

STREET & SMITH'S

# WILD WEST

WEEKLY

DECEMBER 18, 1937

10

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

## GUN NOTCHES

A

### "RISKY McKEE"

NOVELETTE

By WILLIAM A. TODD

Also

FRECKLES MALONE

and

LONE STAR BUCKAROO

NOVELETTES





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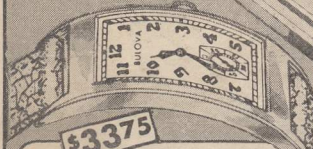
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Vol. 116, No. 1    CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER 18, 1937    Whole No. 1835

Cover Picture—Scene from  
 "Gun Notches" . . . . . Painted by Edward Moritz

### THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

- Gun Notches** . . . . . *William A. Todd* . . . . . 6  
 When it comes tuh bein' hung, Risky McKee's guns do some fast talkin'.
- Smoky Round-up on the Overland** . . . . . *Ward M. Stevens* . . . . . 56  
 Freckles Moran kin corral hoss thieves as well as longhorns.
- Buckaroo Trails A Sheriff** . . . . . *Walker Tompkins* . . . . . 82  
 An' he tralls some hefty gun trouble, too.

### FOUR COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

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 But the younker is still no meat fer rustlers, bronc-marked or not.
- The Whistlin' Kid and the Lost Brands** *Emery Jackson* . . . . . 44  
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 An' he kin play it on the fiddle or with six-guns.

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OH BILL! I'M SO PROUD OF YOU. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO

YES! I'VE GOT A GOOD JOB NOW AND A REAL FUTURE. THANKS TO N.R.I. TRAINING

**TOM SAID "NO"**  
HE'S STILL WAITING FOR "LUCK"

BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME

SAME OLD GRIND-- SAME SKINNY PAY ENVELOPE-- I'M JUST WHERE I WAS FIVE YEARS AGO

GUESS I'M A FAILURE. LOOKS LIKE I'LL NEVER GET ANYWHERE

YOU'LL ALWAYS BE A FAILURE, TOM. UNLESS YOU DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. WISHING AND WAITING WON'T GET YOU ANYWHERE

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## WINNIN' A FIGHT

By Arthur L. Rafter

The name of the jasper was "Denver Dick."  
An' he stopped at the Grand Hotel.  
When he 'lowed he was gunnin' for "Hornet"  
Horn,

The pizenest killer that ever was born,  
We knowed that he lied like hell.

With his elbow leanin' upon the bar,  
An' one hand strokin' his gun,  
He talked an' talked of the fights he'd fought  
An' the rustlers an' robbers that he had caught,  
For, somehow, he'd allus won.

Then we heered that a five-man rustler band  
Had stole "Doc" Silver's cattle.

So we had to gather a posse quick,  
An', fust of all, we asked Denver Dick,  
An' he said that he's achin' fer battle.

When we all was mounted an' ready to ride,  
There wasn't a trace of the feller.  
But he'd wrote he was gone on the Hornet's  
track  
An' was aimin' to git him an' bring him back.  
Then we *knowed* that the cuss was yeller.

We sight the rustlers at Rocky Gulch,  
An' they're hustlin' to git across.  
As they're splashin' their way through the shall-  
low crick,  
There's a hoss on the bank where the shade is  
thick,  
An' it's Denver Dick on the hoss.

A pinto lets loose a warnin' snort,  
An' Dick's hoss whinnies back.  
Then every one has his six-gun out,  
An' we see each flash, as the pistols spout,  
While we're gallopin' down the track.

We spur our hosses right up the bank,  
Where one man's fightin' flye.  
But we're jest too late, as four of 'em's dead,  
An' Dick holds a gun at a rustler's head—  
An' it's Hornet Horn—alive.

. . . . .

As Denver Dick leans agin' the bar,  
He's one of the town's big sights,  
An' he's boastin' there in the same old way,  
While none of us ain't got nothin' to say,  
For mebbe he *had* them fights.



