you call few. In fact, *muchacho*, I think we will both die some time this night."

Ray Vernon was on his feet now, feeling his way about. He heard the rasping of a match, and turned to glance down at old Juan Amado, who sat hunched in a corner, lighting a stub of candle.

Ray glanced quickly about as the yellow light grew to its full strength, tawny eyes raking swiftly along dim gray walls that were cool to the touch. Those walls were of stone, and Ray knew without being told that the rather long, narrow room in which he found himself was under ground.

"The door yonder leads into the basement, which is under the main house," Juan Amado pointed a skinny hand toward a massive door.

Ray Vernon nodded, stalked to the door, and shouldered it. He threw most of his weight into the motion, yet the door did not give in the least.

"From the rim of the gully up which you tried to escape, I saw what happened," the Mexican spoke calmly. "I raced down, and was trying to give you the help when those two evil ones—Tom Bradford an' Lon Trent—came up. They took us both prisoners, an' rushed here with us. No one, I think, saw them do it."

"In other words we're plumb out o' luck, eh?" Ray asked grimly. "That's what yo're tryin' to tell me, ain't it?"

"Si, that is what I mean," the old fellow nodded. "To-day, you made the monkey of Tom Bradford in public, after killing one of his hired thieves. Besides that, Bradford

knows that you an' I, *muchacho*, might tell the things to Sheriff Brill Kerry. Me, I think Bradford will want to make sure you and I do no talking to those sheriff."

"In that case the skunk could 'a' killed us both there at the edge o' town, where my hoss took that spill," Ray gritted. "If he's faunchin' to see our hides on the fence, why didn't he drill us then and there?"

"You do not know Tom Bradford, my son," old Juan shrugged. "He is the devil, that is sure. We will not die the easy deaths, I think."

Ray shuddered a little, for there was something dreadfully grim in the old fellow's seamed face and dark eyes. Ray tapped absently at his empty holsters, then just as absently lifted his hands to his middle. He gave a sudden start, for his money belt was missing once more.

"That snake finally got my dinero!" he rasped. "Blast Tom Bradford's hide, I'd like just one more chance at settlin' accounts with him."

"Your money is hidden!"

Ray spun at the low, hissing words. Juan Amado was on his feet now, stepping forward.

"There where your horse fell, *muchacho*, I dig the hole an' hide the belt with the dinero when I see that I can never get you away before those evil ones reach us," the old fellow hissed. "I dug the hole beneath a cat's-claw bush an' hid your belt an' money in it. There is the skull of a steer hiding the fresh earth. If by some miracle you should escape these ladrones—"

The old fellow's voice pinched off. There came the sudden rattling of metal, then the heavy door at the end of the room opened a few inches. The door was only a pace away, and

Ray Vernon tensed his lean muscles, ready to leap shoulder first against the door. But old Juan Amado guessed the youth's intention and gripped his arm with talonlike fingers that were surprisingly strong.

"There is a stout chain outside the door, which keeps it from opening only those few inches if some one outside wishes it so," Juan whispered.

Ray relaxed, groaning inwardly. He had meant to leap against that door, knowing that the sudden move would more than surprise whoever was outside. But with a chain permitting the door to open just so far, lunging against it would avail him nothing.

"Waal, how yuh two smart-Alecks feelin' now?"

Tom Bradford's evil face showed at the crack of the door. The big jasper was grinning wolfishly, red-shot black eyes puckered as he looked in upon his two prisoners.

"It'll be dark in another hour, so yuh two snakes better start prayin'," the Anchor boss gloated. "Know what I aim ter do with yuh two?"

"I know this much," Ray Vernon snarled, "yuh ain't got the sand to step in here, Bradford, an' fight me man to man. Make it knives, fists, or guns, yuh snake! If I win, then Juan Amado an' me leave here unharmed. If I lose—well, what happens after that is up to yuh."

Tom Bradford's face went purple. An oath bubbled past his thick lips, and for a moment it seemed that he would try lunging through that small aperture. From behind him came a shuffling of feet and a mutter of voices, which told Ray that his proposition had been heard by some one beside Tom Bradford.

"Yuh—yuh lippy young pup!" the Anchor owner snarled chokingly. "Fer two cents I'd come in there an'

give yuh the wust beatin' yuh ever had."

"Not yuh, Bradford!" Ray sneered, hoping desperately to goad the mean-eyed man into some rash play. "Yuh strut around before yore men an' tell it scary about bein' a tough hombre. But at heart, Bradford, yo're yella. Yo're a cheap, four-flushin', loud-mouthed crook who hires his fightin' done."

"By gosh, boss, that feller is layin' it on thick!" a hoarse voice came from outside.

"Nope, I'm readin' his brand, out loud," Ray put in swiftly. "Yuh gents out there that have been drawin' fancy pay to do this big snake's dirty work. I reckon yuh see now why he hires his fightin' done. He's too yella to do it his own self."

"Yeah?" Tom Bradford snarled through quivering lips. "By gosh, kid, yo're askin' fer it. Hyar, Lon, hold these cutters o' mine. I'm goin' in there an' take the starch out o' that loud-mouthed slick-ear."

There were roars of approval from outside, then the door opened wider. Tom Bradford stalked through the door, a skulking, powerfully built man who knew his rough-and-tumble fighting from A to Z.

Ray Vernon settled himself for what was to follow, fully aware of the fact that he was in no physical condition to put up much of a scrap. Ray was a good twenty pounds lighter than Tom Bradford, and lacked the arm length of the bigger man. Besides, Ray was weak from the wound in his head and from the fall he had had that day.

"Hyar's a sample, kid!" Tom Bradford snarled, and shot a straight, well-timed punch at the youth's head.

Ray tried to dodge, but failed. The blow caught him, slammed him back hard against the stone wall.

He tripped, fell sidewise. Then Tom Bradford was rushing him, grinning broadly.

"Yaller, am I?" he roared, and launched a kick at the youth's pale face.

The boot toe landed angrily, ripping the skin across Ray's cheek. Ray Vernon knew then and there that he was worse than over-matched.

CHAPTER VI.

FISTS—AND A TRICK.

RAY VERNON could never remember just how he accomplished it, but he managed somehow to gain his feet. His face was crimson-smeared, plastered with dirt from the floor of the dungeon room that was lighted by a flickering candle.

"So yuh thought yuh could whup me, huh?" Tom Bradford's snarling voice came as if from a great distance.

Ray Vernon's blurred eyes swung toward the voice, however, and he could see the bigger man moving toward him swiftly. Ray dodged instinctively, gasping for breath, sick from the pain of cracked ribs—ribs that had cracked when Tom Bradford's boots crashed again and again into his sides.

"Stand still, blast yuh!" Bradford was snarling again. "All I want is one good punch, so's I kin stretch yuh out on the floor again. Next time, younker, I'm trompin' yuh plumb flat."

Ray Vernon heard, and fought desperately against the dizziness that was making him weak. He felt the rush of a fist past his crimson-and-dirt-smeared face, and lashed out blindly at the blurred form before him.

His fist landed, yet the bigger man did not so much as grunt. Ray knew

the sickening feeling of defeat then, for he realized that without time to rally his strength he would soon be battered back to the floor and perhaps trampled to death.

"If I could just keep out o' that big lobo's reach for a minute or two, I might get my wind back," Ray thought swiftly.

But even as the thought drilled through his numbed brain a fist crashed into the base of his neck, flinging him back savagely. But for the damp stone wall of the dungeon Ray would have gone down then and there.

As it was he flung his arms wide, wabby legs braced as he leaned against the wall. Through glazed eyes he saw Tom Bradford rushing in, grinning wolfishly.

Ray mustered every ounce of his remaining strength, shoved himself forward from the wall, and flung a looping right at the swimming face before him. He felt the numb jolt of his fist landing, and saw crimson spatter from Bradford's nose. The Anchor boss rocked back, howling oaths.

"Dang it, onhook that chain!" a voice that was edged by excitement demanded. "Trent, yuh an' them other two is gettin' all the sights while the rest o' us stand back. Open the door a mite an' we kin all see."

The words struck through Ray Vernon's pain-fogged brain, causing him to go suddenly tense. If the chain on that door was unhooked, he might conceivably make a break, get out into the hallway, and get his hands on a gun! The thought was like a plunge into cool water.

Ray's tawny eyes cleared rapidly, and his brain became clear, cool. He twisted his crimson-smeared face into a grin as he saw Tom Bradford

skulking toward him, cautious after that wallop on the nose.

Bradford's teeth showed in a snarl, and there was murder in his eyes as he advanced. But Ray felt like whooping, for he saw the heavy door shove, swing wider. The chain had been unhooked!

But Ray's grin, and the sudden puckering, cold gaze of his tawny eyes warned Tom Bradford. The big jasper halted, staring uneasily, crimson dripping from his nose.

"Shucks, Bradford, don't start runnin' just when I'm gettin' warmed up!" Ray taunted. "But I reckon I can keep yuh hemmed up in here, at that!"

From the tail of his eye Ray measured the distance to the door that was now half open and jammed with the evil faces of Bradford's gang.

"Runnin', am I?"

Bradford's voice warned Ray. The youth jerked his eyes back to Bradford, and was barely in time to dodge a blow that would have stretched him out cold.

Ray struck up and out sharply, knowing that he was too far away to land anything resembling a telling blow. But the whiz of his fist before Bradford's face caused the big jasper to dodge back, which gave Ray time to get his balance.

Then Ray backed before a sudden charge, only too glad of the chance. For backing carried him toward the door. He pretended to stumble, and took a blow on the point of his shoulder that staggered him. But the door was almost at his back now, and he barely felt the pain of that blow so intent was he on putting his plan into effect.

"Got yuh!" Tom Bradford roared. "I'll twist yuh in two, kid! Jist wait until I git my hands on yuh. I'll break——"

Ray pretended to stumble again,

then dropped suddenly flat to the floor. Tom Bradford tripped over the youth's lean body, went crashing forward, mighty body striking the partly open door with terrific force.

There were howls of pain and surprise as the door swept men back and down. Ray leaped up, breath sobbing with the effort of forcing his numbed and aching muscles to act. He gained his feet, dived into the tangle of men there in the black hallway that led from the dungeon room into the basement proper.

There were oaths and yells and the churning of bodies against the hard dirt floor. But Ray was paying no attention to the yells and oaths and the blows that were rained upon him. His hands were groping, clawing at the men he sprawled across. Then his fingers found a gun butt, clamped down. He wrenched the gun free, threw his body sideways.

He saw Tom Bradford now, saw the huge jasper leap up from that tangle of bodies. Bradford cursed wildly, kicked out savagely at the men about him.

Ray Vernon gained his feet, batted a man loose from him with the Colt he had taken, and leaped toward the hulking boss of the snarling pack. Ray thumbed back the hammer of the gun, jammed the muzzle hard into Bradford's middle.

"Steady, yuh skunk!" he snarled. "An' get this through yore head: If yuh or any o' yore gang make a bad move, yo're the *first* gent I'll plug!"

Tom Bradford went stiff, huge hands hooked, ready to claw down at the gun. Ray slithered sideways, got behind Bradford, and bored in hard with the muzzle of the gun he held.

"Better quiet yore pack, feller!"

he snarled. "Remember, Bradford, you get shot first if things go wrong."

Others heard Ray's voice now, and there was a sudden hush over the dank corridor.

"My gosh!" a hoarse voice wheezed. "That younker is out o' the dungeon. An' he's got the drop on the boss."

"Order yore gang into the dungeon, Bradford," Ray ordered grimly. "Tell 'em to go in backward, single file."

"Juan!" he yelled loudly in the next breath.

"Si, *muchacho!*" came the reply. "I am here, within the door."

"*Bueno!*" Ray clipped. "When Bradford's litter o' skunks back past yuh they'll come one at a time an' move slow. Take their guns, Juan, as they go into the dungeon."

"Go—go ahead, men!" Tom Bradford gulped. "This—this snake has got me cold turkey, boys. Yuh b-better do like he says, I reckon."

There were nine men there besides Bradford. They stood crouched, snarling like cornered beasts, hands trembling above holstered guns. Some of them looked battered from being struck by the door and their boss's fists. But they were ready for battle, and Ray Vernon held his breath as he waited to see what effect Bradford's orders would have.

To Ray's vast relief four or five of the tough customers stepped forward, their hands lifting. One turned his back, started backing clumsily through the door.

Ray saw old Juan Amado's skinny hands flash out, lift twin guns from the Anchor tough's holsters. Then another man approached the door, turned his back to it, and began backing slowly.

Ray Vernon relaxed a little, breathing for the first time in several seconds. Once those toughs were inside that vaultlike room the rest would be simple.

The third man was approaching the door now, backing through. In another minute or two—

"Say, what are we, anyway?" Lon Trent's voice lashed suddenly through the gloom. "The odds is ten to two, in our favor. Do yuh jaspers aim to let one cow-puncher an' that stove-up ol' Mex run yuh into that blasted dungeon an' leave yuh there to rot?"

"Shut up, Lon," Tom Bradford croaked. "This gun is—is borin' my back. If you make this feller sore he m-might drill me."

"Ray Vernon ain't the sort ter shoot a defenseless man!" Lon Trent cackled shrilly. "Jist stand with yore hands up, boss, an' yo're safe. Me, I'll slide up the stairs an' see that Ray Vernon an' his Mex friend don't git out o' the basement. Yuh kin——"

Ray waited to hear no more. Realizing that the rest would turn on him now that Lon Trent had made the break, Ray knew that his only hope lay in beating the others to the action.

He sprang across the gloomy corridor, the gun he had captured weaving before him. He saw an evil yet beautiful flower of blazing powder bloom briefly in the gloom ahead, and fired above and to one side of it.

There was a shrill yell behind him that penetrated to his consciousness even in that tense moment. There was something strangely wild, almost barbaric in that shrill, drawn-out cry that echoed down the corridor.

Then guns were booming, and

men were screaming in fear and anger as they scuttled this way and that, like rats in a sinking ship.

Ray Vernon could have dashed on down the gloomy corridor, for he had headed the seething mass of excited men now. But his mind was suddenly on old Juan. Ray had hoped to reach Lon Trent, manage somehow to hold the Anchor pack at bay. But he saw now that the task was hopeless, for the gang was bearing down upon him like stampeding cattle.

He fired two shots over their heads, but they came on, yelling, crowding, not even returning his fire. Groaning, Ray reeled in close to the wall, gun poised to lash out at the first man who came in reach. But he found that there was a sort of recess in the wall at his back, and staggered into it while the men streamed past.

"Beat 'em to the stairs, boys!" Tom Bradford's heavy voice boomed as the shadowy figures seethed past. "We've still got the snakes bottled if we git to the basement stairs first. An' don't shoot ter kill, fer I aim to make them two tell us where they hid that four thousand dollars, afore we leave their carcasses swinging where folks kin see 'em."

The gang was past now, and Ray Vernon turned grimly back down the corridor. The candlelight was gone from the dungeon room, and he was forced to feel his way along the damp wall.

He stumbled over a body in the doorway of the dungeon, dropped swiftly to his knees, free hand groping. His fingers encountered rough leather garments, and he knew that the man who lay there was old Juan.

"Too late!" Ray gritted. "I turned back to help the old gent, when it was already too late. An' now I'm trapped for fair."

CHAPTER VII.

SHOW-DOWN.

RAY VERNON dragged the limp form of the aged Mexican through the door. He found and closed the heavy portal by feel alone, then fished a sulphur match from his pocket. He struck the match, peering down into the Mexican's leathery face.

There was an ugly red tint to the old fellow's grizzled hair along one side of the head. But Ray had to search for and light the stub candle before he could make much of an examination.

He bent above the old Mexican after the candle was burning, examined the crimsoned patch of grizzled hair. Ray Vernon saw then that he was not too late, for old Juan suffered nothing more than a deeply cut scalp. Even as Ray discovered that the old fellow moaned, rolled half over.

Ray glanced quickly, helplessly about the long, damp room. His tawny eyes glowed when he saw the four six-guns lying there on the floor, where old Juan had evidently tossed them as he disarmed the Anchor men.

Ray selected a well-matched pair of weapons, shoved them into his holsters after making sure they used the same caliber cartridges as he carried in his belt loops. He raked the other guns closer to the candle, thinking grimly that with so many weapons at hand he could at least make it hot for the Anchor cut-throats if they came after him again.

"Eh?"

Old Juan's voice jerked Ray's glittering eyes down. The old fellow was sitting up, feeling gently of his cut scalp as he stared questioningly at Ray.

"You did not make the break,

then?" the old Mexican asked slowly. "For why did you not run for the stairs, *muchacho*?"

"An' leave yuh behind?" Ray growled. "Not much, Juan. We're in a bad spot, that's true. But we've got us some guns, anyhow. Feel like walkin' up to the basement yuh mentioned?"

"The door then is not locked?" the old fellow asked.

"Nope," Ray gritted. "I pulled it shut, so's none o' them snakes could sneak back an' take a pot shot at me while I looked at yore hurts. I'll put out the candle, then we can open the door safe enough."

"If you had not come back, my son, I would have been killed by those ladrones, most likely." Old Juan's voice came through the darkness now, for Ray had snuffed out the candle.

"I reckon we'll both likely get our tickets, Juan," Ray answered grimly as he felt for the door and shoved it open. "But I aim to make it interestin' for them snakes. They'll starve us out in the long run, shore. But——"

"But no," old Juan chuckled softly. "Remember, my son, I built this house in those days when the Apaches were to be feared."

"Gosh, that reminds me!" Ray croaked. "I heard a war cry that sounded like the yell of an Apache a while ago. Some o' them Anchor snakes must 'a' been on the prod for fair."

"I did the yelling" Juan chuckled at Ray's elbow. "I heard it many times when I was the young man and fought with those Apaches. I knew fear of it then, and knew that those ladrones would also fear it in darkness."

"So that's what stampeded the snakes!" Ray gritted. "But right now we'd better get up into that

basement. If we had water an' food, we might make a decent stand, at that. But as it is our chances are slim."

"But we are no longer prisoners," old Juan chuckled again. "Come, my son. I lead the way."

Those lean, strong old fingers bit into Ray's arm, guiding him along the darkened passageway. Then old Juan was halting before the nook in the wall where Ray had crouched to let the fear-maddened Anchor killers pass him.

"Say, yuh don't mean there's some secret way out o' this place, do yuh?" Ray asked tensely, for he heard a sudden groaning sound, and felt damp, chill air fan his face.

"Just so!" old Juan laughed. "In five minutes we will be at the hidden cave, well beyond the house. Hold to my jacket, *muchacho*."

Ray grasped the scarred leather jacket with trembling fingers, gripped it tight. Down through a tunnel that was damp and narrow old Juan led the way for what seemed ages. Yet it was scarcely five minutes until a patch of dim light showed ahead of them.

Ray wanted to shout with joy when he sniffed clean, sweet air that grew tangy and hot with desert dryness as they approached the light. Then they were in a small cave, where thick brush formed a heavy screen before them.