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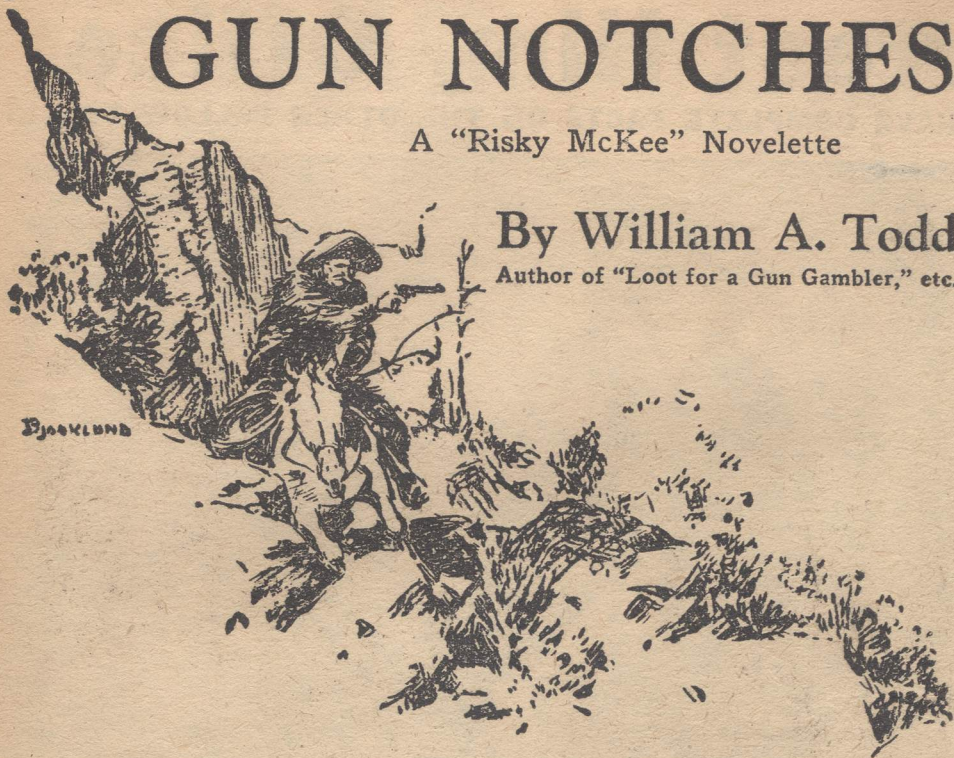


# GUN NOTCHES

A "Risky McKee" Novelette

By William A. Todd

Author of "Loot for a Gun Gambler," etc.



## CHAPTER I.

### A DANGEROUS BET.

FROM the start, the puncher in the red flannel shirt was suspicious of the set-up. He was mending the corral when a buckboard came careening up the road in swirling dust. Its ragged driver seemed terrified enough to be fleeing a pack of starving wolves. He yelled wildly, cracked his whip, and slumped on the swaying seat.

The chances were fifty-fifty that the man was throwing a bluff.

"Risky" McKee ducked through the corral rails to stop the galloping team from wrecking his ranch house. But he had only to wave his arms and shout before the broncs slowed down.

The animals were streaked with alkali and blowing from exhaustion. They recognized a cool barn when

they saw one. It meant water and rest. So the horses broke from gallop to trot, then let the rig roll up to the red-shirted waddy.

The ragged buckboard driver appeared to be in worse condition than the team. A crimson-soaked bandage was wrapped about his head. His face was ghastly white beneath its grime. He rolled glassy eyes as he lay on the seat, gasping out his words.

"I'm dyin'! Yuh've got ter help me!"

Risky McKee climbed the wagon wheel to reach him.

"Shore I'll help you," he said calmly. "Take it easy. There's plenty o' time."

"There ain't no time to waste!" the stranger cried, holding the cowboy off. "I've got two cases of bullets! Are yuh Risky McKee?"