"This way," old Juan panted, and turned along the dim line of an old trail.

A moment later Juan and Ray were lying flat on their stomachs atop a round knoll, looking out and down upon a great, rambling adobe house. Beyond the house were barns, corrals, and many smaller buildings.

"My home," old Juan said simply.

"Many years that was the home of Anna an' me. But now——"

"How'd that Bradford snake get it away from yuh?" Ray asked tensely. "Gosh, Juan, yuh must 'a' been a rich man when yuh owned such a place as this."

"Si, I was what yuh call reech," the old Mexican nodded. "But my cattle, they suddenly start to vanish. Finally, I have to borrow the money to buy more cattle. I borrowed it from the man I thought a good neighbor, Tom Bradford."

"An' yuh lost the place because yuh could not pay back what yuh borrowed, eh?" Ray mused, studying the great, comfortable ranch house through puckered lids.

"When I sell the cows an' go to pay back the two thousand which I borrow, the paper says *twenty* thousand, not two thousand," the old Mexican gritted suddenly. "Those Tom Bradford, he had what you call raise the amount of the note. I had not the twenty thousand. So Señor Bradford takes away the rancho which is mine."

"Look!" Ray cried suddenly. "By golly, yonder comes the sheriff an' a posse. Do yuh reckon they've found out that yuh an' me was brought here?"

The two watchers grew tense with excitement. A dozen mounted men had swarmed up out of a draw, and were spurring toward the great arch that was the front gate. Men poured from the house, and Tom Bradford's huge form bulked above his hirelings as he led the way down the long walk to the gate.

There was a lot of talking down there for the next few minutes, then Anchor men were running to the corals, roping out horses. A few minutes later, the sheriff and his posse were galloping away with five Anchor men.

Ray Vernon was just as excited as if the sheriff and his posse had been a rescue party, however. He watched until the posse vanished and Tom Bradford and his three men had again rushed back into the house.

"Come on, Juan," Ray snapped. "Yuh know the place, so lead the way. There's only four o' them snakes left down there now. I'm callin' a show-down."

Juan would have protested, but Ray gave him no chance. Instead of waiting for Juan the lanky youth leaped to his feet, sprinted down the hill, and gained the back of an out-building.

A few minutes later, Ray was pressing close to the back wall of the main house, panting from the hard, swift run. Old Juan came up, glaring his protest and looking pleased at the same time. The old fellow had brought a pair of businesslike six-guns from the dungeon room, and was now drawing them, to inspect them carefully.

"How can we get into the house with the least trouble?" Ray whispered.

Juan nodded his understanding, slid along the wall. The sun was just setting, and Ray wished suddenly that he had waited until dusk to make his attack. But it was too late now, and he followed old Juan around a corner of the building to what was obviously a patio.

They went through a tall gate, guns out, eyes alert. Then they were across the patio, walking along worn tiles beneath a long porch.

Old Juan turned suddenly to a tall door, tried the latch, and stepped into a hallway. Voices came to them instantly, and they heard a man laughing. Juan nodded his grizzled head, moved catlike down the hallway toward a wide arch.

"We'll not bother with them two snakes down in the cellar ontill some time to-morrer," Tom Bradford was saying. "No chance o' them breakin' out, but we'll keep a guard at the cellar door all night."

"That blasted sheriff shore throwed a scare into me, showin' up like he done." Lon Trent's voice came snarlingly. "But yuh worked it slick when yuh offered ter send the boys along with his posse. When they find that Ray Vernon snake, he'll be swinging from a limb, some place close ter town."

"We've got ter hang that Vernon younker an' the Mex fer folks ter look at, after what happened in the saloon in town ter-day," Tom Bradford snarled. "But we'll do that chore soon as we starve them two into tellin' where that four thousand is hid. Buzz, yuh an' Poke jar loose from that jug an' pass it over this way."

Ray Vernon and old Juan came to the great archway, stood looking down into a huge, low-ceilinged living room. At a long table in the center of the room sat Tom Bradford, Lon Trent, and two others.

Lon Trent took a gallon jug in his hands, tilted it to his lips—and let raw whisky spill out over his shirt front. He was staring at the big archway, trying to speak through lips that were numb and sagging.

"L-look out!" he squalled at last, and let the jug roll from his trembling hands.

The jug hit the tiled floor, smashed to hundreds of pieces. Tom Bradford and the other two at the table leaped up, whirling.

"Steady, yuh skunks!" Ray Vernon rasped. "If yuh make a fool play——"

A shrill, piercing yell lashed the room, seemed to rebound from every wall in multiplied echoes. Old Juan

Amado had yelled his Apache war cry, and the Anchor toughs jumped in their boots.

But their hands had already been slapping down as old Juan yelled, and now the sudden, blasting roar of six-guns drowned out the echoes of that eerie war cry.

Ray Vernon felt a slug fan his face as he went forward behind spitting guns. He saw Lon Trent fold over the back of a deep-seated chair, heard the pale-eyed killer's choking wail of death.

Then a slug caught Ray in the ribs, jerking him half around. But from the tail of his eye he saw another Anchor man hit the floor in a limp heap.

"Kill them two!" Tom Bradford screamed. "Drill them two before they——"

Ray Vernon's guns matched the thunder of the Anchor owner's. Bradford's voice trailed off, became a choking gasp. He crashed into the table, dropped sidewise to the floor.

The remaining Anchor man was dropping his guns, lifting his hands through the dim blue death pall that was powder smoke in the room. The man who had surrendered was heavy of jowl, fat, paunchy-looking. He stood shaking visibly, greenish gray eyes protruding in terror as Ray Vernon reeled forward, grinning harshly behind smoking guns. Beside Ray came old Juan, hot gun weaving.

"I wanted to wing Bradford, make him talk," Ray growled. "But it looks like——"

"D-don't plug me no more!" Tom Bradford's thick voice came chokingly. "I'm—sure done fer—men. D-don't shoot a man that's already dyin'."

"Talk, Bradford!" Ray rasped, kneeling beside the white-faced An-

chor boss. "Tell us how yuh got possession o' this ranch."

"Loaned ol' Amado—two thousand—dollars," Tom Bradford choked. "I raised the note to—twenty thousand—knowed he couldn't pay. I stole him blind first—so's he'd have to—borry money. Then I loaned him—that two thousand an'—an'——"

The voice choked off, died. Tom Bradford's hard eyes went blank, glazed over.

"Hombre," Ray Vernon snarled up at the fat jasper who had surrendered, "did yuh hear what yore boss said as he cashed in his chips? Kin yuh remember that, an' remember to repeat it to the sheriff? In case yuh do, yuh'll get a chance to hunt a healthier climate."

"S-shore as my name is Poke Belton, I kin remember what the boss said," the fat hombre gasped. "Gosh, I'll be only too glad ter tell what I know if—if yuh'll give me a chance ter ride yonderly, Vernon. An' I'll tell the sheriff how yuh was first jumped by Wolf Haskett an' Lon Trent, too, when they was out watchin' Coyote Sink fer a Cattleman's Association detective that was supposed ter be prowlin' up this way."

"Fair enough," Ray nodded, then turned to grin at old Juan Amado. "That dinero o' mine made pretty good skunk bait at that, Juan," Ray

smiled wanly. "Tie that jasper up, then see if yuh can't wrap somethin' around my side. A bullet gouged me, an' it needs lookin' after."

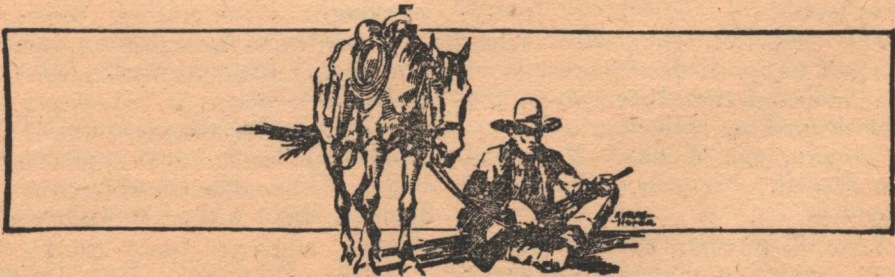
"When this Poke Belton hombre tells to the sheriff what he knows, then I get my rancho back," old Juan said a few minutes later as he finished bandaging a gash along Ray's side. "Suppose, my son, you take the dinero which you say was the skunk bait an' buy the cows. I have the rancho, you have the money. That way, *muchacho*, we are what you call the partners, no?"

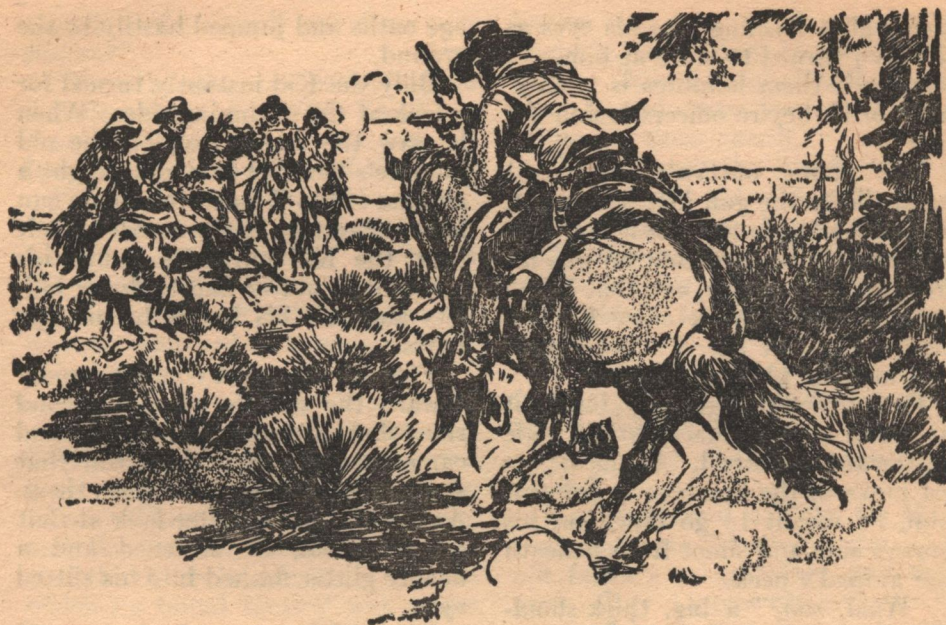
"Yuh—yuh mean it?" Ray gasped. "Why, Juan, this is a fine big spread. My measly four thousand would——"

"Would buy many cows." The old fellow smiled happily. "Then it is settled. My wife an' me, we are old an' lonesome, my son. If you would be with us here an' help us run the rancho which would some day be yours, we would be lonesome no more. It is—how you say it?—the deal, eh? You will shake the hands, no?"

Ray could not speak over the lump that was in his throat. But he reached up, and felt his hand gripped by those bony, strong fingers.

Old Juan smiled happily, "So, my son, we are now the partners," he said simply, and turned to inspect the bonds of the grunting prisoner.





Outlaws Cross Guns

A "Billy the Kid" Story

By Samuel H. Nickels

Author of "Marshal Of Abilene," etc.

AS Billy the Kid halted his tired grulla bronc at the little creek for a drink, he looked keenly at the long, adobe ranch house that was nearly hidden in a grove of big cottonwoods. He stared for a moment, then his sandy-lashed eyes swung hastily to the big corral just beyond where some cowboys were at work.

The Kid could smell the odor of singed hair and burning cow chips, and could hear the bellow of branded calves. But he could see only a single puncher roping the calves and dragging them to the branding fire.

"Huh!" he muttered, staring. "It looks like them hombres on the fence

figgers they're too good to dirty themselves working in a brandin' pen. Accordin' to thet, there might be a job open here fer a feller like me thet ain't particular what he does so long as they'll give him honest work."

As the Kid started his horse on, he pulled the brim of his old hat lower on his forehead and shifted his holstered Colts to a more convenient position on his narrow hips. His thin lips tightened for a moment over his prominent teeth when he got a better look at the heavily armed hombres who were perched on the corral.

"Gunnies!" he snapped softly, a

steely glint flashing into his eyes as the men turned to stare at him. "I wonder if them hombres is workin' here, or if they're officers lookin' fer me?"

The young outlaw's slim right hand slid to the gun just beneath it, and he started to turn his horse. But he instantly realized that he was far from his home range, and that it had been almost a week since he had eluded the last sheriff's posse that was hunting him.

He frowned thoughtfully, but kept his hand close to his gun and rode on toward the corral. At the slightest move of the hombres in front of him, he meant to go down on his horse's side and shoot from beneath the animal's neck.

"Waal, son?" a big, thick-shouldered hombre growled inquiringly as he stopped in front of them. "Was yuh goin' somewhar, or was yuh out huntin' a bear? Them's awful big guns fer a little button like you to be packin'."

As the hombre's companions burst into a roar of jeering laughter, the Kid stiffened. He started to snap an angry reply, but caught himself in time and managed to grin.

He now knew that the hombres were not officers. If they were, they were not looking for him. He was sure that they merely took him for a wondering young saddle tramp.

"Has the cat got yore tongue, son?" the big man guffawed, winking at the hombres beside him. "Speak up! Thar ain't nobody hyar goin' to bite yuh. Maybe we'd——"

As a sudden clatter of flying hoofs sounded from beyond the cottonwoods, the hombre bit off what he had started to say and looked sharply around. A wiry, gray-haired old man burst into view and turned his horse straight toward them. The men on the fence snapped sav-

age oaths and jumped hastily to the ground.

Billy the Kid instantly turned for a look at the oncoming rider. When he saw the angry look on the old hombre's bearded face and caught a glimpse of the Winchester saddle gun, he was carrying ready across his left arm, the Kid hurriedly pulled his horse back out of line of flying bullets and slid his hands to his gun butts.

The old man was coming rapidly toward the corrals when a second rider shot into view behind him and came spurring at a dead run that swiftly closed the gap between them. As the Kid got a better look at that slender form, he stiffened and a deadly glitter flashed into his slitted eyes.

"A girl!" he snapped, staring. "I don't savvy what's bein' pulled off here; but, whatever it is, I'm in on it—an' I'm on her side."

The Kid's eyes swung back to the hombres at the corral. When he saw that the big gunman had slipped his right-hand Colt partly out of his holster and had flipped back the weapon's hammer, the Kid hunched over and braced himself for a lightning shot.

But just as the youthful outlaw was getting ready for one of his matchless draws, the speeding girl reined her sweat-lathered horse in front of the old man and faced the scowling gunmen at the corral.

"You cowards!" she almost hissed, shaking the damp curls back from her flushed face. "You thieving cowards! You were not content with stealing our cattle and horses in your attempts to drive my father and I away from our little ranch. Now you were——"

"Kate!" the old man cut in harshly, his faded blue eyes glinting dangerously as he gripped his gun.

"Kate, git out of the way! Yuh'll git hurt! This thing has gone far enough! I've got to shoot it out with the skunks! I've——"

Without finishing what he started to say, the old man tried to ride past her. Billy darted a look at the gunmen at the corral, and he saw that they were all set to shoot the instant they could do so without hitting the girl.

In a flash, he drove spurs to his grulla and got in front of the old man. Before the old hombre could swing up his Winchester, he struck the weapon's muzzle aside and wrenched it from his grasp.

"Steady, mister!" he whispered hastily. "Do yuh want to git shot here in front of yore girl? Keep yore head! Git away from here until yuh kin cool off an' think! Git on while yuh got a chance! I'll foller directly! Ride!"

In spite of the old hombre's angry shouts, the Kid gave the gun to the girl. He then handed her her father's bridle reins and motioned for her to lead him away.

As she instantly turned back down the slope and went spurring toward home, the Kid swung his horse to face the hombres at the corral. He fully expected to have to stab for his guns and begin shooting, but he found he was mistaken.

The men had holstered their weapons and were grinning wolfishly at the old man who was glaring back at them and shouting for the girl to turn his horse loose and give him his rifle. The big hombre whooped a taunting reply, then he glanced across at the Kid and spat out a stream of tobacco juice.

"It's lucky fer old Culver thet yuh butted in, sonny," he grunted carelessly. "If it hadn't been fer thet gal, yuh would have already had a chance to have seen an hombre shot.

But we'll have to down him yit. Either thet or he'll take thet filly of his an' leave hyar."

The Kid said nothing. He darted a look over his shoulder in time to see the girl lead her father's horse out of sight around the cottonwoods.

"Waal," the big hombre went on, staring, "yuh ain't told us what yuh was doin' hyar on our range, sonny. Maybe yuh was huntin' yuh a job whar yuh could learn to be a cowboy an' shoot them big guns yo're packin'. It might be we could use a button like yuh fer a hoss wrangler."

A steely glint crept into the Kid's slitted eyes, and a mirthless smile curled his thin lips that made him look years older than he was. He stared straight at the fellow for a moment without speaking.

"Yeah?" he finally snapped. "So yuh'd learn me to be a cowboy, would yuh? Feller, I reckon I can rope and ride circles around anything yuh've got here in the shape of a cowhand. An' as to learnin' me how to shoot these guns yo're makin' fun of me fer packin', just watch this!"

Still keeping his eyes watchfully on the crowd, the Kid pulled two pennies from his chaps pocket. He laughed shortly and tossed them high into the air, then his hands stabbed to his holsters in a lightning draw.

Bang-bang! The two pennies were just starting down when both the Kid's guns flamed in a bellowing roar, and the coins vanished as if an unseen hand had suddenly reached up and plucked them out of the air.

A chorus of startled grunts and oaths instantly burst from the watchers. The big hombre's eyes widened.

"What the——" he ejaculated. "Say, whar in heck did yuh ever

learn to shoot like thet, sonny? If yo're lookin' fer a job hyar, yo're hired right now, an' yuh git paid fightin' wages if yuh got nerve to match yore shootin'. I kin always use a good gunny thet——"

"Yeah?" the Kid cut in harshly. "Well, hombre, I got the nerve to match my shootin', but I wouldn't work fer you on a bet. An' don't yuh start callin' me 'sonny' no more. If yuh do, I'll roll yuh an' see what makes yuh tick. Savvy?"

With a warning glare at the dumfounded hombres, the Kid deliberately turned his back and rode away. But as he did so, he kept his right hand on a gun to be ready if any of them should try a treacherous shot at him from behind.

But there was little danger of the men shooting at him. Though they were impressed with his uncanny display of shooting, they still looked on him only as a harmless kid, and their boss merely grunted and shrugged carelessly as he sped away.

II.

The Kid quickly caught up with the old man and the girl, and the old hombre eyed him with angry suspicion as he pulled up beside them. Billy grinned and slouched over in his saddle.

"What do yuh want?" the old man snapped, glaring. "I reckon Buck Krugel sent yuh to foller us an' see what I aim to do. It's lucky fer him yuh grabbed my gun when yuh did. Yuh would have been out a thievin' boss by now if I'd had time to shoot him!"