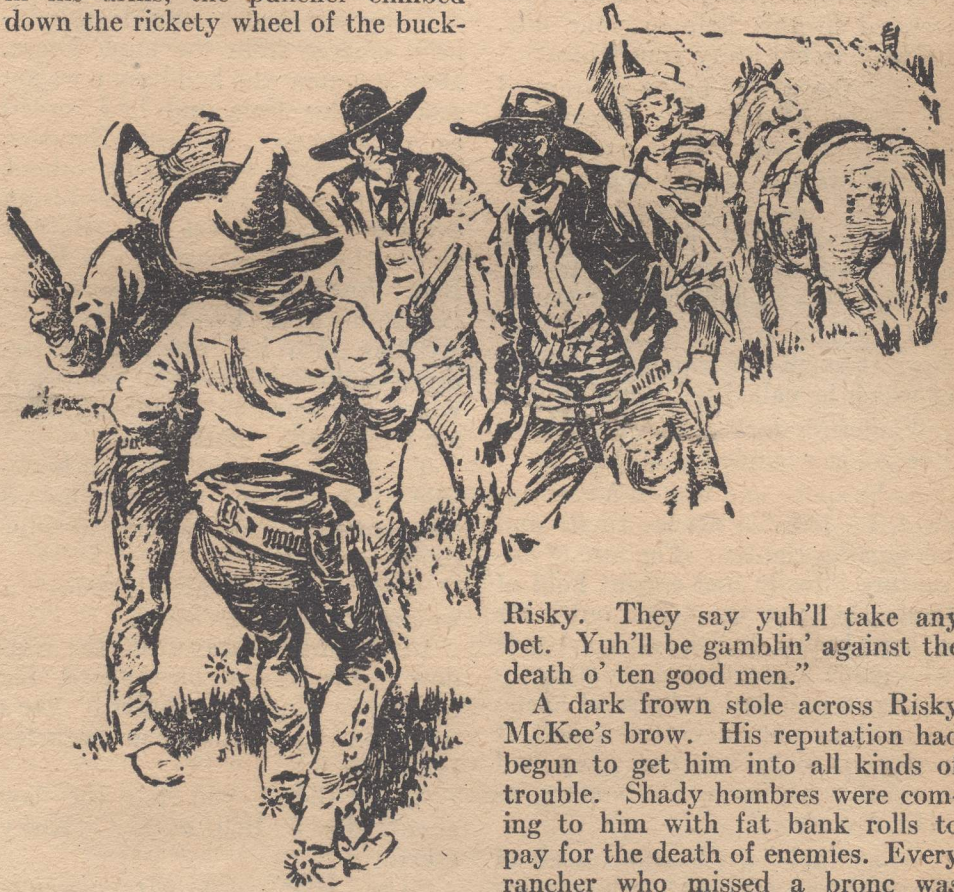
"I'm McKee," Risky replied. "But button your lip while I move you into the ranch house. That wound might be a bad one."

"Let me be!" the buckboard driver protested.

Risky's strength was too much for the undersized hombre. Lifting him in his arms, the puncher climbed down the rickety wheel of the buck-

as he laid the patient on a couch in the big living room. "I better get my pard from the bunk house to heat water."

"No time," the stranger groaned, shutting his eyes tight. "Yuh've got ter pack them two cases o' bullets to Scalp Mesa. Don't fail me,



board, and started toward the ranch house.

There was the odor of whisky on the man's breath. But he really had been wounded. His bandage slipped, and Risky saw an ugly gash above the right ear. The puncher also became aware that the fellow had been hit in the left thigh.

"Just keep quiet," Risky advised,

Risky. They say yuh'll take any bet. Yuh'll be gamblin' against the death o' ten good men."

A dark frown stole across Risky McKee's brow. His reputation had begun to get him into all kinds of trouble. Shady hombres were coming to him with fat bank rolls to pay for the death of enemies. Every rancher who missed a bronc was asking Risky to recapture it from some notorious bandit. Men wanted him to find lost mines.

Risky's business of breeding prize pack mules and blue-ribbon brones was beginning to suffer. And he wished he never had pitted his skill with a gun and a horse against the outlaw tribe, when the odds had been against him, and the law had been on his side. Having aided a



few friends in trouble, Risky McKee was said to be ready to take any dare for the sheer love of the excitement of it.