The Kid chuckled and tried to speak, but the old man cut him off. Grinning dryly, the Kid shrugged as the girl added her voice to her father's.

Between them, they quickly told

the Kid what had been happening. As they talked the boyish grin slowly left the Kid's face, and his thin lips tightened grimly over his prominent teeth.

Bob Culver was the old man's name, and with the help of his daughter he was running a few cattle on their little homestead a few miles beyond the edge of "Buck" Krugel's J Bar B range. Krugel was the big hombre who had offered the Kid a job.

A glint of understanding flashed into the Kid's eyes when Kate let fall a remark that told him just what the trouble was all about. And it told him, also, that the lives of both Culver and the girl were in deadly danger.

Krugel was a stranger from below the border, and old Culver had seen him treacherously shoot the original owner of the J Bar B in the back and murder him. The slippery hombre had then forged a bill of sale and got possession of the ranch, which he now held with a crew of his amigos.

"An' now," the old man shouted angrily, "Krugel has got a suspicion thet I know what he's done an' he's tryin' to steal me out an' run me off the range! Either thet or he means to git me in the back like he got Jeff Bradshaw, who used to own thet ranch! But I ain't afraid of him, an' yuh kin go back an' tell him so!"

"I don't happen to be workin' fer Krugel," the Kid said quietly. "I ain't goin' back there, an' I——"

At that instant, a sudden, rapid beat of flying hoofs brought him around in the saddle. As he caught sight of two of Krugel's gunmen who were spurring swiftly after them, he swung his horse to the side of the trail and pulled to a quick halt.

Almost as he did so, the two glar-

ing hombres spurred up beside Culver and the girl and slapped hands to their gun butts. The Kid's eyes glinted dangerously, and he began whistling tunelessly between his teeth as he pulled his horse slightly aside so that Kate Culver would not be in line of flying bullets.

"Listen, yuh!" the bushy-whiskered hombre bellowed to the old man. "Krugel sent us to tell yuh to git to blazes off this range. Take this gal o' yores an' light a shuck fer some place else. Don't let the sun rise on yuh, either! Thet goes fer this young button yuh got foler-in' puh, too! Yo're all gittin' out!"

As one of the ruffians grabbed the girl's bridle reins while the other tried to snatch the Winchester from her hands, the Kid raked his horse with his spurs and snapped his right hand to a Colt butt.

"Git back there, both of yuh!" he barked harshly. "Git away from thet girl an' hoist them hands! Yuh ain't runnin' no blazer no nobody around here! Hoist!"

With bellowed oaths, the two bullying ruffians pivoted hastily in their saddles. Glaring, they spurred toward the Kid and reached for their guns, apparently expecting to see him turn and run.

"Stop right there!" the Kid warned sharply. "Pull them guns, an' I'll——"

Before he could finish, the hombres dragged at their weapons and hunched over in their saddles. As they did so, the Kid's slim hands blurred down and came up with both his long-barreled .45s blazing as they cleared the leather.

Bang-bang-bang-bang! The Kid's and the bushy-whiskered hombre's guns roared almost together, and a slug grazed the Kid's side as he planted a bullet beneath the fellow's

left eye and broke both the other ruffian's arms in three lightning shots.

Kate's horse reared and would have plunged away, but she reined it around as the bushy-whiskered hombre toppled from his saddle and rolled on the ground. Lips parted, she stared at the other ruffian, who was swaying and mouthing oaths.

"Shut up thet cussin'!" the Kid snapped to the fellow. "I hate to hit a man thet's got his arms busted, but don't yuh use any more of thet talk in front of this lady, or I'll slap yuh!"

Spurring forward, the Kid pulled the fellow's horse around and started it back down the trail. He struck the animal across the rump with his hat, then motioned Kate and her father on.

"We'd better git to yore ranch 'fore thet hombre gits back to Krugel," he said quickly. "Krugel an' the rest of his gang will come foggin' after us as soon as he hears what's happened."

Culver stared at the dead man. He blinked and glanced at Kate, then he looked keenly at the Kid and a slow grin split his leathery face.

"Thanks, pard," he said, chuckling. "I thought at first thet yuh might be workin' fer Krugel, but I see I had yuh wrong. Let's go!"

Instantly spurring their horses to a swift gallop, they sped away. The Kid motioned for the girl and her father to take the lead, and he dropped in behind them to keep watch on their back trail.

It was long past noon when they turned up through a stretch of cedar brakes to a high, rocky mesa several miles away. Soon the Kid saw a small adobe ranch house and a large corral of cedar pickets in front of him.

The Kid was thinking rapidly as they swung from their saddles at the corral. The range-wise cowboy outlaw had noticed a tiny cloud of dust far out behind them when they topped the mesa rim, and he knew that they were already being followed.

"Waal, pard," Culver chuckled, "hyar we aire at home. Kate'll rustle us some dinner while me an' you looks after the hosses."

As the old man jerked a thumb toward the house and nodded to Kate, the Kid shook his head grimly and motioned for her to wait. He glanced at their back trail and listened for a moment, then turned to Culver.

"Fork yore horses again, both of yuh!" he barked sharply. "No, wait! I see yuh got other horses in thet corral! We'll saddle fresh ones, then you're goin' to do some of the fastest ridin' yuh ever done! Quick! Yuh ain't got a second to lose!"

The Kid was jerking the saddle and bridle from Kate's horse before he had finishing speaking. Rushing into the corral, he hastily caught a wiry buckskin while she slipped a bridle on a long-legged sorrel for her father.

"Say!" Culver demanded suspiciously, as the Kid hurriedly cinched the girl's saddle on the buckskin. "What's this all about? What——"

"Aplenty!" the Kid barked, darting another look at the mesa trail. "Listen! Yuh told me thet Krugel murdered a feller named Jeff Bradshaw fer thet J Bar B Ranch, an' he forged a bill of sale to hold it."

"Yeah!" Culver said, frowning. "but——"

"Well," the Kid cut in impatiently, "I happen to know thet Bradshaw has a cousin who runs a ranch at the foot of the Datils nearly forty miles from here. His

name's Pete Bradshaw. Tell him what yuh told me, an' git him an' his punchers here as fast as yuh kin. I'll stand Krugel an' his bunch off till they git back. Now fork them horses and ride as yuh never rode before! Ride!"

Muttering, the old man swung reluctantly into his saddle while Kate sprang on the buckskin. He started to grumble an objection, but the Kid threw open the gate and the girl spurred swiftly through it.

As Culver's big sorrel followed her, the Kid slapped the animal across the rump with his hat and sent it racing at a dead run toward the cedar. As they vanished at top speed among the trees, the Kid snatched up the old man's saddle gun from beside the corral and went running to the house.

"I'm sure glad I got thet girl away from here," he muttered, shoving open the door and rushing inside. "Now thet the show-down is comin', Krugel an' his gang would murder her quick as they would the old man. They'll do anything thet's ornery."

The Kid's thin lips tightened as he thought of the many tales he had heard of Buck Krugel and his gang of murderous outlaws. Though he had not told Culver and Kate who the fellow was, he knew just what kind of a gang of killers he would have to fight the instant they told him the hombre's name.

He had never crossed Krugel's trail, but the Kid had heard of Krugel along the border from the Big Bend to the Arizona line. The outlaw leader was a killer, and one of the fastest men with a Colt in the entire West.

"It's lucky I happened to pass Pete Bradshaw's ranch yesterday," the Kid muttered as he hurriedly filled his pockets with cold biscuits which he found on the table by the

stove. "Yeah, an' it's lucky fer Culver an' his girl thet Pete sent me here to see his cousin about a job. Just wait till Pete hears about his cousin bein' murdered by Krugel."

The Kid had barely time to gulp down a cup of cold coffee and grab a box of cartridges for the saddle gun from a shelf behind the stove when he heard a faint clatter of hoofs from beyond the house. Instantly snatching the Winchester, he leaped through the door and raced around the corner of the house.

He headed swiftly for a small clump of piñons that grew among the rocks on a little rise where he could keep watch on the yard and corral. He had just reached the shelter of the trees and crouched down when Buck Krugel and fully a dozen heavily armed riders burst into view across the clearing.

As the outlaw pack came spurring angrily on toward the house, the Kid crouched on one knee and hastily levered a cartridge into the barrel of the Winchester. His sandy-lashed eyes narrowed dangerously, and he threw the weapon to his shoulder as Krugel pulled his sweating horse back on its haunches in a plunging halt at the door.

"Hello, in thar!" Krugel bellowed, glaring savagely. "Open up thet door, or we'll bust it down an' drag yuh out! An' we want thet young cuss yuh got with yuh, too! Blast yuh, we aim to fix yuh both!"

The Kid smiled grimly and settled the big-calibered Winchester firmly against his wiry shoulder. When he saw Krugel and his gang leap from their saddles and start toward the door with their .45s gripped ready, he cuddled the gunstock to his cheek and sighted along the weapon's stubby barrel.

"Halt there, Krugel!" he barked

harshly as the outlaw leader reached to hurl open the door. "Thet doorstep is the dead line, hombre!"

III.

With a snarl of rage, Krugel leaped back and whirled with both his .45s cocked and poised to shoot. Behind him, his gang gripped their weapons and waited, their slitted eyes darting to right and left in an effort to locate the Kid's hiding place.

Glaring and hunched over in a fighting crouch, Krugel looked hastily toward the corral. He then shot a swift glance at the corner of the house and at a little shed beyond.

"Yuh ain't lookin' in the right direction, Krugel," the Kid called calmly. "I'm over in these piñons, an' I'm——"

Bang-bang-bang-bang! Br-a-m!
The sudden thundering bellow of hastily fired guns drowned the sound of his voice and ringed him with a hail of whizzing bullets as Krugel and his ruffians riddled the trees with a quick volley.

The Kid started to reply, but held his fire. He waited until the first wild bursts of shooting had dwindled to a few scattering shots, then he laughed tauntingly.

"Try again, Krugel!" he called sarcastically. "I'll give yuh some lessons in shootin' directly, but just now I'm savin' my bullets fer the first hombre thet tries openin' thet door down there! Savvy?"

"Blast yuh!" Krugel shouted back. "You an' Culver come on out of them rocks with yore hands up! If yuh don't, we'll come over thar an' git yuh!"

"Culver ain't here, Krugel," the Kid called, grinning. "Him an' Kate has gone where yuh won't find them.

I'm here all by my lonesome, but yuh ain't got the nerve it takes to come an' git me."

With a snarl of fury, Krugel fired a hasty shot in hopes of downing the Kid. The ruffians behind him instantly began raking the clump of trees with a withering hail of bullets that showered the Kid with bits of bark, twigs, and slivers of flying lead.

Suddenly Krugel shouted a command, and he and his ruffians charged across the yard toward the Kid's hiding place. The Kid waited until they passed the corral, then he grinned carelessly and snapped the Winchester again to his shoulder.

Bang! The heavy weapon spat a yard-long streak of fire and smoke, and Krugel's silver-banded sombrero jerked around on his head.

With a startled oath, Krugel threw himself aside and ducked hastily behind a rock. Some of his gang fired hasty shots at the flash of the Kid's rifle, then all dived for shelter around a corner of the corral, behind rocks or anything that would shield them from the Kid's bullets.

The Kid merely smiled as the hombres riddled the trees with a hail of lead in a savage effort to cut him down as quickly as possible. He kept a close watch on them and held the Winchester ready in case they tried another charge.

A bullet glanced from a rock near the Kid and stung his face with slivers of flying lead. Another slapped through the top of his hat, and a third hit the piñon beside him and showered him with bits of bark and twigs.

Suddenly the Kid heard Krugel's growling voice. There came a quick reply from behind the corral, then he saw a big ruffian hunch over and go running at top speed toward the house.

Like a flash the Kid jerked up his saddle gun. He waited until the hombre was almost to the door, then pressed the trigger.

Bang! The heavy weapon bucked viciously in his hands, and the ruffian spun half around and went down as if kicked by a mule.

Instantly there came a chorus of wild yells, and another storm of bullets slashed wickedly through the trees around the Kid. Crouched low behind the rocks, he answered them shot for shot as fast as he could work his rifle lever.

He caught a glimpse of an hombre's shoulder at the corner of the corral and fired a hasty shot. Instantly there came a bellow of pain, and a return bullet from another direction struck the rock beside him.

Shooting swiftly, the Kid raked the corrals until the Winchester barrel grew hot in his hand. He was just crouching to reload the stubby weapon when there came a sudden shout from Krugel.

"Hold on thar, blast yuh!" Krugel whooped. "Wait a minute!"

The shooting at the corrals stopped instantly, but the Kid kept cramming fresh cartridges into the magazine of his Winchester while he waited to hear what else Krugel would have to say.

"Yuh hear me, button?" Krugel bellowed again. "Listen! If yuh think yo're so hot as a gunny, I'll send my men plumb back away from us, an' me an' you'll step out hyar in the open and shoot this out betwixt us! I'll see thet nobody else butts in! It'll just be me an' you fer it! Have yuh got the nerve it takes to face me?"

The Kid smiled cold and wiped a slight trickle of crimson from his cheek where a sliver of lead had cut him. A steely glint crept into his

slitted eyes as he finished reloading the Winchester.

He chuckled dryly when Krugel again shouted his offer to shoot it out. He had meant to just stand the hombre and his amigos off until Culver and Kate could get back with Pete Bradshaw and his punchers, but this suited him even better. If he could disarm Krugel and capture him, he could use him to keep the other ruffians away.

"Listen, button!" Krugel bellowed for the third time. "If——"

"I heard yuh!" the Kid called back harshly. "Your offer suits me fine. Git yore men back out of gun range where they can't shoot me in the back. Me an' you'll then step out in the open an' finish this with our hand guns."

Instantly there came a whoop of satisfaction from Krugel and sarcastic shouts from his amigos. With scarcely a pause, the hombres at the corral went rushing away across the clearing. When they were followed by three other ruffians who had been hidden away among the rocks, the Kid's lips tightened grimly and he laid his Winchester aside.

"All right, hombre!" he called to Krugel. "Holster yore guns an' git up where I kin see yuh. I'll come to meet yuh, an' we'll stop about ten steps from each other to shoot this out. Yeah, an' remember thet I'll be watchin' in case yuh try any gun sneaks on me. Savvy?"

With a black scowl on his beefy face, Krugel rose warily from his hiding place and stood waiting. When the Kid stepped from among the piñons, both strode slowly forward.

Apparently certain of his ability to beat the slender youth, Krugel's scowl changed to a wicked grin of satisfaction. But he had seen a sample of the Kid's shooting, and he

kept his hands close to his guns as they moved closer together.

"Waal," Krugel bellowed, as they stopped a few steps apart, "I reckon yuh didn't know just *who* yuh'd be facin' when yuh elected yoreself to cross guns with me, did yuh? I'm a killer, I am!"

The Kid merely smiled. He could see that the fellow was trying to throw a scare into him in an effort to slow him down when he made his draw.

"I'm Buck Krugel!" the hombre blustered importantly. "Since I'm goin' to kill yuh, anyhow, I don't mind tellin' yuh just who I am. I'm Buck Krugel, the outlaw! Savvy what that means, sonny?"

The Kid's eyes were dancing with a reckless light. He chuckled and leaned slightly forward for one of his famous draws.

"Buck Krugel, huh?" he said, grinning inquiringly. "Well, I'm sure glad to meet up with yuh, Krugel. My name happens to be Bonney. Some folks calls me Billy the Kid. Savvy what that means, skunk?"

Krugel was braced to go for his guns, but as the Kid told him his name, he stiffened and his eyes widened in sudden fright. Mouth open, he jerked his hands hastily away from his weapons as if they had burned his fingers.

"The Kid?" he almost gasped. "N-no wonder yuh was able to shoot them pennies out of the air. Yuh—yuh fooled me. I figgered Billy the Kid was older than you. I ain't fightin' you! I——"

"Yuh scared, Krugel?" the Kid snapped, the grin suddenly leaving his boyish face. "But bein' scared won't save yuh. Go fer yore guns!"

Krugel's face was twitching with fright. His hands trembled, and he

took a shaky step backward as if he meant to try to run.

"But, Kid," he gasped, "I—I——"

"I said to draw yore guns!" the Kid barked coldly. "Count three, then go fer yore irons! Yeah, an' you kin do the countin'! Start at it!"

Krugel looked around in terror, but his men were too far away to help him. He licked his dry lips and gulped painfully. Shooting a man in the back or facing an inexperienced kid was one thing, but shooting it out with Billy the Kid was something else. He was almost slobbering with terror.

Suddenly he stiffened and darted a quick look at the Kid's holstered Colts. The Kid saw his eyes begin to glint like those of a cornered rat, and he seemed to get control of himself.

"Well," the Kid snapped impatiently, "are yuh——"

"I'll count! I'll count!" Krugel gritted hastily. "I'll count three. At three, we go fer our guns an' start shootin'. Be sure yuh wait till I've counted three."

Krugel threw himself into a fighting crouch. With his clawed hands poised for a lightning swoop to his holsters, he again licked his thick lips.

"One!" he bellowed. "Remember thet yuh ain't to shoot until I've counted three!"

The Kid nodded grimly. His hands were hanging loosely at his sides, but he was watching Krugel closely.

"Two!" Krugel snarled, and his hands blurred to his holsters in a treacherous draw.

Bang-bang-bang-bang! The sudden bellowing roar of their guns sounded almost like one blasting shot, but Krugel's bullets merely

kicked up the dust in front of him, and he staggered back with both arms broken above the elbow.

As Krugel's hoarse scream of agony brought his amigos rushing back across the clearing, the Kid grabbed him and jerked him around. Holding the cursing killer in front of him, he was just starting to back toward the shelter of the piñons when a crowd of spurring cowboys suddenly burst from the cedar brakes beyond the house and came charging down the rocky slope at a dead run.

At sight of the oncoming riders, a chorus of startled yells burst from Krugel's men, and they swerved hastily to where their own horses stood ground-hitched beyond the corrals. With scarcely another glance in Krugel's direction, they leaped into their saddles and spurred frantically for the shelter of the trees and rocks beyond as a hail of bullets sent two of them pitching to the ground.

The Kid blinked in amazement, then grinned when he saw Pete Bradshaw hurtle past him on a big sweat-lathered black horse and go leading the crowd of cowboys on in pursuit of Krugel's fleeing amigos. He was just starting to drive Krugel in front of him to the house when Culver and Kate came galloping toward him from the trees.

"We didn't have to go to Bradshaw's ranch, pard," the old man called. "He had already heard about his cousin bein' dead, an' he was comin' to see about it. We met him an' his punchers at the edge of the mesa."

The Kid shrugged carelessly and looked at Krugel's pain-twisted face. He nodded grimly and started the fellow on toward the house.

"Blast yuh!" Krugel snarled

through his clenched teeth, and he glared wickedly at the Kid. "Yuh'll git yores for shootin' me up like this. I'll fix yuh! The law wants you even worse than it does me, an' thar's a big reward out fer yuh. Just wait till I tell these hyar folks who yuh aire!"

Culver and Kate exchanged quick glances. The old man winked knowingly, and she smiled quietly at the Kid.

"I don't think you can tell us anything we don't already know, Krugel," she said, and she held her slim, brown hand out to Billy. "One of Pete Bradshaw's cowboys has already recognized Billy the Kid, and Pete Bradshaw is going to offer him

a job, just as soon as they round up your amigos."

NOTE: Billy the Kid got into a great many more shooting scrapes than people of the present day have ever heard about. It is said that he had killed just twenty-one men at the time of his own death—a man for every year of his life.

The writer and an aged Mexican who knew the Kid quite well were discussing some of the Kid's shooting scrapes some time ago, and they tallied up thirty-two men who had died with their boots on in front of the Kid's blazing guns. Just how many persons were killed by the Kid during his short but stormy life will never be known, but this writer, who probably knows more about him than any living person, believes the Kid really killed even more than thirty-two men. He believes forty would be a safe estimate.—THE EDITOR.



A BRAVE MUSHER

IN the wide stretches of the far Northwest, a lone mail carrier may be caught in a blizzard. When his strength gives out, and his dogs are exhausted, he must call a halt to save his life. He unharnesses the dogs, feeds them, and then attends to his own needs.

After thawing himself out, he caches the mail sacks in a tree, crawls into his sleeping bag and gets a few snatches of sleep to the lullaby of howling timber wolves.

If the season is advanced, there is always the danger of thaw. Last spring, a runner was overtaken by an early thaw at Fort Simpson, from where eight hundred miles of river travel lay ahead of him.

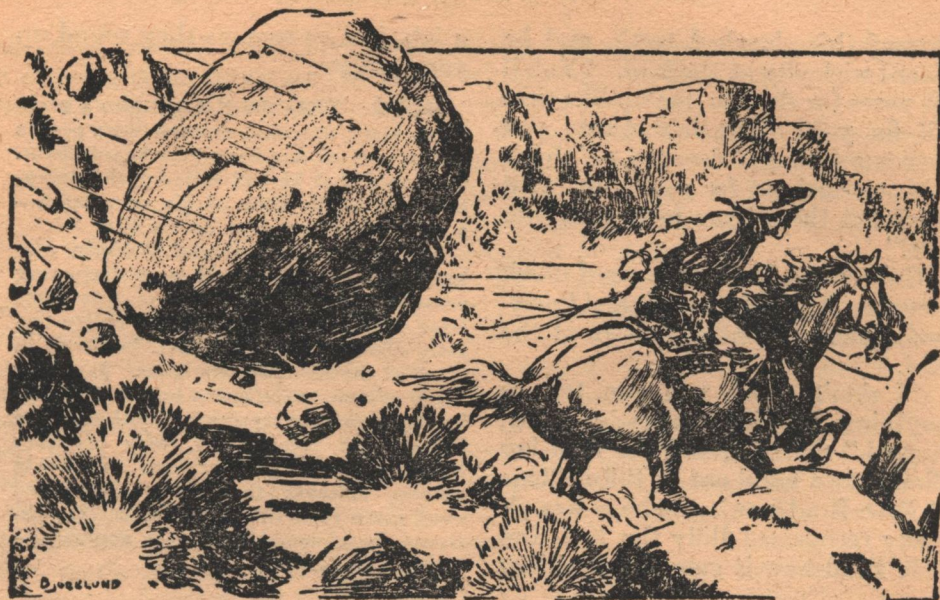
Efforts were made to persuade him to give up and wait, perhaps for two months, for the first boat. He

simply grinned in reply. He carried mail of great importance, and he had promised to have his load at McMurray before the end of April. So he started out.

The thaw kept up. Melting ice piled in heaps, and each day, newly opened holes appeared. But the musher kept on, urging and encouraging his team.

The dogs became frightened as the ice moved under their feet, while the driver, almost numbed, ran step by step with them.

On the last day, he ran sixty-seven miles. Twenty-four hours after he arrived on solid ground, the ice went out, splashing, cracking, and roaring, as the floes tumbled and crashed on their way. But the mail was delivered, and the driver and his team were safe.



Pinto Shane's Murder Mortgage

By Philip F. Deere

Author of "Shane Of Santa Fe," etc.

CHAPTER I.

ROCKING STONE RAVINE.

AN earth-shaking rumble caused young "Pinto" Shane to twist in his saddle and look back up Rocking Stone Ravine, down which his white mustang was picking its way toward Cartridge Creek.

As he did so, a cry of horror burst from the cowboy's lips. The huge granite boulder which had been delicately balanced on the rim rock above, which gave the ravine its name, had become dislodged.

Now the huge granite chunk, weighing a dozen tons or more, was thundering down the narrow defile

with a roar that shook the very cliffs on either side of the horseman.

In an eye-wink, Pinto Shane saw that he and his horse were trapped in the path of the boulder.

"Roll yore tail, Skyrocket—we got tuh edge intuh that wide place thar, or we'll be smashed flatter'n a tortilla!"

The big white mustang leaped forward like the skyrocket it was named for, under the roll of Shane's spurs.

Reining sharply into a hollow which widened the ravine, horse and rider flattened themselves against the stone even as the mighty boulder catapulted past.

Whoosh! With a rush of wind

which whipped the sweeping gray brim of the waddy's Stetson, the gigantic rock zipped on down the ravine at bullet speed.

A pine tree blocked Rocking Stone Ravine a dozen yards below the cringing waddy. The boulder hurtled into the twenty-inch trunk and snapped it as if it had been a toothpick.

Pinto Shane, still pressed against the cliff wall as he sat astride his trembling white bronc, saw the boulder dash on down the ravine and bound out into the open canyon of Cartridge Creek.

Splash! The Rocking Stone buried itself forever in the rippling current, sending sheets of spray fifty feet in all directions.

"Hold tight, Skyrocket!" panted Shane. "We could still git killed by them small rocks it dislodged!"

They kept in the protection of the rocky hollow as a small landslide pounded down the pit of Rocking Stone Ravine, smaller boulders dislodged by the mighty glacial chunk which had tumbled from its perilous perch of ages on the rim rock above.

When the avalanche had finally petered out, Pinto Shane reined back into the ravine, his freckled face pale from the narrowness of his escape from a horrible death.

The air was filled with dust, gilded by the rays of the noonday sun. Gravel and small rocks were still tumbling and rolling down the ravine about Skyrocket's hoofs.

"I wonder what in blazes loosened that stone tuh-day?" muttered the waddy.

Instead of resuming his course on down to the sparkling creek where they had planned to quench their thirst after a long morning's ride, Shane tooled his white mustang back up toward the floor of the cactus-dotted mesa.

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"Somethin' fishy about this," muttered the cowboy, loosening his guns in their holsters. "Jest afore we entered Rockin' Stone Ravine, you acted skittery, like mebbe you smelled danger, Skyrocket. But even a wise hoss like you wouldn't smell a loose boulder about tuh tumble down this gulch."

Shane was a wiry young waddy from the Santa Fe country, in New Mexico. Brown and freckled, he was just past twenty-two. His deep chest was clad in a dusty work shirt and a gaudy vest of rainbow-striped Navajo blanket material.

Disdaining the heavy and uncomfortable batwing chaps commonly used by bronc twisters in the West, Shane of Santa Fe incased his saddle-bowed legs in gray moleskin trousers.

There were red eagle designs on his cowman's boots, and the rowels of his gooseneck spurs had been cut star-shaped from Mexican silver dollars.

Regulation cartridge belts criss-crossed his waist, the loops filled with .45 shells. The twin Colt six-guns at his thighs were standard Peacemaker models, common along the Western out-trails; but Pinto Shane's holsters were the most unusual in Arizona.

They had been cleverly fashioned from the legs of young calves, so that the polished cloven hoofs were still intact to adorn the muzzle ends. The white-spotted brown calfhide had been molded and sewed to fit the guns they contained.

As Pinto Shane rode out of the ravine onto the level floor of the mesa, he let his metal-blue eyes range over the shimmering expanse of Scorpion Basin, hemmed in by the jagged circle of desolate peaks forming the Old Smoky Mountains.

It was a part of the vast range of

the Coffin 13 Ranch, in southwestern Arizona near the border of old Mexico.

"Let's take a look at the spot whar Rockin' Stone was, Skyrocket!" muttered the cowboy, dismounting on the rim rock. "It was right yonder, as I remember."

He saw the place on the edge of the ravine where the giant glacial rock had been balanced. A few feet away lay a cedar log, bleached with age, but as tough as oak.

"By Jiminy! A man could 'a' used that log fer a pry an' dislodged Rockin' Stone!" thought Pinto Shane. "A man could 'a' trailed me all mornin', an' I wouldn't 'a' known it. Too bad thar ain't any sign tuh show——"

Skyrocket whickered, and the cowboy from Santa Fe whirled.

Out of a thick chaparral a hundred yards from the mouth of the ravine rode a black-hatted hombre on a bay mare. The bronc was trotting in their direction.

CHAPTER II.

"PAY UP OR VAMOSE!"

PINTO SHANE climbed warily into the saddle, awaiting the rider's coming. His freckled face was sober with distrust.

Had the approaching horseman anything to do with the rolling boulder which, except for Skyrocket's speedy hoofs, would have smashed them to buzzard meat down the ravine?

The hombre drew rein alongside Shane's stirrup, lifting a hand in greeting.

Shane saw a narrow, dark face with one bullet-nicked ear and a knife slash across the right cheek. The hombre had a long, red-wattled neck with a big Adam's apple, and

hands that reminded Shane of a buzzard's claws.

"Howdy, cowboy! You Pinto Shane?"

Pinto nodded suspiciously. He wondered if this human bag of bones would have the strength to overbalance a huge boulder like Rocking Stone.

He smelled a trap. This long-necked jigger could have trailed him across the bad lands all morning, seen him ride into the ravine, and realized how easy it would be to slay both horse and rider by tipping over the Rocking Stone.

"Yeah, I'm Shane."

The stranger stuck out a bony palm which Shane took reluctantly. It was like shaking hands with a corpse.

"Waal, I'm Hagwood, the lawyer over tuh Gunnysack town. Turkey Hagwood, they calls me. I understand you are the new owner o' the Coffin 13 Ranch—that Chuck Fitzpatrick willed you this spread, afore he died last week."

Shane nodded again, his eyes disapproving the turkey-necked lawyer. Hagwood couldn't look him full in the eye.

"That's right, Hagwood. I been spendin' the past week ridin' over my new ranch. Sheriff Link Donovan helped me hire a gang o' honest punchers tuh run the spread."

"Turkey" Hagwood piled his hands on the saddle horn and squinted at the range with snakelike eyes. The Coffin 13 was the largest in Scorpion Basin, and that it had suddenly become the property of this hard-riding stranger from New Mexico had been startling news to the folks about Gunnysack town.

"I represents Shill Fesster, the saloon owner in the county seat," went on Turkey Hagwood, pawing under his coat lapel and producing a legal-

looking paper. "I'm honin' tuh talk over some business with yuh, Shane."

The cowboy glanced at Rocking Stone Ravine behind him, dust still smoking up out of the split in the mesa from the recent avalanche.

"How long you been trailin' me this mornin', Hagwood?" demanded Shane sharply. "I jest escaped gittin' pancaked by a rollin' boulder, an' I wondered if you knowed what tipped it off the rim rock."

Hagwood avoided the waddy's glance.

"The Injuns been expectin' Rockin' Stone tuh topple down that ravine fer years," evaded the lawyer. "Yuh was plumb foolish tuh risk ridin' down tuh the river under that rock. A strong wind like tuh-day's could tip it over."

Hagwood passed over the paper in his hand, as if to change the subject. Shane gave it a hasty glance, then stared at it hard. The color rose slowly in his face.

"This is a order tuh vamoze off my own ranch!" cried the waddy angrily. "Who does Shill Fesster figger he is? I got a plumb legal will that makes me sole owner o' the Coffin 13."

Turkey Hagwood shrugged his warped shoulders and shifted the weight of a holstered six-gun on his thigh.

"The Coffin 13 Ranch is heavily in debt tuh my client, Shill Fesster," returned the lawyer. "Ten thousand dollars, tuh be exact. That dinero is due within two weeks, Shane. At midnight on Tuesday, the fifteenth o' this month."

Pinto Shane's mouth tightened as he read the threat in the lawyer's rat-like face.

When Shane had gone through the books of the late owner of the ranch, Chuck Fitzpatrick, he had learned that "Shill" Fesster held a mortgage

on the place. But with fall round-up just around the corner, Shane was confident that he could pay off the note.

"Fesster knows I can't git no cash tergither on such short notice!" protested the cowboy. "After I sells my beef, I kin meet his danged note. He can't kick me offn this spread without warnin'!"

Turkey Hagwood wheeled his bay mare and started trotting back in the direction of Gunnysack town.

"This paper is yore warnin', Shane!" jeered the cow-town lawyer over his shoulder. "That money's due in two weeks, an' we'll foreclose pronto if yuh ain't got ten thousand bucks cash on the line by midnight on the fifteenth. Pay up or vamoze!"

CHAPTER III.

SHANE'S ONLY HOPE.

LONG after the hoofbeats of Turkey Hagwood's mount had died on the morning air, Pinto Shane sat his saddle and stared unseeingly at the papers which the Gunnysack saloon owner had sent him.

A strange and tragic chain of events had put this wiry young cowboy in possession of the biggest ranch in Scorpion Basin.

Sheriff Link Donovan had told Shane that the saloon keeper, Shill Fesster, was attempting to gain control of the cow country surrounded by the Big Smokies.

Already, Fesster's henchmen owned most of the range land. The only obstacle in his way to becoming the cow baron of Scorpion Basin had been the dogged old owner of the vast Coffin 13 Ranch, Chuck Fitzpatrick.

A crooked foreman had murdered Fitzpatrick only a week ago. But the murderer had been unlucky enough to do his deed the very day

that fate had brought Pinto Shane—a roaming young waddy from Santa Fe honing to rent his lariat—into the picture.

Fitzpatrick, aware that his life was in danger, had thwarted his enemies, a few hours before his murder, by willing the spread to Pinto Shane, who was the son of Fitzpatrick's oldest friend.

"Reckon we're about licked, Skyrocket!" groaned Pinto Shane in despair. "This cash is due Fesster by midnight o' the fifteenth, two weeks afore our round-up. Fesster knows no ordinary cowprod like me would have that much dinero. So I reckon Fesster will git the ranch, all right, despite all I kin do."

Heavy of heart, Shane spurred Skyrocket into a gallop and headed for the ranch house, a mile up Cartridge Creek.

Cow-punchers were already busy getting ready for the fall round-up, and Shane knew that a fortune was in the vast herds of prime beef stuff which bore the Coffin 13 brand and earmarks, and which they would be loading on trains for market within the month.

"I just cain't let Fesster git his claws ontuh my spread, just in time tuh pluck the harvest!" snarled the waddy, dismounting in front of the trim Spanish-style ranch house. "Fesster knows I could pay off that murder mortgage he holds on this ranch, after I market my steers."

Shane dragged himself wearily into the house, despondent over the outlook. Señora Madera, the Mexican housekeeper, brought the rugged young ranch owner a letter bearing a Santa Fe postmark. It was the regular weekly letter from his father, "Buckaroo" Shane.

"By gosh, this gives me a plumb *bueno* idea!" cried the waddy, as he finished reading the letter. "Dad

jest sold his hull Turkey Track spread, fer enough tuh live easy the rest of his life. I reckon it won't be riskin' his life savin's tuh lend me ten thousand bucks. This Coffin 13 is plenty good security tuh offer him!"

Feverish with new hope, the cowboy dashed off a letter to his grizzled father in New Mexico. There would be barely time, he knew, for stagecoaches to carry the letter to Santa Fe and get the money back to Scorpion Basin, before the fatal deadline when Shill Fesster's mortgage came due.

"An' I kin trust that skunk of a Turkey Hagwood tuh have a gun-hung bunch o' desperadoes on hand at midnight on the fifteenth, tuh make shore I rattle my hocks off the ranch," muttered Shane, as he strode outside and mounted Skyrocket. "Reckon I'm goin' tuh bust up their little play yet!"

An hour later, he was loping down the main street of Gunnysack, the county seat of Scorpion Basin, one of the wildest cow towns along the border.

As Pinto Shane rode between the rows of ramshackle false-fronted stores, his eye came to rest upon a Concord stagecoach behind a six-horse team.

The coach would shortly leave for Phoenix, and had stopped at Gunnysack only long enough to change teams and drivers and to load and discharge mail and passengers.

Galloping up to the shanty which housed the Gunnysack post office, Shane trailed his spurs inside and approached the goat-whiskered clerk who was canceling stamped letters ready to put in the mail sack for the outgoing stagecoach.

"This hyar letter is plumb important, amigo!" panted the cowboy. "I simply got tuh git it off on tuh-

day's stage. Will yuh make shore she leaves O. K.?"

The clerk nodded, and Pinto Shane made his way outside and headed for a general store to buy some supplies.

A burden was off his mind, and a cheery whistle was on his lips as he bow-legged his way across the wheel-rutted street.

But the smile would have faded if he had chanced to read the sign just below the words, "U. S. POST OFFICE, GUNNYSACK, ARIZ." above the post-office door. For the rest of the sign read: "Turkey Hagwood, Postmaster & Lawyer."

CHAPTER IV.

SHILL FESSTER.

INSIDE the post office, Turkey Hagwood was busy catching up with the distribution of the Gunny-sack mail, after returning from his ride out to the Coffin 13 that morning.

Hearing the familiar voice of Pinto Shane addressing his mail clerk, Turkey kept out of sight until he was sure the young cow-puncher had left the building.

Then he hurried over to his assistant's bench, his eyes gleaming like a serpent's.

"Whar's that letter Pinto Shane brung in jest now, Lem?" he asked hoarsely. "If it's extry special, I reckon I better take care of it myself."

The goat-whiskered clerk handed him the envelope addressed to Pinto Shane's father.

Grinning like a cat, Turkey Hagwood hurried into his living quarters behind the post office proper.

A teakettle was spouting steam on Hagwood's stove. Taking the letter over to the jet of hot vapor, the

crooked postmaster loosened the flap and opened the envelope.

Shane's bold, distinctive handwriting read:

HOWDY, DAD: I've already wrote you about how your old amigo Chuck Fitzpatrick was killed by a bunch of skunks and how he willed the big Coffin 13 Ranch to me.

Well, I find out this morning from a cowtown lawyer who's got a yellow stripe down his backbone and a smell of skunk oil about him, that I'm in danger of losing this ranch before I've even had a chance to ride from boundary to boundary.

The lay is this: it seems a certain hombre here named Shill Fesster is out to control the Scorpion Basin cow country. He holds a \$10,000 mortgage against the Coffin 13, and it's due midnight on the 15th. He says he'll kick me off the ranch if it isn't paid in full on the dot.