"You've got me wrong," the waddy told the wounded man. "Scalp Mesa is across the border. There's a law agin' carrying guns over the line. Besides, I'm more interested in this hole in your laig. I'll have to cut away your trousers."

"But the 8 Bell outfit is trapped on Scalp Mesa!" the buckboard driver protested. "They were huntin' wild Mexican stock when Hidalgo Pete an' his gang cornered 'em. They're short of powder. They can't fight their way back to the border. They ain't even got grub."

Risky had moved to a side window, through the rippling curtains of which he called to a bunk shack:

"Sufferin' Joe! Rise an' shine! I've got a wounded gent here."

As he spoke and waited for an answer, he felt his nerves tingle and his muscles tighten. The lure of adventure already had caught hold of him. He knew the 8 Bell outfit for a hard-boiled bunch of cowhands who made a practice of shooting up towns on pay day and also of hiring themselves out in cattle wars. It was easy to believe that they had tangled with such an hombre as "Hidalgo Pete."

Risky had been hearing much of that Mexican bandit who called himself the "Gentleman from San Pedro," a name which had been shortened to Hidalgo Pete by gringo border hoppers. That outlaw, who wore the finest vests and bell-bottom trousers in Chihuahua and rode a five-thousand-dollar palomino horse, had been mixed up in several revolutionary stunts. He was suspected of stealing stock on the American side of the line.

"Sufferin' Joe!" Risky shouted to the bunk house again.

"I'm a-comin' as fast as my rheumatics will let me," a healthy voice roared back to the waddy. "What does that feller mean by bringin' his lead pizen hyar ter spile my siesta? How do we know he ain't got some catchin' disease?"

Risky watched a long, lean baldhead emerge from the bunk house. He was a man who had been a wagon scout in his time and had served as map maker for the Rangers. His constant complaining about imaginary ills had got him fired from every job that he ever had. He was as healthy as the day he was born. Risky knew it, and paid no attention to his squawks.

"Snap into it!" the cowboy ordered Sufferin' Joe. "I want hot water, medicine, an' bandages. This ain't no foolin' matter."

The baldhead in the fringed buckskin jacket and trousers halted short, mouth dropping open to show toothless gums.

"Yuh ain't kiddin' about a wounded feller?" he asked.

Risky turned away from the window to the hombre on the bed. He heard the jingle of Sufferin' Joe's spurs turning to the mess shack for hot water.

"Why didn't you tell the law about the 8 Bell outfit?" Risky asked.

"The law?" the stranger exclaimed. "There ain't no Mexican law near Scalp Mesa. An' no American law kin go across the border. I was with the 8 Bell. I slipped past Hidalgo Pete at night. Look at my wounds. If yuh don't take them cases o' bullets ter Scalp Mesa, Risky McKee, the death o' them eight punchers will be on yore hands."

The buckboard driver was breath-



ing hard from the exertion of his speech. He stretched as if in agony on the bunk, closed his eyes tight again, and groaned miserably.

Sufferin' Joe was coming in the front door with a steaming pot of water.

"Set it down on a chair near the bunk," Risky ordered the baldhead, who peered hard at the patient. "I'll have to clean that head wound first. Then we'll give him somethin' to drink before pullin' the bullet out of his leg."

"Gosh, if it ain't Jack Scuppers!" the former wagon scout ejaculated. "Why, the last time I heard about him, he was nipped by a pizened spider, an' his arm swelled up an' almost exploded." Sufferin' Joe swallowed hard. "Better be careful, Risky. He might be carryin' the germ."

The cowboy waved his pard aside. "Go out an' rope my best mule," he instructed. "Throw a diamond hitch onto those two cases in the buckboard. I'll need my stocky buckskin pony, extra six-gun, rifle, an' a little grub. Also a goat bag of water. Supplies for ten men go with the mule."

"Whar yuh goin'?" the baldhead asked breathlessly. "Ter China?"

"Scalp Mesa," Risky replied, working on the wounded hombre's head. "Don't talk so much."

"That's a fine place fer a vacation," Sufferin' Joe growled, turning to the front door. "An' yuh promised ter take me ter the doctor in Carrizozo at the first chance." He slammed the door as he went out.