If you can spare that much dinero, dad, old pard, shoot it out by return stage-coach. I don't feel sheepish about asking for this loan because the Coffin 13 is plenty good security in itself, and I'll clear that much after the round-up.

Your son & pardner,

PINTO.

Turkey Hagwood's face lighted villainously as he returned the paper to its envelope. But instead of re-sealing the letter, the crook ducked out the back door, crossed a weed-grown vacant lot, and knocked at the rear exit of the Spurs and Saddles Saloon.

The door was opened by a huge hombre with a gaudy vest, a diamond horseshoe pin in his red tie, and double guns strapped to his waist. Up the black sleeves of the hombre's coat, Hagwood knew, were kept a brace of stubby-nosed .44 derringers.

"Shill, I jest swiped a letter that Pinto Shane is rushin' to his old man in Santa Fe. It's plumb interestin'. He aims tuh git that money an' pay you off afore the dead line, after all! We shouldn't 'a' warned him this a way."

Shill Fesster, owner of the saloon

and gambling dive, seized the letter and read it swiftly.

Fesster had a moon face, with black hair combed and oiled down slick against his skull. His nose was thick and a frayed cigar was perpetually in one corner of his flabby lips. A double chin folded down over his soiled wing collar, and jewels glittered on his stubby fingers.

"I advise yuh, as yore lawyer, tuh burn that letter!" hissed Turkey Hagwood. "Then the money won't arrive, an' you'll git the Coffin 13 title an' with it the control o' the Scorpion Basin cow country, same as you been wantin'."

Shill Fesster spouted blue smoke from his nostrils, and his eyes shown with triumph as he thoughtfully folded Pinto Shane's letter and returned it to the envelope.

Turkey Hagwood rubbed his hands together and smirked.

"O' course, I'll have tuh charge you a fee fer interceptin' this letter out o' my post office," wheedled the turkey-necked lawyer. "Yo're danged lucky tuh have a lawyer in a position tuh git his claws on yore enemy's correspondence, Shill. As it is, Shane won't suspect you destroyed his letter until it's too late tuh save his ranch, an' even then he won't know the letter went astray at this post office."

Shill Fesster walked over to a roll top desk, got out a pot of muscilage, and carefully resealed the letter to Buckaroo Shane. He handed it to the slack-jawed postmaster, and a sneer curled his lips off cracked yellow teeth.

"Fer an hombre that calls hisself a lawyer, sometimes I think yo're perty dumb, Hagwood," commented Fesster in his cold, even voice. "You see that this letter gits in tuh-day's stage without fail, savvy? An' yuh better register it."

Hagwood's Adam's apple chased up and down his skinny neck.

"B-but yuh don't want Shane tuh git that dinero, do yuh?" gasped the lawyer. "Yuh want me tuh foreclose on 'im, don't yuh? That Coffin 13 Ranch is worth more'n the ten thousand to yuh, Fesster. Cain't yuh see that?"

Shill Fesster flicked ash from his wet cigar with a finger.

"O' course, yuh danged fool. I been aimin' tuh git control o' the Coffin 13 fer years. But this here letter will bring ten thousand dollars in cold cash, an' I intend that that cash will never git intuh Pinto Shane's hands, see?"

A wide grin broke on Hagwood's features. He turned and hurried out of Fesster's private office, to make sure Pinto Shane's letter would get on its way.

But Shill Fesster had even more schemes up his sleeve. Not only did he want Pinto Shane's ranch and his money, but Fesster was out to get Shane's life, also.

Going to the door of his barroom, Fesster called in one of his paid gunmen, a gorillalike hombre named "Fanner" Dupard, a French half-breed who had killed a cowboy in Montana and had fled south to escape a sheriff's posse.

"What you want, boss?" asked Dupard, his gray-stubbed face eager as he rubbed the filed stocks of his triggerless six-guns. "You want zee hombre keel" thees mornin', *oui*? I crave a leetle excitement."

Shill Fesster rolled his cigar stub from one corner of his flabby mouth to the other and nodded. He seldom spoke, and when he did it was in a dead, colorless tone.

"Pinto Shane is in town, Fanner," stated the gambler. "See that he doesn't get out alive."

CHAPTER V.

BARROOM BRAWL.

PINTO SHANE emerged from the general store, his arms loaded with supplies which he needed out at the ranch.

Crossing the street to where he had tied Skyrocket, the cowboy proceeded to load his purchases into saddlebags.

He had hoped to visit his friend, Sheriff Link Donovan, but had learned that the lawman was out of town chasing rustlers with a posse.

"Reckon I need some loads fer my artillery," decided the Coffin 13 owner, glancing down at the empty loops on his shell belts. "Hard tellin' when I'll have time tuh come tuh town ag'in, with work pilin' up on the ranch. Might as well stock up now."

Shane glanced across the street to see the adobe-walled, false-fronted Spurs and Saddle Saloon, owned by Shill Fesster.

He had never seen Fesster, the gambler whom he suspected of being his enemy. Therefore, he decided to buy his needed cartridges in Fesster's establishment, on the chance that he might get to see the famous saloonman in person.

"He'll be plumb surprised that a pore cowhand from Santa Fe, who didn't even have a job a week ago, will soon be payin' him off in full before the mortgage dead line," chuckled Pinto Shane, as he headed for Fesster's saloon. "I won't give Fesster no hint that I'm gittin' the money until foreclosure time comes."

Shane knew his father too well to be nervous about Buckaroo Shane failing to send the money by return stagecoach, in time to save the Coffin 13 from Fesster's clutches.

The usual crowd of loafers were whittling and drowsing on the shady

porch. The clean-limbed young ranch owner disregarded their stares as he headed for the green, slatted swing doors of Shill Fesster's barroom.

Inside, the cowboy found swamper busy sprinkling fresh sawdust over the floor. Mexican *mozos* were busy cleaning the card room in preparation for a night's work for the poker and faro dealers, the roulette wheel, and the craps table.

Disregarding the barflies who lined the brass rail in front of the counter, Pinto Shane made his way toward the end of the room where guns, ammunition, saddles, and fishing tackle were sold.

The red-mustached bartender waddled his fat bulk over to Pinto Shane, as if he resented the approach of a customer to disturb his doze behind the bar.

"What'll it be, stranger?" he demanded sourly.

Pinto Shane grinned at the surly reception. He was in too good spirits this afternoon to take offense easily.

"Two boxes o' .45 shells an' some .30-30s."

As the bartender turned to the shelves to hunt for the desired cartridges, a gorilla-faced *hombre* emerged from a door by the back bar and his gaze widened as he looked at Pinto Shane.

"Wait, Alky!" grunted the *hombre*, striding across the room toward the bartender. "I'll wait on thees man, *oui*."

Shane leaned against the gun counter and repeated his order to Shill Fesster's chief bodyguard, Fanner Dupard. The waddy was quick to notice that the half-breed had no triggers in his .45s.

This meant, to a waddy of Shane's experience that Dupard was a "fanner"—he clicked the hammer of his

six-gun with the heel of one palm, thereby firing a burst of six shots in half the time it would take even an expert gun-slinger to pull a trigger six times.

It was a method of gun play having advantages only to crooks who operated at close range. A man's aim could not be accurate while fanning a six-gun, but bullets could be got off in a hurry when a Colt had its triggers filed off.

Fanner Dupard piled the boxes of ammunition before Shane. The latter reached in his moleskin pants and drew out a twenty-dollar gold piece, which he spun on the counter in front of the ugly-faced French breed.

Dupard picked up the glittering new coin and eyed it suspiciously. Then he opened a cash drawer under the counter.

"What's the matter, amigo?" asked Shane casually, as he saw Dupard halt in the act of counting change.

"Ze matter?" thundered Dupard, in a voice which made every customer in the saloon turn and look. "You dirty sidewinder, you try for to palm off zee brass coin on me, oui?"

Shane went white about the mouth. His brow gathered threateningly.

"Button yore lip, busky, afore yuh go callin' me names. Hand me back my twenty-dollar gold piece. Bang it on the counter—yuh kin prove it's genuine by the ring."

Grinning nastily from the corner of his mouth, Fanner Dupard tossed a yellow metal disk on the counter in front of Shane. It was a tarnished, cheap counterfeit.

"You got other dinero in zat poke—pay me in seelver money!" snarled Fanner Dupard. "We don't deal weez fake cash here."

Anger stained Shane's face a crim-

son hue as he saw through the breed's trick.

"That ain't the coin I just gave yuh!" rasped the cowboy, pin points of fire dancing in his eyes. "I don't know what game yo're up to, hombre, but you better trot my money back pronto afore I come back o' that counter after it!"

Fanner Dupard laughed, as if Shane's defiance was what he was after. He had tried to goad the cowboy into a fury, and he had succeeded.

"You ask for zee bellyful of lead, m'sieu. So here eet comes, oui!"

Pinto Shane saw in a clipped heartbeat what Dupard was planning to do. The crooked bodyguard had a three-foot counter between him and Shane, so that he was out of the waddy's reach. Dupard was going for his gun.

The shocked onlookers of the drama by the gun counter did not see the smooth, flawless draw of Pinto Shane.

One instant, the waddy from Santa Fe was standing crouched by the counter, his eyes following Dupard's hand as it jerked one triggerless Colt .45 from holster.

In the split second that it took Fanner Dupard to reach his other hand across his body to fan the hammer of the leveled six-gun, Shane of Santa Fe went into action.

His palms struck the staghorn butts of his Colts together. Out of the strange calf-leg holsters leaped the guns in a draw too fast for eye to follow.

Brrram! The thunder of three guns shattered the tense stillness of the saloon.

Shane's right-hand gun blazed slugs into Dupard's flaming weapon, deflecting the killer's gun enough to send a burst of lead into the counter. At the same time the cowboy's left-

hand gun drove a lead slug through Dupard's stomach.

Gun smoke swam lazily about Pinto Shane as he leaped sidewise, his double .45s still covering Fanner Dupard.

The Colt had been knocked from Dupard's hand, but he was not reaching for the other weapon belted to his hip.

Instead, the hombre Shill Fesster had sent out with orders to kill Pinto Shane was now swaying on his feet, both hands clawing at the spouting crimson fountain above his belt buckle.

Then Dupard toppled out of sight behind the counter.

For an instant after the crash of Dupard's dead body, silence gripped the barroom.

Then Alky, the fat bartender with the bristling red mustache, let out a bellow like a wounded longhorn.

"Get that jigger!" he yelled. "Salivate that murderer!"

Shane's scalp prickled as he saw the room suddenly become alive with Shill Fesster's paid gunmen. The swampers dropped mops to claw guns from holsters; the *mozos* cleaning up the gambling hall tipped tables over and were jumping behind them to get out of line of crisscrossing bullets.

"Drop that scattergun!"

Shane yelled the words as he ran straight for the bar, where the red-mustached keeper was hauling a sawed-off shotgun from under the bar.

Brram! Shane was forced to crease the bartender's fat shoulder as Alky triggered the double-barreled weapon.

The whistling shot missed Pinto Shane and demolished a hanging lamp above him. Behind the bar, the keeper was squeezing his

wounded shoulder with a fat hand.

"Everybody in the room reach fer the sky!"

Pinto Shane's ringing command halted three swampers by the door in the act of cocking their six-guns.

Shane knew he was trapped, that it would take fast thinking and faster gun play to get out of Fesster's saloon alive. He headed for the batwing doors opening on the street, then halted.

Shadows on the porch floor outside told the bayed puncher that Shill Fesster's crooked bodyguards lay in wait for him outside those swinging doors, guns out of leather and waiting to fill him with lead as he sped toward his waiting horse.

Shane of Santa Fe was coolest in times of greatest peril. Now, in the most dangerous moment of his life, he thought fast.

Outdoors, killers were waiting for him to attempt flight. The windows were closed. He knew he could not count on safety inside the bar. At any instant one of the *mozos* in the adjoining gambling hall might begin firing on him.

To dart into the private office behind the bar would be the fire after the frying pan. The only other avenue of escape was a door in the gambling den. Would it lead outside into an alley?

Triggering a slug through the chest of a Mexican *mozo* who was drawing bead at him across an overturned dice table, Pinto Shane fled like a deer for the gambling room.

"After him!" bellowed the wounded bartender.

The cowboy's retreat was the signal for the swampers in the barroom to start shooting. But their bullets were wild, slamming into the wall along which Shane was racing.

The waddy skidded to a halt by

the door opening off the gambling-room wall. If it led to the outdoors he was saved.

Opening the door with one hand, Pinto Shane triggered a hail of slugs at his foes in the barroom. Then he leaped backward across the threshold and shut the door.

With a gasp, he found himself in total darkness, instead of in a rear alley as he supposed. Slugs were hammering into the door, but not penetrating its thick panels.

Panting like a landed trout, Shane pulled a match from the snakeskin band about his sombrero and struck a light.

Horror chilled his veins as he saw where he was.

He had jumped into Shill Fesster's liquor closet—a room without windows, as impossible to get out of as a bank vault!

He was trapped, with a howling wolf pack of killers outside that doorway, bent on slaying him!

CHAPTER VI.

HAGWOOD'S PROPOSITION.

OUTSIDE the thick door of the wine vault, the muffled voices of Shill Fesster's killer crew sounded ghostly and far away.

By the guttering flame of the match in his hand, Pinto Shane saw the barrels of whisky and beer, the bottled wines and gins which tiered the walls of the closet.

He ejected empty shells from his .45s and reloaded them from his belt loops. If he had to stand off a siege, he was sorry he hadn't snatched up the ammunition he had been in the act of buying from Fanner Dupard.

Shane struck another match. There was a wax candle on a piece of bent tin nailed shelf fashion to the door. He lighted it, then hunted for a way of locking the door.

It was equipped with no bar or lock on the inside. That meant that Shill Fesster's gang could lock him in, but he had no way of keeping them out.

"They're out havin' a council o' war, now," panted Shane, his face glossy with sweat in the yellow rays of the candle. "They got me in hyar like a cornered rat, so they don't have tuh hurry."

Knowing that attack would not be long in coming, Pinto Shane rolled a whisky keg over to the door and found, by a stroke of luck, that it fitted under the massive doorknob.

That barricade, together with the thickness of the door itself, protected him against anything short of a battering ram that would rip the door from its hinges.

Air seeped through the cracks in the floor, and already Shane was shivering with cold. A storage vault for liquor was not a warm place to hide in.

"These walls is thin enough tuh puncture with rifle bullets," muttered Shane, glancing about him. "Fesster will either try tuh starve me out or gun me down that way."

He grinned bitterly as he thought things over. It was all clear enough, the way he had been baited into a barroom brawl.

Fanner Dupard had stepped out of Shill Fesster's office to wait on Shane. It was more than probable, the waddy figured, that Dupard had been ordered by Fesster to "get" the new owner of the Coffin 13.

There sounded a hammering of knuckles on the door, and a nasal voice which Shane recognized as coming from Turkey Hagwood, the Fesster's lawyer, came to the prisoner's ears:

"Better toss out yore hoglegs when we open this door, Shane. I'll guar-

antee yuh won't be shot down. We'll turn yuh over tuh the sheriff fer fair trial."

Shane's heart leaped with new hope. Link Donovan, the sheriff of Gunnysack, was the only friend he had in a range that swarmed with foes. Perhaps Donovan had heard the crackle of gunfire in the Spurs and Saddle Saloon, and would come to his rescue.

Then he recalled, with a sinking feeling, that Donovan was out of town. There would be no hope of rescue there.

"What you got agin' me, Hagwood?" shouted the waddy. "I ain't throwin' out no guns yet a while."

Turkey Hagwood shouted angrily from outside:

"I got plenty o' counts tuh prove agin' you in court, Shane. Yuh murdered Fanner Dupard in front o' witnesses, after he objected tuh you passin' a fake coin on him, which same coin we're holdin' as evidence."

Shane snarled bitterly in the feeble candlelight.

"Furthermore," the lawyer went on, "yuh pinked Alky, the bartender, when he was in the pursuit o' his duty, an' yuh committed burglary bustin' intuh Shill Fesster's wine cellar. All in all, we got enough tuh arrest yuh on, all right!"

Pinto Shane's guns were in his hands now. He knew that Turkey Hagwood's proposition of mercy was calculated to get him out where he could be murdered.

"Go tuh blazes, Hagwood. If yuh want me, come in an' haul me out o' hyar!"

Shane crossed the room to put his back to the wall opposite the door. He doubted if Hagwood could batter the door down, with the whisky keg blocking the knob.

Hagwood's shrill voice reached his ears:

"One more chance tuh open up, Shane. Then we'll start sievin' that closet with rifle slugs from Fesster's private office. We know we cain't bust this door down, but we kin keep pepperin' away with rifles until we git yuh."

Sweat dripped down the hard line of Pinto Shane's jaw. Show-down had come; Turkey Hagwood had discovered a way to slay him.

"Shoot an' be danged, Hagwood!" shouted the waddy defiantly.

As he braced his wide-spread legs, Shane's high-heeled boot felt one of the floor boards shake loosely. In a flash of inspiration, Pinto Shane believed he saw a scant chance for escape before Hagwood began drilling the walls with slugs.

Already, he could hear men trooping into Shill Fesster's private office, alongside the thin wall of the wine closet.

Going into action swiftly, Pinto Shane took a heavy iron bung starter from a wall hook, got to his knees, and pried it under the end of the loose floor board.

Sweat beaded his face as he struggled at the board until the end was loose enough for him to get his fingers under the end and tug upward.

This accomplished, Shane swept a row of wine bottles to the floor to clear a wall shelf, and jerked loose the board serving as the shelf. This board he put under the loose plank in the floor to use as a lever to pry loose the nails.

He knew he was fighting against time. Already, he could hear Turkey Hagwood pulling rifles from a wall rack inside Fesster's office, could hear Winchester levers cranking high-powered cartridges into breech blocks.

"This is how we'll kill Shane,"

came Hagwood's thin voice, sharp as a knife blade. "Start shootin' high, in case he's hidin' on top of a barrel or layin' on a shelf—I jest heard bottles bustin', like he was emptyin' a shelf. Then we'll gradually keep pepperin' lower down, till we're rakin' the floor with .30-30 slugs. One of 'em will git 'int."

Cold air fanned Shane's face as he pried off the board in the floor, then jumped down into the narrow opening.

Two feet below was the hard earth under the saloon building.

Brrrang! Heavy slugs began tearing through the wall of the closet, as Hagwood's firing squad sent the first volley into the liquor closet.

Spouts of whisky came from burst kegs and bottles. Little pin points of light showed in the wall, as a second blast of rifle fire raked through the closet.

Struggling to wedge his broad shoulders down through the hole in the floor, Pinto Shane ducked under the planks just as a .30-30 missile bored through his Stetson crown.

"Whew! That was plenty close!"

Crawling on his stomach to where daylight showed along the edge of the foundation timbers of the saloon, Pinto Shane glanced out on an empty alley. Then he dragged his dusty body out from under the saloon, and walked calmly out on the street to where Skyrocket was tethered.

In the Spurs and Saddle Saloon, rifles thundered again and again as Turkey Hagwood made a thorough job of drilling his employer's liquor closet with slugs. But he was only succeeding in ruining Fesster's supply of liquor!

Chuckling to himself, Pinto Shane galloped out of town.

CHAPTER VII.

TUESDAY, THE FIFTEENTH.

THE fatal day of the mortgage foreclosure arrived without Pinto Shane having had a word from his father in reply to his request for a loan to save the Coffin 13.

Cowhands who had visited Gunnysack had brought back the ranch mail during the intervening two weeks. They had also brought back the story which had been circulated by Turkey Hagwood to keep Sheriff Link Donovan from investigating the shooting scrape in Fesster's saloon during his absence.

Hagwood had figured out a plausible enough tale for the sheriff's ears. According to the turkey-necked lawyer, the half-breed gunnie, Fanner Dupard, had suddenly gone loco from too much rotgut whisky, and had shot two men and wounded the bartender before being trapped and killed in Fesster's liquor closet.

Inasmuch as Fanner Dupard and the other dead men were a good rid-dance to the town, Sheriff Donovan had accepted the story as fact. Pinto Shane's duties at the ranch kept him from visiting the county seat to give his sheriff friend the facts.

As the morning of the fifteenth dawned, Pinto Shane could not curb his anxiety any longer. He saddled up and rode to town, making straight for the post office.

"Reckon yuh know what day this is, Shane," jeered Turkey Hagwood, as he passed the anxious-faced waddy his mail. "At midnight, I'm movin' you offn the Coffin 13, unless yuh plank down ten thousand bucks tuh cover Fesster's mortgage."

Shane's ice-blue eyes speared the cow-town lawyer in silent contempt as he turned on his heel and left the post office. He went across the

street to the sheriff's office to read his mail.

"Any news from yore dad, Pinto?" inquired the kindly sheriff. "Time's gittin' almight short."

Donovan was a giant of an hombre with straw-yellow hair and bushy brows like frayed lariat hemp. He packed his .45 Colts with the air of a born gunman, and the star that gleamed on his open vest was the authority of Scorpion Basin to back up those guns.

"Yep, here's a letter from Santa Fe!" cried Pinto Shane, his heart pumping wildly as he found a letter in his father's handwriting. "Gosh, I hope it's got good news about that loan."

In the act of opening the letter, Shane frowned. The flap on the envelope had been smeared in closing, for there was a shiny mark where it had been gummed down originally. Had his father opened it to add something to his letter?

Eagerness to get the message put the matter from the cowboy's mind, however, as he tore open the envelope and read aloud:

DEAR PINTO: It's taken me longer than I figgered to get that \$10,000 together, but it'll be in the Wells Fargo stage that arrives in Gunnysack late Tuesday evening, the 15th.

If nothing goes wrong the dinero will be waiting for you before the midnight deadline when this Fesster yahoo clamps down on the murder mortgage he holds on the Coffin 13.

Best of luck and write me pronto about how things turn out.

Yore dad,

BUCKAROO SHANE.

Pinto folded the note. His look of relief gave away to one of worry.

"Does that stagecoach keep its schedule, usually, sheriff?" he asked.

Donovan scratched a grizzled jaw.

"Danged seldom, Pinto," he said. "The Old Smoky trail is rougher'n

blazes. That danged stage is due here tuh-night, but she's jest as apt tuh pull in ter-morrow mornin' or later."

A chill ran through Pinto Shane. "That'd be too late. Turkey Hagwood jest reminded me he'd be out tuh the ranch at midnight, tuh kick me offn the spread so's Shill Fesster could take possession."

Before the sheriff could reply, Pinto Shane remembered the queer look of the envelope flap. He eyed it more closely.

"Sheriff," he said tensely, "I think this letter has been steamed open! It got here on yesterday's stage, an' I wouldn't be surprised if Turkey Hagwood opened it, bein' as how he works fer Shill Fesster."

Link Donovan turned the envelope over and over in his hand, then glanced at a rusty alarm clock on his desk.

"I wouldn't put nothin' past that turkey-necked buzzard across the street!" agreed the lawman. "Pinto, I realize what you got at stake if that stagecoach shows up even five minutes after midnight. But I got a scheme that'll save yore ranch."

"I'm plumb glad tuh hear that, sheriff."

"We'll meet the stage! We'll ride tuh Spearhead Springs, over at the edge o' the Scorpion rim. When the coach stops thar tuh water, we'll git yore money. Me bein' with yuh will give the driver authority tuh turn over the dinero. Then no matter how late the coach gits here, you'll pay off that mortgage afore midnight."

Shane smiled gratefully as he saw Link Donovan put on his Stetson and hitch up the gun belts about his big waist. They headed out to their horses together, and a few minutes later were dusting out of Gunnysack to meet the Wells Fargo stage.

At the same time, back in Shill Fesster's private office, Turkey Hagwood was having a conference with his crooked boss. The two were re-reading a copy of Buckaroo Shane's letter—the second communication which Hagwood had steamed open in his post office.

The money'll be aboard that coach, accordin' tuh this," chuckled Hagwood. "But when the stage gits tuh town, the dinero mustn't be aboard."

Shill Fesster chewed his frayed cigar.

"*Sta bueno*, Hagwood! Take a gang o' trigger-pullers an' stop that stagecoach, savvy? Kill anybody that tries tuh keep yuh from gittin' that dinero. Yuh better tackle the stagecoach around Spearhead Springs!"

CHAPTER VIII.

STAGECOACH HOLDUP.

THE dusty old Concord stage which linked Scorpion Basin with the south central part of Arizona jounced its way through the dry bed of the Rio Amarillo.

A red-bearded guard with a stubby shotgun sat beside the driver. Two mounted deputy sheriffs from La Catulla were accompanying the stagecoach on horseback, ahead of the team.

"That shows the gold's aboard," chuckled Turkey Hagwood, from his ambush on the south rim rock a hundred yards ahead. "Git ready fer action, boys!"

Across the Rio Amarillo's narrow gulch, hidden in the scrub mesquites and ocotillo cactus clumps, two swarthy Mexican killers lay hidden, brown serapes blending with the sun-parched background.

Turkey Hagwood squatted on the opposite rim rock behind a granite boulder. The evil lawyer from

Gunnysack had his six-guns in hand, and at his shoulder was "Slick" Henderson, a scrawny-faced gun slinger who was also on Shill Fesster's pay roll.

"O. K., boys. Handle them guards, you Mexes!"

As the creaky stagecoach drew nearer, Hagwood adjusted the blue bandanna about his hawkish features. The other three dry-gulchers followed suit. They did not want to be recognized.

They had chosen a narrow spot in the dry river bed about two miles up-mountain from Spearhead Springs, where the road was so rough it forced the coach to a creeping pace.

"Reckon we'll git tuh Gunnysack ahead o' schedule tuh-day," came the high, cackling voice of the driver as he squinted at the westering sun which poured its fiery light full into their squinting eyes. "I'll be glad, carryin' this——"

Brrrang! A gunshot blasted out in the stifling heat of the dying day, and as if by magic the driver's hat whipped off his bald knob of a head.

At the same instant Turkey Hagwood stood up on the rim rock, level with the top of the coach. Smoking guns were in his hands.

"Grab a cloud, buskies!" came the masked lawyer's snarl. "We won't plug nobody, if yuh don't git boogery with yore hoglegs!"

The two startled deputies on horseback yanked Winchesters from scabbards. Instantly came the roar of heavy guns on the opposite rim, as the two hidden Mexicans got into action.

The two guards' horses began to buck as the deputies threw up their hands and tumbled out of the saddles.

In the meantime, the red-whiskered shotgun guard had jumped to

his feet to level his scattergun at Hagwood and Slick Henderson.

But the lawyer and his pard had concentrated their attention on the guard, knowing the Mexicans would finish the deputies.

Spang! Hagwood and the slim gun hawk at his elbow fired as one.

Four slugs dropped the stage guard in his tracks. He fell over the footboard, arms dangling toward the whiffletrees as the driver struggled desperately to control the startled team.

As if they were acting out a well-rehearsed play, Turkey Hagwood and his scrawny companion slid down the bank, guns covering the interior of the stage. But it was empty of passengers who might cause trouble.

"Jest hold them nags, driver!" advised Turkey Hagwood, as he climbed up the front wheel and covered the driver with his .45. "We won't hurt yuh none if yuh don't git ringy."

The driver had his hands full with the team. He offered no objections as Turkey Hagwood reached under the ragged canvas flap of the stage boot, and rummaged among the sacks of mail.

Disregarding the red-striped canvas bags which he knew contained valuable registered mail, Turkey withdrew a small box, sealed with tin straps and bearing the labels of the Wells Fargo Co. It was addressed to Pinto Shane.

"Reckon this box is full o' gold," chuckled Turkey Hagwood, loudly so that the driver would be sure and hear. "Reckon we better be high-tailin' it across the border amigos."

Scrambling back up the slope of the Rio Amarillo's shale bank, Turkey Hagwood vanished in the brush in the direction of the draw where the gang's horses were waiting.

He was followed by the two Mexicans and Slick Henderson, who stood guard until the last, and then motioned for the driver to leave the country if he wished.

Filled with horror as he found himself alone in the corpse-strewn canyon, the driver of the looted mail coach jerked his foot off the brake and let the frantic team leap ahead.

Rocketing around curves on two wheels, the Concord overtook the two snorting broncs with empty saddles, mounts of the deputy sheriffs whose corpses were collecting flies back up the canyon.

In a cloud of dust and with an ear-banging clatter, the coach careened around a widening bend in the Rio Amarillo's dry gorge and approached an open flat which was thickly overgrown with cottonwood, willow, and salt cedars.

Tall cliffs shimmered in the sinking sun. It was here, at Spearhead Springs, that the Indians in ancient times had chipped out their arrowheads and tomahawk blades.

The team had exhausted its terror, and came to a halt with foam dripping from the harness, a few feet from the underbrush. The chaparral parted to reveal two surprised-looking men, one a giant with blond hair and the other a wiry young cowpuncher with a rugged, freckled face.

"What's this, Uncle Joe?" cried Sheriff Donovan. "What's wrong with yore guard, there?"

"Uncle Joe," the bald-headed driver, wrapped his lines about the whipstock and did a flying leap from the seat to the ground. He pointed to the crimson drops seeping through a crack in the footboard under the corpse of the shotgun guard.

"Bandicks!" squawked the driver, finally getting his voice. "Four of 'em stuck us up in a narrow place whar the sun blinded our eyes.

Killed three guards. There were a couple o' Mexies an' two masked gringos. They lit a shuck fer Mexico."

Pinto Shane felt a cold hand grip his heart. He and the sheriff, to make sure that the mortgage money should not be delayed in reaching Gunnysack that night, had ridden hard to meet the coach at this remote outpost of Scorpion Basin range.

Now it appeared they had been outthought by unknown forces of outlawry—bandits who had not hesitated to kill in order to plunder.

"What," gruffed the sheriff, "did they steal, Uncle Joe?"

The bald-headed old tooler wiped sweat off his cheek.

"That's a funny thing, sheriff. Them bandicks didn't touch the mail sacks. The leader o' the bunch clumb up an' hunted around until he got a load o' gold that was consigned to a jasper name of Pinto Shane, over in yore town!"

The young owner of the Coffin 13 went white. Then he turned on his heel and vanished into the brush around the water hole. He appeared a moment later leading Skyrocket and the sheriff's bronc.

They mounted together, eyes steely with a grim determination.

"You cain't buck that gang with night comin' on!" yelled the stage driver. "They're halfway tuh Mexico by now!"

Without reply, the two horsemen galloped away from Spearhead Springs, heading for the spot where the holdup had occurred.

"Them skunks won't know the law is so close. They figger the trail will be cold before the stage can git tuh Gunnysack an' tell what happened!" grated Link Donovan. "Mebbe we kin trail down them

polecats afore dark. Yuh with me, Pinto?"

Shane of Santa Fe took out his guns and tested the cylinders.

"All the way, sheriff," returned the cowboy in a voice like dripping ice. "It ain't alone fer my Coffin 13 that I'm fightin'—it's tuh keep a skunk like Shill Fesster from gainin' control o' Scorpion Basin!"

CHAPTER IX.

BANDIT CAMP.

GRIM-FACED, tight of lip, the two riders pushed on up the dusty canyon until they reached the bodies of the two deputy sheriffs which told them where the holdup had occurred.

"Uncle Joe said as how the desperadoes headed toward Mexico," commented Link Donovan. "So we'll hunt on the south bank an' see if we cut any snake sign, Pinto."

It was easy enough to read where the four bandits had scrambled up the shale bank into the boulders. A short hunt revealed the hoof and boot marks in a brush-choked barranca near by, where the four crooks had tethered their horses.

Long shadows were stealing across the bad lands as they began following the trail through the sparse greasewood and cactus. The sun was sinking in a riot of color above the western rim of Scorpion Basin, where the distant California mountaintops were faint and purple in the gauzy haze.

Soon, they knew, it would be too dark to travel and follow the sign. Shane and his lawman friend also realized that while they could resume the trail with the coming of daylight, that would be too late.

In six more hours, the mortgage on the Coffin 13 would be foreclosed. The midnight hour would make due

the ten-thousand-dollar claim which Shill Fesster held against the ranch. And that spread was the last barrier between Shill Fesster and the complete dictatorship of Scorpion Basin's cow business.

The trail followed for two miles along the base of the towering red cliffs which marked the eastern edge of the basin.

The fact that the night breeze off the desert country had not erased the tracks in the sand showed the two riders that their bandit quarry could not be far ahead of them.

This indicated that the stage robbers had not dreamed of such prompt pursuit on the part of Sheriff Link Donovan; they had no way of knowing that Donovan and Shane had ridden as far out as Spearhead Springs to meet the stage.

"We're licked, Pinto!" groaned the sheriff. "Night's here."

Darkness was falling like lavender mist over the range, and Pinto Shane realized with a despairing heart that Donovan was right. Further trailing was impossible.

They dared not ride on in the general direction of Mexico in the hope of picking up the trail later. The outlaw band might cut due east into the Big Smokies, if they were an outside bunch; or, as Shane secretly suspected, head for their lair in Gunnsack.

"Look, sheriff!" cried Pinto Shane in a low voice, as their horses toiled to the summit of a hogback rise. "I thought I seen a light flicker down in that draw jest ahead!"

The two man hunters stiffened in their saddles as they saw a tiny pin point of flame in a black sink beyond them, followed by an upleaping burst of crackling red flame. A camp fire was being lighted, down in that barranca. The pungent odor

of burning creosote weed wafted to their nostrils.

"I'll bet a bushel o' pesetas them's our bandicks, campin' fer the night!" gasped Sheriff Donovan. "They're mighty shore o' themselves."

They reined their horses back under the brow of the rise, so as not to be sky-lined against the star-sprinkled heavens. Saddle leather creaked as the two men dismounted, tying their horses to juniper snags.

"Be shore yore smoke-poles is loaded fer bear," whispered the sheriff. "We'll jump them killers in their own camp!"

The bandit lair—if it belonged to the men they were chasing—was a quarter of a mile away. They made their way through the intervening chaparral, taking a half hour to creep to the mouth of the draw.

Tobacco smoke was in the air; horses whickered under the barranca rim. Low muttering voices reached their straining ears.

"You watch the head o' the gulch here, Pinto," whispered the sheriff. "I'll go down thar an' arrest that bunch."

Shane fell in step at the lawman's shoulder. His heart stirred with admiration for the man who had daring enough to go out alone against four-to-one odds.

"*Gracias*, but I ain't stayin' no place!" answered Shane of Santa Fe. "It may be yore duty tuh catch them sidewinders, Donovan, but it's my dinero yo're riskin' yore hide tuh git back. If thar's any gun play, count me in to the last chip."

They moved apart as they neared the camp fire. Not fifty feet away, at the edge of the flames, two cone-hatted Mexicans squatted by the fire, busy with skillet.

For a moment, Shane had the uneasy feeling that perhaps these were not the hombres who had held up

the stagecoach that afternoon. What if it was but a sheep-herder's camp, or a prospecting outfit?

It was an instant later that a scrawny-faced gringo on the opposite side of the fire caught sight of light shimmering off the badge on Sheriff Link Donovan's vest.

With a hoarse bellow of warning, the gringo dived for his rifle lying across his saddle near by.

Brrram! Sheriff Donovan's guns blazed out, and the gringo clutched a bullet-creased elbow. The two Mexicans dropped their frying pans and whirled, guns spraying the night with bullets from six-guns which had leaped from their holsters.

Bracing himself for the shock of tearing lead, Pinto Shane triggered his Colt .45s with ruthless precision. He saw one Mex drop flopping, knee smashed by a slug. The other spun about and pitched backward, shoulder grazed by one of Shane's bullets.

"Close in on 'em, Pinto. We got 'em!"

Donovan leaped out into the circle of firelight, but Shane hesitated, his metal-blue eyes shuttling the darkness. The stage driver had said there were four bandits involved in the robbery. Where was the fourth man?

No shot rang out from any lookout in the surrounding gloom. The firelight traced the ruddy outlines of three horses, unsaddled and busy cropping grass under the barranca walls.

Sheriff Donovan leaped grimly among the wounded hombres, disarming them and tossing six-guns into the fire. He kicked the gringo's rifle into the outer murk, and stood beside the camp fire with six-guns weaving.

"What in blazes yuh doin', sheriff?" whined the lanky hombre, whom Donovan recognized as Slick

Henderson, one of the bar flies who hung around Shill Fesster's saloon in Gunnysack. "Cain't a man do a little honest prospectin' without bein' trailed by a salty tin-badge?"

Pinto Shane walked up to the fire, his eyes staring at a little pile of tin straps girdling the charred remains of a wooden box such as express companies use.

"They've got my dinero somewhere, Link," growled Pinto Shane. "These are the *bandidos*, all right—not prospectors. See the remains o' that money box that they busted open?"

Slick Henderson, still squeezing his crimson-drenched sleeve, leered at the Coffin 13 owner.

"Yeah?" he taunted. "If yuh think we got any dinero o' yores, go ahead an' find it, busky. But I'm afeared, sheriff, that yo're gom' tuh have tuh turn us three loose fer lack o' evidence. You cain't prove we ain't prospectin'!"

Pinto Shane made a careful search of the outlaws' saddle, bed rolls, and grub box. There was no trace of evidence to prove that these were stage robbers, except the crumbling remains of the box they had destroyed in the camp fire.

"I got enough evidence tuh hang these skunks," growled the sheriff, "by matchin' the hoofs o' their hosses with the tracks by the robbery. But it's that money I'm worried about, Pinto!"

Convinced that the missing loot was not at the bandit camp, Shane of Santa Fe turned to his sheriff friend.