"Are yuh really goin', Risky?" the buckboard driver groaned. "Yuh wouldn't kid me?"

"It's a bad bet, Scuppers," the puncher answered grimly. "But if what you say is true, I've got no choice."

"Look out fer the gang," Scuppers said excitedly. "The 8 Bell is holed up on the rim o' the north cliff. They'll throw down a rope for the bullet cases. Yuh kin git up ter the cliff at night. There's a password, Risky. Strike eight bells on the cowbell in the buckboard."

Risky finished bandaging the head wound, and started to cut the man's filthy denims from his legs.

"I'm going to pull that slug from your leg," he said easily. "Take a swig of Sufferin' Joe's snake medicine."

"Forget that bullet, an' get those others ter Scalp Mesa," Jack Scuppers groaned.

"Hold tight," Risky advised.

There was a piercing shriek from the patient as the puncher probed for the lead, found it, and jerked it from the flesh. The buckboard driver tried to rear up. He shuddered and fell back. He was unconscious.

The front door sprang open.

"Did yuh kill him?" Sufferin' Joe's voice asked.

"He's out cold, but still breathin'," Risky replied, wiping beads of sweat from his brow. "Have you got the mule packed an' my bronc ready?"

"That's done," the baldhead said seriously. "Do yuh know anythin' about two hombres in Mexican sombreros that are watchin' our ranch yard from yonder hill?"

Risky wheeled to his pard. "No kiddin'?" he asked.

"They've been powerful interested in our mule pack," Sufferin' Joe said.

"Why shouldn't they?" Risky snapped. "That mule is as fast as any ordinary Indian pony. It can climb the side of a cliff like a goat, pack or no pack. You come here



an' take care of this gent. I better be goin'."

He moved to a chest, picked up a pair of batwing chaps, and buckled them on.

"I'll be followin' yuh, partner," Sufferin' Joe growled. "An' don't tell me that I won't."

"You won't," the puncher said tersely, taking a high-powered rifle from a wall rack.

"I've got a bronc saddled already," the baldhead chuckled. "If yuh touch it, I'll shoot yuh in the back when yuh ride away. An' if I miss yuh, them riders on the hill will nail yuh."

"You stay home an' attend to this wounded hombre," Risky replied, gray eyes flashing. "I'm sick of the sight of you. You give me a pain in the neck."

"I've had that same pain fer three years," Sufferin' Joe chuckled. "I must have caught it from associatin' with yuh that long."

"You don't even make sense," Risky said, jingling out the front door.

Outside, he halted, lifting his eyes to a barren hill a mile away. Two horsemen in sombreros turned and rode out of his view.

"Buzztails!" Risky exclaimed. "I don't like any part of this. It smells bad. I don't trust Jack Scuppers or the 8 Bell outfit. I'm nothing better than a tenderfoot in a game with card sharps."

But he hurried down the ranch yard to where two saddle brones and a pack mule stood. Quickly uncinching the hull from the sorrel mount, he slapped it on the rump to send it out to the range. Then, swinging to the saddle of the buckskin, he drove the pack mule out of the ranch yard ahead of him.

At a window in the cabin, Sufferin' Joe grinned toothlessly after the

puncher in the red flannel shirt and tan ten-gallon hat.

## CHAPTER II.

### A RIGHT TO THE JAW.

RISKY MCKEE'S prize mule had nothing in common with a burro. It was as big as a mustang and had much more sense. If it got tangled in barb wire, the mule wouldn't take panic and cut itself to shreds, as would a pony. It would step out of the tangle carefully. And if almost dead from thirst, the mule would not drink, as a horse, until it completely killed itself.

With twice the strength and stamina of an ordinary bronc, the mule was just as fast. Risky had proved it to more than one strange puncher who goaded him into a race. He counted hard on his long-eared pard at all times, as he did now.

The grub and ammunition weighed no more than a rider on the back of the black mule. So Risky had no fear of being overtaken by the hombres in the sombreros. He struck a straight course down the basin to the red mountains that lay between him and Mexico. By traveling the level open country, the puncher forced his foes to keep in the rocky hills, where the going would exhaust their mounts.