"You keep a close hobbler on these three rattlesnakes, Link," he said, "while I go gunnin' fer the leader o' this outfit. I got a danged good hunch who he is—an' whar he's headed. Adios!"

Leaving Sheriff Link Donovan

with his three wounded prisoners in the lonely camp, Pinto Shane headed at a run out of the barranca, bound for Skyrocket and a long ride across Scorpion Basin.

CHAPTER X.

MIDNIGHT.

TURKEY HAGWOOD was grinning into the night breeze as he tooled his wiry bronc along a little-used trail across Scorpion Basin, toward the town of Gunnysack.

So completely dark was the night, with clouds blowing in from the Mojave country to finally blot out the stars, that the evil lawyer was often forced to ride at a walk.

Hagwood felt that victory was complete. He believed that Sheriff Link Donovan would not hear of the stagecoach robbery until nearly midnight, and that the lawman could not start trailing the killers until dawn the next day.

The lawyer had purposely divided from Slick Henderson and their two Mexican helpers, who would camp overnight and then head deep into the Big Smoky Range, being careful to make tracks which Donovan would follow, perhaps for days. In the meantime, Hagwood would be safe in Gunnysack—with the loot which he now carried in his saddlebags.

The only direct proof that would link him with the stagecoach robbery was the Wells Fargo box, which had contained the gold belonging to Pinto Shane, and Hagwood had seen to it that the box had been destroyed.

"Reckon I'll deliver this cash tuh the boss, an' then shag out tuh the Coffin 13," chuckled Turkey Hagwood, as he loped on toward Gunnysack through the inky night. "It'll shore be a pleasure, kickin' that

Pinto Shane hombre offn his spread. Too bad I didn't squash the jigger, though, when I tumbled the Rockin' Stone down that ravine the other day."

Several times the shifting wind, whipping sand on the back of his long, wattled neck, brought to the crook's ears what sounded like the far-off drumming of hoofbeats; but he cast off his anxiety as unfounded.

In a few more hours the loot in his saddlebags would be safe with Shill Fesster. By no stretch of the imagination could the stage robbery ever be traced to Turkey Hagwood.

The lights of Gunnysack finally appeared through the dark. Turkey Hagwood struck a match to get the time from his watch. The gold hands pointed to eleven forty-five.

"Only fifteen minutes tuh the dead-line time fer Pinto Shane's mortgage!" exclaimed the lawyer, a feeling of exultation warming his arteries. "Time shore slipped up on me, crossin' this range."

He could visualize Pinto Shane, out at the Coffin 13 ranch house, sweating with anxiety and despair at the failure of his father's loan to show up.

Riding into the cow town by a back trail, Turkey Hagwood was careful not to be seen or heard by any of the cowboys who were on the main street.

He tied his lathered and jaded horse behind the Spurs and Saddles Saloon and knocked at the back door of the gambling dive.

The *mozo* who admitted him told Hagwood that Shill Fesster had gone home, intending to get a few hours' sleep, and then ride out at sunrise to inspect his new ranch.

"Reckon this is important enough to wake the boss up fer," chuckled Hagwood, as he unstrapped his saddlebags containing the stagecoach

loot. "Besides, I got tuh git rid o' this dinero."

The crooked lawyer made his way down an alley skirting the Mexican quarter of town, then turned and followed a wheel-rutted street until he came to the Spanish-type house where the wealthy saloon keeper made his private residence. Its green lawns and hedged-in patio made it the finest home in Scorpion Basin.

A light burned in an upstairs window above Fesster's door. Yapping dogs rushed across the lawn at the lawyer's approach, attracting the attention of the man in the upstairs bedroom. A moment later, Shill Fesster's shirtless form blocked the window.

"It's Hagwood, boss!" called up the lawyer softly. "I got what I went after. Thought I'd turn it over tuh you, an' then ride out tuh the Coffin 13 an' kick Pinto Shane offn the ranch."

Shill Fesster's chuckling voice answered him.

"Wait'll I pull my pants on, Hagwood," said the evil gambler. "I'll come downstairs in a jiffy an' git that dinero."

Hagwood saw his boss leave the window. The turkey-necked lawyer lowered the gold-laden saddlebags and rubbed his hands together with satisfaction. His fee for to-night's work would be five thousand dollars, which Fesster would be glad to pay.

A spur jingled in the darkness behind him. With a start, Turkey Hagwood whirled to see who could have followed him unheard across the lawn.

A soft drawl met his ears: "*Buenos noches, Hagwood!*"

Standing in the bar of lamplight from Fesster's second-story bedroom was a tall young waddy in moleskin

pants, gray Stetson, and gaudy Navajo vest.

"Pinto Shane!" gasped the crooked lawyer.

The Santa Fe waddy nodded. His guns were in their calf-leg holsters at his thighs, his hands hooked in his cartridge belts.

"What are you doin' hyar—this time o' night?" gasped Turkey Hagwood, his heart racing.

"I've come fer my dinero, that's all," answered the cowboy.

Hagwood felt panic clawing at him. He fought to control his gasping lungs.

"What—yuh mean, Shane? What dinero?"

Shane was smiling. It was not a pleasant smile.

"I figgered you would high-tail it for Fesster's place as soon as you robbed that stage!" rasped the cowboy in a deadly monotone. "So I been follerin' you across the desert, Hagwood. You had a ten-minute head start o' me from that bandit camp, but I had a better hoss, so I caught up with yuh."

A hoarse yell of terror came from Hagwood's scrawny throat. He knew, now, that he *had* heard hoofbeats behind him.

Then the lawyer seemed to go loco. His talonlike fingers darted down to close about the cedar butts of his six-guns, jerked them frantically from their holsters.

Not until the lawyer was thumbing back the knurled hammers of the Colts did Pinto Shane's lazy pose change and his hands loosen themselves from his cartridge belts.

Then, in an eye-wink of time, the cowboy from Santa Fe had both six-guns leveled and spitting flame and smoke.

Brrrang! Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang! Firing coolly, first from the left gun, then from the right, Pinto

Shane went to work on the crooked lawyer who had schemed to double-cross him and cheat him of the Coffin 13 Ranch.

Bullet holes appeared like a row of red buttons up Hagwood's chest, drilled twice through his red-wattled, scrawny neck, punched a hole between his eyes and another in the center of his forehead.

Driven backward by the impact of eight driving chunks of lead, Turkey Hagwood stumbled over a low hedge bordering the gravel path, and fell out of sight, a bullet-torn wreck which the dogs shied away from, barking furiously.

The house door swung open, flooding the pathway with light. Shill Fesster stood there, one hand holding up his trousers, the other bearing a kerosene lamp.

"Cut out the noise, Hagwood!" growled Fesster. "I know it is our night tuh howl, but yuh oughtn't tuh be celebratin' by poppin' off yore cutters like a drunken ranny on Fourth o'—"

Shill Fesster broke off as he caught sight of Pinto Shane strolling up the path, carrying a pair of saddlebags. It was the first time the two men had met face to face since Shane had arrived in Arizona.

"Shane!" gasped the would-be cattle baron, falling back against the door jamb. "What're you doin' here? I thought Turkey Hagwood was down here."

Pinto Shane shook his head. His eyes were steely slits.

"Must be some mistake, Fesster!" drawled the waddy from New Mexico, as he halted at the doorstep. "Hagwood ain't around."

Somewhere in the house behind Shill Fesster, a clock began striking the hour of midnight.

Fesster kept his eyes glued on the smoke which seeped out of Pinto Shane's holsters.

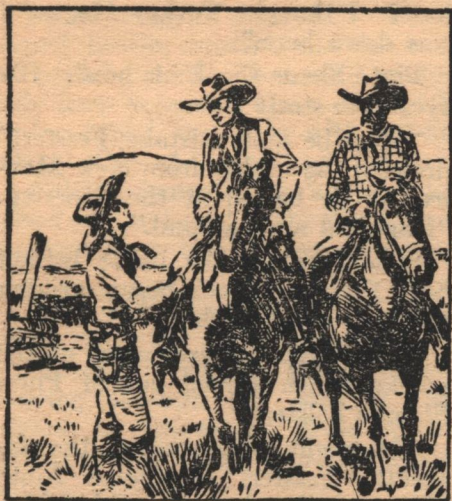
"Midnight o' Tuesday, the fifteenth, Fesster!" reminded Pinto Shane, as the clock stopped tolling. "Yore murder mortgage was due tuh-night, yuh may recollect. An' here's yore ten thousand bucks in cash—on the line!"

Pinto Shane was now the sole owner of the Coffin 13 Ranch.

But thet don't guarantee thet his troubles are over. As long as Shill Fesster is alive an' kickin', Pinto ain't a-goin' ter have no easy time o' runnin' the Coffin 13. Don't miss the next story about Shane o' Santa Fe in next week's issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



A Pardner For



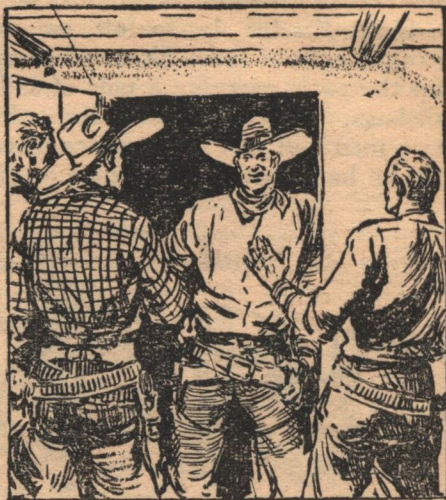
1. The day finally came when Dogie and Tex decided it was time to head back to Bar 6. On their way, they stopped at the Square D Ranch to say good-by to Virginia Danforth and her father. But the Old Man said that Virginia was out.



2. Dogie couldn't leave without seeing the girl once more. So he and Tex accepted the Old Man's invitation to wait for her. The day wore on. The sun set, darkness fell. Still there was no sign of Virginia. They began to get worried.

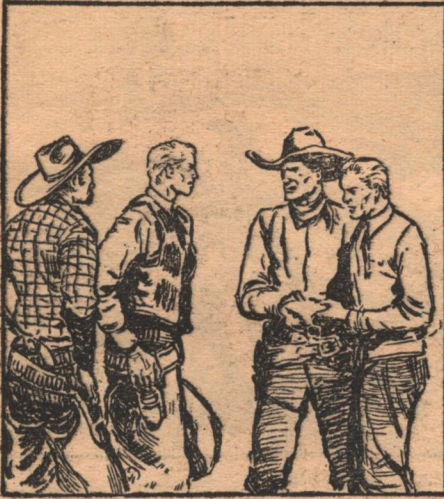


3. Finally, they could stand the strain no longer and decided to go out in search of her. It didn't seem that anything could have happened to her—she was a wonderful rider and a good shot. Still— They headed for the door.

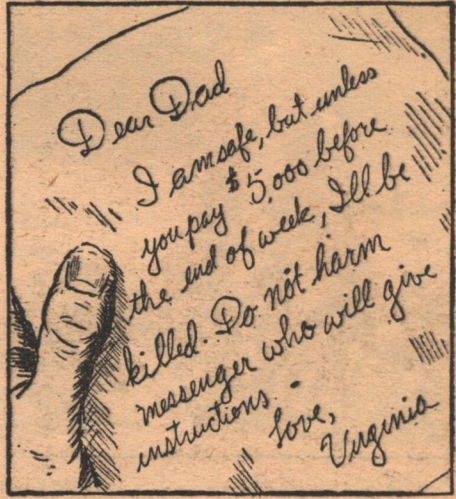


4. Before they reached it, however, it swung open. Framed there against the blackness of the night sky was one of the hardest-looking two-gun men Dogie had ever seen. He grinned crookedly at them. "This the Square D?" he asked.

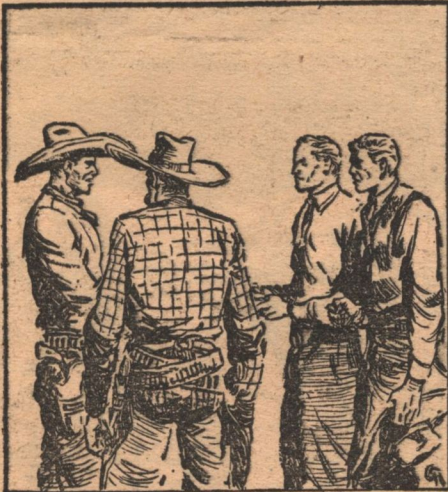
Dogie Cantwell



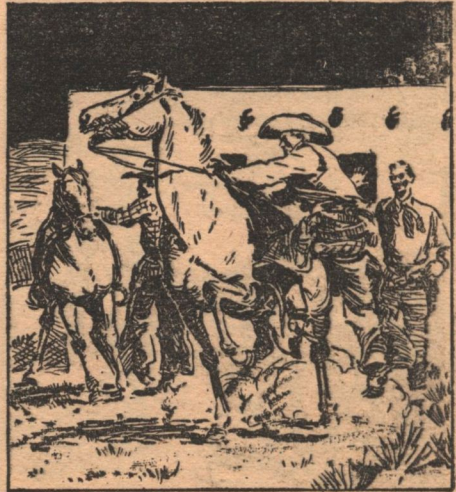
5. "Thet's right," said Old Man Danforth. "What kin I do fer yuh?" The stranger eyed the rancher calmly. "Yo're the boss, I reckon," he said. "Ol' Man Danforth?" The rancher nodded. "Waal, here's a message fer yuh, hombre."



6. He handed over a folded piece of none-too-clean paper. Danforth took it, read it swiftly, and began to tremble. Dogie and Tex moved forward, read the note over the rancher's shoulder. Tex swore. Dogie went pale with fear and rage.



7. "Blast yuh!" snarled Danforth, turning on the messenger. "If yuh've hurt —" The gunman chuckled gloatingly. "Keep yore shirt on," he said. "The gal's safe. You be at Coyote Spring with the cash ter-morrow night."



8. With that, he turned and stalked from the house. For a long minute, the three men stared helplessly at one another. They heard the messenger's horse gallop away. Then Dogie snapped to life. Dashing out, he and Tex saddled their brones.



9. A moon had risen and it wasn't hard to follow the gunman's trail. They pushed their broncs to the utmost. Then, ahead of them, they caught sight of the rolling dust cloud kicked up by the gunman's loping broncho.



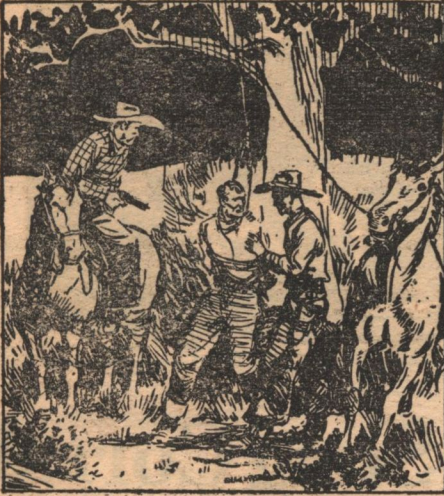
10. Finally, from a ridgetop, they spotted their quarry. Dogie spurred Gray Streak. The bronc was fresher than the gunman's. Dogie figured he could catch him. The young ranch owner was figuring out a plan to rescue Virginia.



11. The kidnap messenger heard Dogie coming. He hipped around in the saddle, started pitching lead. But his aim was bad from the top of a galloping cayuse. Dogie shook out his lariat, whirled it, slung a loop through the air.



12. It landed fair, snagging the outlaw around the shoulders. Gray Streak skidded to a halt. The kidnap messenger was yanked from his saddle and hit the ground hard. Behind him, Dogie could hear Tex Mellen galloping up.



13. Dogie then put his plan into action. Hog-tying the gunman, they brought him to a grove of trees, pretended to make ready to hang him. His nerve broke. At Dogie's question, he gave the location of the kidnapers' hide-out.



14. Leaving the man bound and helpless, Dogie and Tex rode on. An hour later, they reached a lonely shack. They approached cautiously. Although they might be outnumbered, they would have the advantage of a surprise attack.



15. At a word from Dogie, the two pards kicked open the door and went barging in. Gunmen leaped up from a table, swearing in alarm. Dogie saw Virginia in the background. Then guns started hammering, there in the tiny shack.



16. It was over swiftly. All the kidnapers were down. Dogie released Virginia. "Ginny!" he exclaimed, forgetting Tex. "Yuh got ter marry me, so I kin perfect yuh. Will yuh?" Virginia smiled. "Yes, Dogie," she said—and Tex grinned.

Next Week: "The Pony Kid Lands A Job."



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.

WAAL, now, folks, what'll we have fer tuh-day? First, I'd like tuh hear more from the Song Corral Clubs. How're they comin'? Find any new old songs? I hope we'll be hearin' from yuh soon an' sharin' yore findin's with the rest of the readers o' this Corral.

February's no time tuh be thinkin' of spring, but this is one o' those warm winter days when yuh jest can't help feelin' as if it's jest around the corner. It's a mighty good thing tuh keep in tech with the seasons. Makes the year round spicy. Take advice from an old hombre an' never forget tuh look at the sky an' the land an' the sea. An' when I say look, I mean reelly *look* at 'em!

But tuh git back tuh songs, here is a couple of short ones, easy tuh learn fast:

IT'S GREAT TO BE A COWBOY

It's great to be a cowboy,
I surely speak the truth,
When you've got three things to back you,
Health and strength and youth.

Oh, it's great to be a cowboy,
And riding all the day,
To saddle up your mustang,
And then to start away.

At a swinging lope or faster,
Whatever takes your mood,
Through the forest or the open,
I tell you it feels good.

You can sing or smoke or whistle,
Or just do as you please,
And you've always good company—
The horse between your knees.

I would not trade a cowboy's life
For honor e'er so high,
And if all cowboys think like me,
They'll be cowboys till they die.

So here's to every cowboy
That throws his leg across
A broncho Ball, Bucking Mule,
Or any other hoss.

Thet was sent tuh us quite a while back
by Tex Gholson, of Arizona. He didn't
say who wrote it, but I reckon we kin
sing it all right. The same is true of
"Little Pinto Hoss" which was sent tuh
us by Joe Adamik, of Illinois:

LITTLE PINTO HOSS

You never won a single prize
For looks, and none for speed,
But little pinto hoss, you're always
On the job in time of need.

When the prairie's hot and dusty,
Out across it we must streak.
Little pinto, I can always
Depend upon your feet.

When the snow is drifting
Out on the lonely plain,
We're lost, freezing, and we listen
To the wild coyote refrain.

It is then I really love you
With a heart that knows no boss,
For I know that I can trust you,
Little pinto hoss.

I reckon I've spoken before about the
relationship thet usually exists between a
man and his hoss. It's one of the strong-
est ties there is. An' it's not jest based
on common affection, either. What
would cowboys have done without their
hosses? Answer me thet! Yuh know as
well as I do, thar wouldn't have been any
cowboys, if they hadn't had hosses tuh
work with 'em.

One of the most excitin' events in the
early days of the U. S. A. was when the
Pony Express first began. Hyar's one of
Henry Herbert Knibbs's best songs tellin'
all about it:

PONY EXPRESS

By Henry Herbert Knibbs

The moon was drawing pictures of the
mesquite on the sand

Round the old adobe station, the last of
the long relay,

When I slid from a bronc of Fargo's—the
wave of a friendly hand—

And I lit in another saddle and headed for
Santa Fe.

That ride I carried some papers that didn't
have time to wait;

Government stamp was on 'em, so the com-
pany turned us loose,

Picked from our relay riders, and started
us two hours late.

It was up to me and the pony to make it—
and no excuse.

The moon was riding the mountains, and
Toby was in his stride,

When we came to the ford—like silver with
the black of the rocks between.

He nosed his hocks for a minute, splashed
water to cool his hide;

Then he laid to work like a major, running
it strong and clean.

The stars grew dim on the sky line, for the
morning was taking toll,

Calling 'em back to heaven, counting 'em
one by one,

When sudden and blind, like thunder, we
lunged in a gopher hole—

Leg snapped short at the ankle—I tried—
but the job was done.

It was one of my own, not Toby's—and for
that I was mighty glad.

His luck, it had turned him over; but he
trotted to where I lay,

And his eyes were big as he sniffed me; I
grinned, for he sure looked sad.

"And now what's next on this program?"
that Toby hoss seemed to say.

I got a grip on the stirrup, hung the reins on
the horn, and took

That packet of government papers and tied
'em where folks could see;

I opened a saddle pocket and slipped in my
record book,

While Toby, with head turned sidewise,
was staring surprise at me.

The desert whirled for a minute, then
stopped, and my head grew clear,

For I cinched to that one idea, and I put
it to Toby straight:

"You got to carry the papers, and maybe
you think it's queer;

But vamoose! and don't be forgetting they
started us two hours late."

I knew him. Now, lots of hosses would have
trailed to the brush and grazed,

Left me to chew the bullet, for I sure
wasn't feeling strong;

But Toby and I were pardners, the both of
us being raised

In the high, dry mesa country where quit-
ters don't last for long.

I swung my hat and I hit him; the muscles
along his flank

Rippled and bunched—and the raw, red sun
came over the eastern range.

I drew in a breath of morning, then down on
the sand I sank.

I heard him crossing a coulee; then—
everything still and strange.

They told me they tried to catch him 'way
out on the edge of town,

How he kept on agoing steady, like a lone
night herder's rhyme,

Till he stopped himself at the stable. They
wondered where I was down.

He couldn't talk or he'd told 'em, but the
papers arrived on time.

'Twas a pardon for some poor hombre—I
don't recollect his name.

Me? Oh, my leg it mended, and the com-
pany gave me pay

For the time I was off. And Toby? That
little hoss, wise and game?

Why, he's doing his regular running—
from this station to Santa Fe.

Some of yuh have had thet one, I
reckon, but yuh should all have it in yore
scrapbooks.

By the way, I wonder how many of
yuh are keepin' scrapbooks?

Waal, so long till next week. I'll be
seein' yuh then.

WISE PACK MULES

A DETACHMENT of eighty Rangers
had been sent to scout on the Pecos
River, the supplies being carried by
fifteen pack mules. Captain J. M.
Hunter was in command. The stock
had been watered and all canteens
filled at the head of the Llano River,
this being the last water they would
reach until they covered the sixty
miles across the plains.

They were only halfway over
when the water ran short. The heat
was intense, and some of the men
mutinied, declaring they would not
go another yard on that trail, but
would hunt water in another direc-
tion.

In vain Captain Hunter threat-
ened them with court-martial, as
about two-thirds of the command
stopped, refusing to follow him.

Another officer, William Banta,
was sent to talk to them. He prom-
ised the rebellious ones that, if they
did not reach water by evening, the
course would be changed. But they
would not listen.

Banta saw that the men were suf-
fering agonies, and some of their
horses were almost dead. He re-
ported to Captain Hunter that the
men would go to water, if they had
to kill him first. To see eighty men

perishing of thirst, and threatening
to kill their leader or go to water,
was a trying experience. But his
superior officer said he would go on,
no matter what the result might be.

William Banta told him that he
would go with the others. He
wheeled his horse and rode back to
the men, telling them he was going
to find water, and all those who
wanted to could go with him. Sixty-
five men followed him, taking thir-
teen pack mules, and they set off on
their quest.

They had gone about a mile, when
they saw that the other two pack
mules were following at a good clip.

The men who had stayed behind
with Captain Hunter were making
strenuous efforts to turn the mules
back, but the more they tried, the
faster the thirsty animals went.

This made a good excuse for the
others to follow, too, and they were
mighty grateful to the wise mules
who must have known that water
was ahead.

Soon they reached the Howard
Spring Canyon, where there was
plenty of cool fresh water, and they
all quenched their thirst. The
threatened court-martial was post-
poned indefinitely.



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.

HERE yuh are, Sonny!" we exclaims, as the young outlaw, Sonny Tabor, comes intuh the Corner fer this week's 3W meetin'. "All this week, mail has been comin' here fer yuh. What's up?"

Sonny shakes his head, lookin' plumb puzzled as he takes the stack of envelopes from us an' looks at 'em.

"Yuh got me, Boss!" he says. "I ain't never had so much mail in all my life."

"Open 'em up," says Bud Jones, "an' see what they're all about."

Figurin' that's a good idea, Sonny rips open one envelope, pulls a card out of it—an' gits plenty red in the face.

"Valentines!" he exclaims. "I'll be a son of a gun!"

He starts openin' the rest of 'em, an' we hands out a few that have come in fer the other waddies. We'd plumb fergot about St. Valentine's Day.

All the gang gits quite a kick out of 'em. Fer instance, here's one o' Sonny's:

I'd cook and work and slave and labor,
If only you, sweet Sonny Tabor,
Would think like me that t'would be fine
For you to be my Valentine.

Rahway, New Jersey.

PEGGY.

No wonder none o' the waddies is keen on showin' what they drew in the way o' valentines!

Howsomever, they ain't all like thet one. Fer instance, listen ter this:

The Range Boss is a locoed gent
Who is not worth one dog-goned cent.

He runs the meetin' every week,
And no one but himself can speak!

Thet one ain't signed a-tall.

Thet's enough o' the valentines. We got a lot o' reg'lar mail ter read. So let's git at it. Here's the first one we comes ter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to you, and I hope it misses the waste-basket.

I have been reading the 3W for five or six years, and I am writing this in order to prove to my buddy that there is such a thing as the Wranglers Corner.

My favorites are Circle J, Kid Wolf, the Oklahoma Kid, Sonny Tabor, and the Silver Kid. But all the rest will pass, too.

Tell that hombre who calls himself "Panther" to go jump in the lake. He doesn't know what the West is made of or what good stories are when he reads them.

Adios, Boss!

EL TIGRE.

Griffin, Georgia.

An' here's another:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I've only been reading the 3W—or any other Western magazine—for the past four months, and I sure do realize what I've missed. I've read a lot of different ones since then and have struck some good ones, but none can compare with 3W.

Believe me, I'll keep on reading it till Sonny Tabor, the Bar U twins, and the Texas Triggers quit the spread.

With all the other letters being sent in, I guess I needn't voice any more comments.

Hoping to land in the cow country,
BLOND WADDY.
Malden, Massachusetts.

O. K., cowboy! Here's hopin' yuh land where yuh wants ter be right pronto.

Now let's take a look at this here one:

DEAR BOSS: Just a line to let you know how much I enjoy W. W. W. I buy a copy every week; haven't missed it in a long time. Keep up the good work.

I particularly like Dogie Cantwell and Tex and Virginia. Now that Dogie has met the gal, I suppose he will be quitting the spread. Am I right? I hope not, but I'll bet I am.

My list of favorites would read just like every other one you've ever printed; so I won't bother you with it. I like all the waddies. The only ones I don't care for very much are Bud Jones and Tommy Rockford.

Well, I guess I got ter go now, Boss. Give my best regards to Dogie Cantwell and all the others. I'll be reading about them every week. So long and good luck.

TOMMY OF PHILADELPHIA.

We looks over at Dogie and Tex as we lays thet letter down. "How about it, Dogie?" we asks. "Has Tommy o' Philadelphia got a good hunch or a bum one?"

"Reckon he's got a purty good un, Boss," drawls Dogie.

"Yuh mean yo're quittin' the 3W?" asks Sonny Tabor.

The young owner o' Bar 6 nods, but afore he kin say anythin', Tex Mellen speaks up.

"The pore cuss is agoin' ter git married, Boss," he says. "Then him an' Virginny are goin' back ter Bar 6."

Waal, o' course, all thet ain't no news ter us, personal. But we're sorry ter hear it, jest the same.

"Who's goin' ter take Dogie's place in the 3W?" asks Bud Jones.

"An hombre we knows yuh'll all like," we answers. "He's a young feller who rides the Pony Mail, like Freckles Malone. Like Dogie, the stories o' his adventures on the Overland will be in pictures an' text."

Now we got ter git on with the mail. Here's a letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to the Wranglers Corner, and I sure hope it misses the wastebasket. I have my favorites, like all the other readin' hombres, and here they are, in order:

The Oklahoma Kid—best of all—the Circle J pards, Johnny Forty-five, Señor Red Mask, Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, Risky McKee, and— Oh, shucks! I like 'em all!

Say, I wish you would point out to me that Wouldn't-you-like-two-know-who hombre who sent in that letter, a while back. He should be made into buzzard fodder for sending in such a letter.

I've been reading 3W for quite a spell. I think the first story I ever read in it was "Sonny Tabor's Border Trail."

What in tarnation happened to Storm King, the Shootin' Fool, Deputy Death, the Desert Phantom, and Rio Rande? Bring some of them around some time.

Boss, please do me a favor and print more combination stories like "Pete Rice Rides Down Sonny Tabor." I suggest one with Sonny Tabor and the Oklahoma Kid teamed up.

Tell Buck Foster that even if he is a windbag and a sheep-herder, he is O. K.

Well, I've said my slice. Yours till Ed Sparks snags the Oklahoma Kid,

RAY BRANDENBURG.

Kuna, Idaho.

Thanks fer a good letter, Ray. Send us another sometime soon.

Now let's see what else we got. We'll give this here one a try:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Here I am with my first letter to the Corner. I don't care whether this lands in the wastebasket or not, as long as you read it first. I want you to know what I think of your 3W outfit. Swell!

One of the smartest hombres of the whole bunch is Shorty Masters, M. D., but none of the readin' hombres seem to be able to realize it. He's got more tricks than a dog has fleas and is longer on brains than his mules are on ears. More power to him and his gun-slingin' pard, the Sonora Kid!

I think two of the dumbest waddies are Sonny Tabor and the Oklahoma Kid. Not that I don't like them, but they both own good horses, and don't own homes, yet they still stay where they're "wanted." Why don't they get out of Arizona and go somewhere where they're not known?

The only thing 3W lacks is humor. High-pockets Halligan was pretty good, and William F. Bragg manages to stick a few chuckles into all his stories. But the others never have any humor in them. I think they'd be more interesting if they had.

I don't know whether I like the Circle J outfit or not. Some of their stories are good, but others are pretty bad. Maybe Mr. Endicott is running out of ideas.

Here's hoping that you run another series like Smokey Joe of the Double O who was always a-huntin' ol' Monro. That was swell!

Yours till Bud Jones turns in his star,
WILD WEST WILLIE.

Chicago, Illinois.

A quick look at the clock tells us that we got time for a couple more. Here's the first:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I also think you should put the 3W waddies in the movies. Here are the fellows who should play the parts:

Kid Wolf—Buck Jones
Billy West—John Mack Brown
Flame Burns—Bob Steele
Rio Rand—John Wayne
Dusty Doran—Bob Steele
Border Eagle—Buck Jones
Tommy Rockford—Tim McCoy

It should not be so hard for Buck Jones to play the part of Kid Wolf, as both of them ride white horses; and Señor Red Mask sings, so does Dick Foran. I named Buck Jones twice because he could play either part better than any one else.

I wish you would also have more stories

of Flame Burns, and bring back some of the old favorites, such as Dusty Doran, Smoke Walsh, Cougar Fang, the Shootin' Fool, Jim Hazel, and Bullwhip Adams.

Adios for this time,

WALLY WALLINGTON.

Sedalia, Missouri.

An' here's the second:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I think that Wouldn't-you-like-to-know-who hombre has been eating loco weed. Some folks may say that Buck Foster is no good, but I think he is a plumb fine fellow.

Say, Boss, why is it that Prairie Scout never comes to the Wranglers Corner meeting? I think he is O. K.

Have a story where Sonny Tabor and the Oklahoma Kid meet.

Yours till the Oklahoma Kid gets good-looking.

HUBERT HAMMOND.

White Hall, Georgia.

An' that's all there is, there ain't no more. Not this week, anyhow. The waddies all says so long an' good luck ter Dogie Cantwell—an' the meetin' is adjourned fer another week.

THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

BEEF WAR ON BAD AX

Novelette

By WILLIAM F. BRAGG

After it busts loose, Silver Jack Steele has a plumb tough time convincin' an ol' cattleman that the Injuns he thinks are his enemies are pretty good hombres after all.

MOJAVE BROWN'S LOST MINE

Novelette

By CLEVE ENDICOTT

There's bound ter be trouble when Buck Foster, o' Circle J, hears about a lost gold mine. This time, it takes all the guns of his saddle pards ter blast him out o' the jam.

THE LAW CORRALS PINTO SHANE

Novelette

By PHILIP F. DEERE

The gun-slingin' young waddy from Santa Fe is framed fer murder, an' it takes some plenty fast ridin' an' shootin' ter git him inter the clear ag'in.

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VACU-MATIC

SCORES AGAIN!

BOB McKENZIE
TRANSCONTINENTAL AUTOMOBILE CHAMPION
COAST TO COAST

WESTERN UNION TIMED

NEW YORK
TO
LOS ANGELES
84 hrs-40 min.

LOS ANGELES
TO
NEW YORK
87 hrs-58 min.

CANADA
15,000 MILES
18 days

LOS ANGELES
TO
NEW YORK
AND RETURN
181 hrs-52 min.

WASHINGTON, D.C.
TO
MEXICO CITY
63 hrs-27 min.

LOS ANGELES
TO
PHOENIX
6 hrs-18 min.

MURCOKRYLAK
1927 M. 1st DAY

LOS ANGELES
TO
WASHINGTON, D.C.
8 hrs-37 min.

LOS ANGELES
TO
NEW YORK
84 hrs-40 min.

Vacu-matic Carburetor Co.
7617 W. State St.
Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

Dear Sirs:

Having just completed a new speed record between Los Angeles and Chicago, driving a 1936 Chevrolet equipped with a Vacu-matic carburetor control, I thought you might be interested in knowing some of the facts and the important part Vacu-matic played in the success of the run.

The distance covered was 2322 miles in thirty nine hours and forty-two minutes, officially timed by Western Union, which gave me an average speed of 59.7 M.P.H. based on elapsed time and with the Vacu-matic averaged 18 1/2 miles per gallon on gasoline.

Before leaving Los Angeles, we made several test runs both with and without the Vacu-matic, and the tests proved that Vacu-matic increased my gas mileage 3 1/2 miles per gallon at the driving speed of 80 M.P.H. and also very noticeable increase in both acceleration and power.

After this experience with Vacu-matic, you can depend that on my future speed runs across country that I will be depending on Vacu-matic to give me the same added performance it has proven on this last record breaking drive.

Yours very truly,

Bob McKenzie



**Sets New
Coast-to-Chicago
Record**

**New Supercharge
Principle
SAVES GAS**

**MORE POWER - MORE SPEED
FASTER PICK-UP - - NEW LIFE**

ESTABLISHING new mileage records on cars in all sections of the country, the Vacu-matic again scores in a new speed record established by Bob McKenzie transcontinental automobile champion. Los Angeles to Chicago—2,322 miles in 39 hours and 42 minutes—driving 75 and 80 to maintain a speed average of 59.7 miles per hour!

Here is speed—a gruelling grind—where quick acceleration, greater top speed — and less stops for gasoline mean those precious moments saved that make new speed records possible.

The same Vacu-matic that helped Bob McKenzie establish this speed record and gave him such fine gas savings is now available for all car owners. It is positively automatic—simple to install—inexpensive—and pays for itself many times over in gas savings

Automatic - - Nothing Like It!

Vacu-matic is *entirely different!* It operates on the supercharge principle by automatically adding a charge of extra oxygen, drawn free from the outer air, into the heart of the gas mixture. It is entirely AUTOMATIC and allows the motor to "breathe" at the correct time, opening and closing automatically as required. No idling troubles—no carburetor adjustments necessary. It is so simple it will amaze you—so practical it will save you many dollars on gas costs.

Fits All Cars

VACU-MATIC is constructed of six parts, assembled and fused into one unit, correctly adjusted and sealed at the factory. Nothing to regulate. Easily attached in ten minutes.

Agents and Salesmen

VACU-MATIC offers a splendid opportunity for unusual sales and profits. Valuable territories now being assigned. Check and mail coupon.

The VACU-MATIC Co.

Wauwatosa, Wis.

Guaranteed Gas Savings

VACU-MATIC must prove itself on every car. It is guaranteed to give worthwhile gas savings, quicker pick-up and more power, or it costs you nothing. "On my V-8 Ford it works miracles", says Ralph Fields. James Seely—"On an International Truck on a round trip to Cleveland, 385 miles, it saved 19 gallons of gas." A. V. Grove—"On the Buick it showed 5 miles more per gallon." F. S. Peck—"I average 22 miles per gal. on my Plymouth, an increase of 7 miles, for a saving of \$15.00 a month, or \$180.00 a year." Wm. Lyons—"Averaged 25 miles on a gal. with a Model A Ford at 40 miles per hour."

Free Details

You owe it to yourself to know all about this remarkable discovery. Mail the coupon below. Start saving gas with VACU-MATIC and enjoy a new driving thrill! There's no obligation—so get the facts now! Write today!

--- FREE OFFER COUPON ---

THE VACU-MATIC COMPANY

7617-279 W. State St., Wauwatosa, Wis.

Gentlemen: Please send me full particulars concerning the Vacu-matic and details of your Free Offer. This of course does not obligate me in any way.

Name

Address

City State.....

☐ Check here if interested in selling proposition.

She Clipped the Coupon and Saved over \$28.00

Easy to pay for
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be beaten

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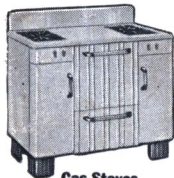
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Cash or Credit
As Little as 18c
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FACTORY
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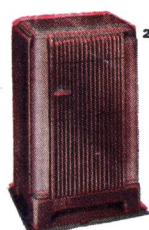
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Ranges, New Gas Stoves. Oil
Ranges. Furnaces. Nearly 200 Styles
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says Mrs. S. Thomas, Overton, Nev.
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