"I'll let them wear themselves out trying to keep under cover," Risky said. "When I reach the mountains, my buckskin an' mule will be as fresh as daisies."

The cowboy was right. By late afternoon, when he trotted to the long, barren slopes of the Sierra Madre Mountains, his mount and packer showed no signs of weariness. But Risky had failed to suspect that the deck in this game was stacked from the beginning, and



that he was playing against real card sharps.

Twice, he detected a flash of yellow light in the rocky hills to the east. He saw no rider. But experience told him that some one was turning a mirror to the rays of the sun, which were reflected dazzlingly from the glass surface. In the old days, army scouts had used the trick to send messages for miles. And this art of the heliograph was still employed by Mexican rurales—and also bandits.

Climbing the rugged grades to the ridges and cliffs, Risky again spied that flashing far behind him, and his pulse quickened.

"It looks like I'm going to meet a war party," he muttered. "Hidalgo Pete ain't no greenhorn."

Worried, the cowboy slipped into a gulch, where he began to prod horse and mule for the first time. The animals climbed fast through the winding defile. Finding a ledge, Risky turned up it and ducked into chaparral on the rim of the cliff.

Now he reached into his bag of tricks and tried every one. No track was left. Dodging across boulder-strewn benches, dropping into chasms, and climbing out again, skirting cliffs, and racing up canyons, the cowboy struck deeper into the great Sierra Madres.

He had hunted this territory for puma and grizzlies. There were no trails. He guided by the surrounding peaks, some of which glistened with the silvery hats of the winter snows. Streams of melting snow water were crossed. Clawing through prickly pear and mesquite, he hurried on to the Pass of the Conquistadores, which marked the border.

There, Risky knew that Hidalgo Pete's men would be waiting for him,

for the heliograph message had not been sent for nothing.

When the cowboy sighted the notch in the rearing ridge beyond, he veered to the right, and kept his horse and mule hidden in crags and brush from far-reaching eyes. He knew a game trail over the ridge. Let the bandits wait in the pass for him. He'd fool them by slipping around the notch.

Sneaking through breaks, winding into scrub pine, and clawing up cliffs of jagged crag, Risky reached the high altitude where his breath came short and snow was packed in crevices.

"I'm as good as in Mexico now," he said, spurring his buckskin up a narrow ledge in pursuit of his mule.

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than he realized that his trick had been discovered. At the top of the trail on the crest of the rocky ridge, a white mountain goat with curled horns leaped into Risky's view. The wind was from the south, blowing in the puncher's face, so that the goat failed to scent him. But the critter spied him in the twinkling of an eye.

Without halting its speed, it dived over the side of the trail and fell like a plummet for fifty feet, landing on legs like springs. It was off with the speed of a cannonball, vanishing into the crags and greasewoods.

"Huh!" Risky grunted.

He knew that wild sheep and goats are the hardest game in the world to stalk. They flee at the very suspicion of men. With eyes that see as far as an eagle's, with the most sensitive nostrils in the wild kingdom, the mountain goat detects danger long before it is in striking distance.

Aware that there was little time to lose, Risky threw in his spurs and



drove his buckskin hard to the crest of the ridge. He jerked a rifle from his scabbard as his eyes focused on the sea of peaks before him. There was no sign of horse or man. But the puncher knew that foes were approaching.

A glimpse at the sun told him that day would end in an hour. Already the sky was filled with golden radiance in the west. Soon, vision would be deceptive in the high altitudes, and the canyons and chasms would be filled with violet shadows.

Risky yipped at the mule and plunged down the side of the ridge at a perilous pace. He didn't get far before the enemy put in an appearance. Three riders in the blue uniforms of Mexican rurales, were racing along the foot of the ridge, darting through boulders and mesquite. Their plan was to cut Risky McKee off, capture him, or force him back to the United States.

His backbone went cold and for a moment, he hesitated. Risky had expected bandits, but not lawmen. He didn't know if they were the real thing or whether Hidalgo Pete had dressed up some of his coyotes in uniform to trick peons and ranchers.

At any rate, Risky had no business transporting guns into Mexico. He was carrying no weapons except his own property. But the cartridges would surely be confiscated. And he might face a firing squad for his trouble.

"By golly, this powder means the lives of ten good Americans," he said excitedly. "It's going through. If those riders are rurales, they're after Hidalgo Pete's raiders. An' I'm doing the Mexican law a service."

Spying a gulch opening at the foot of the ridge to the right, Risky made for it with buckskin and mule. It was a desperate chance. If a

pack slipped, the mule was gone. If his bronc broke a leg, Risky had no hope. He was running for his life. Down shale and ledge, he drove hard, slipping, skidding, righting his horse with a skill born of cow work.

*Zing-g-g!* A bullet whined over his head, followed by the explosion of a rural rifle. Then another, and another. Lead chipped the crags he passed. But the range for the Mexican law guns was long. And shooting from the back of galloping horses was not easy.

Another hundred yards, and Risky was at the gulch. He raced into it, and downward, protected by the deepening cliffs. He knew he could not follow the defile for long before the troops would be hard at his heels. He had to trust in his mule and buckskin now, as never before. Each mile of distance was taking him farther away from his own country, making his return harder.

The gulch led down to a canyon, where the iron shoes of his horse echoed like the clang of branding irons. He found a break and climbed out of the canyon. Shadows were darkening in the pockets of the rock. The sky above was turning to pink. He paused on the rim to listen, and heard the ring of shoes far up the canyon.

"I wonder if they know that I'm heading for Scalp Mesa," he muttered to himself, spurring on across a grassy bench to the shelter of a pine woods. "They might beat me if they know a good trail."

It was impossible to tell if he had thrown off pursuit or not. He couldn't delay to find out. Reaching the woods, he drove through to get into the clear before darkness. The setting sun gave him direction.

His next step was to find a mountain stream that turned into a river



on the flats to the west of the mountain range. That river would guide him close to the grassy table known as Scalp Mesa, which he might pick out by the light of the stars.

"Bucky," he spoke to his bronc by name, "we shore know what it feels like to be on the dodge."

The sun had died in a smoldering fire by the time that the waddy was through the timber. Stars were long in lighting the sky. He groped through the darkness of the mountains. The cold increased, and he donned a mackinaw. The mule followed him now, trusting to his direction. He gave his buckskin its head to find the pitfalls, guiding it with the pressure of his knees.

For hours, he pushed on, sometimes losing his way, because the mountain peaks looked different at night. But he found the river and after midnight, he was on the alkali flats. There, the prickly pear slowed him up.

He frightened wolves and deer. Puma screamed in the distance. The North Star was his compass. And he searched continuously for sight of the rearing table-land that was known as Scalp Mesa.

It was getting on toward dawn when Risky found it. Under the starlit sky, it was a great purple island in the flat sea of prickly pear and mesquite.

He zigzagged through sandy runways in the thorny growth, approaching it from the north. Twice, wild steers crashed away from his approach.

"The 8 Bell outfit must have been after those critters when they ran into Hidalgo Pete," Risky muttered, and he reached into a saddlebag for the cowbell that was to signal his arrival at the foot of the northern cliff.

Halting, he dismounted, and

wrapped the hoofs of his bronc and mule in sacks. Every bit of bridle steel was covered with cloth to prevent it from casting a glint in the night. He removed his spurs.

Taking the animals in tow, Risky advanced cautiously. His nerves were as taut as violin strings. He held a cocked six-gun. This was a dangerous gamble. He didn't know what cards his foes would play.

The waddy might have been walking into a trap. He didn't know whether his foes were waiting or not. There was no sound from them. The stillness worried him. At the first warning, he was ready to shoot or to flee. But there was no sound, no sign of life.

Risky was at the foot of the mesa cliff. For ten minutes, he scanned the two-hundred-foot wall of clay and rock. With misgivings, he took the cowbell, and struck one blow, then another. He tried to make it sound as if the bell was tied to a lost burro. To his ears, each of the eight rings was like the explosion of a six-gun.

Waiting for an answer, he heard the tinkle of falling gravel. Some one was coming down the cliff. Risky strained to see. A dark figure was lowering himself with the aid of a rope. The cowboy waited.

"Jack Scuppers?" a voice called softly.

"It's a friend of his," Risky replied, crouching.

"Who?" the man descending the cliff asked fearfully.

"Risky McKee." He rose, holstering his weapon.

"Waal, I'll be blowed!" the fellow exclaimed. "How are yuh, Risky? I'm Bope Kenyon."

Risky remembered "Bope" Kenyon as one of the toughest hands in the 8 Bell crowd. Kenyon had quite a reputation for trigger magic.



He had shot more than one man, and always been cleared on the basis of self-defense. But he had never given Risky any trouble.

Risky faced him. "Jack Scuppers is bad wounded at my ranch house," he said. "I've got that ammunition with me. Also grub an' water. What's the low-down on this deal?"

There was a hard grin on Bope Kenyon's lips. His eyes glinted in the starlight.

"Yo're a real pard, Risky," he said in a strange tone. "But yuh lose me a hundred dollars."

"How so?" the cowboy asked coldly.

"I bet Scuppers fifty bucks that he'd never get across the border, an' fifty bucks more that he couldn't buy one of yore mules ter bring the powder." He turned to the cliff, cupped his hands, and called: "O. K., boys. We're comin' up the ledge."

Risky's hand dropped unconsciously to his gun butt. "What's this tall yarn about Hidalgo Pete cornering you boys?" he inquired in an expressionless tone. "Jack Scuppers told me that I had to watch out."

"He told yuh right," the 8 Bell cowboy chuckled. "Them rurales are scattered all around, waiting for us ter move the stock. But they're scared ter attack the mesa, because we kin hear 'em scalin' the cliff at night, an' see 'em by day."

"Rurales?" Risky exclaimed. "What about Hidalgo Pete?"

A voice with a Spanish accent spoke behind Risky McKee: "It ees a great pleasure, Señor McKee, to introduce myself."

Risky stiffened. He saw the grin on Bope Kenyon's tough features. He knew then that he had been tricked. The presence of the rurales near the border should have warned

him of the double cross. They were certainly after Hidalgo Pete's raiders. But they were also after the 8 Bell outfit, which had thrown in with the Mexican outlaw.

And Risky could guess the rest about that herd of stock on the mesa. It was not wild, but stolen by Hidalgo Pete, and the 8 Bell outfit was figuring to drive it to the United States for sale.

With the cold calm of a gambler, Risky McKee pivoted to face the tall, lean Mexican behind him. The starlight reflected from the silver threads of Hidalgo Pete's velvet vest. He made an impressive picture in the night, with his wide-brimmed sombrero, flashing black eyes, chiseled features, and spiked mustache.

"*Buenas noches, señor!*" Risky said sarcastically.

Hidalgo Pete's white teeth gleamed. His lean fingers were smoothing out his red silk sash, from the top of which protruded the silver butts of two Colt six-guns.

"I hear much about you," the Mexican said mockingly. "Perhaps we shall have a chance to gamble with the cards. This great service you have done for me, Señor McKee, shall not go without the reward. I pay you money, then with luck, I win it back. It would be very impolite. So then perhaps I return all the winnings again like the true hidalgo."

"An' mebbe you won't, you belly-crawlin', fox-whiskered hydrophobia rat!" Risky exclaimed wrathfully.

As he spoke, his right fist came up with the swiftness of lightning and landed explodingly upon Hidalgo Pete's jaw. The blow lifted the Mexican off his feet, and hurled him into the thorny pear, unconscious.



## CHAPTER III.

## CONDEMNED TO DIE.

RISKY'S sudden change of temper seemed like a signal for the firing of a ton of dynamite. He heard Bope Kenyon cry out in frightened surprise. Risky whirled, dropping to a knee, stabbing for his holstered six-gun. He found the 8 Bell cowboy drawing on him.

Then, to Risky's surprise, weapons roared behind him in the prickly pear, and bullets whipped past him into Bope Kenyon's body. There was the war whoop of an attacking party charging the cliff as the 8 Bell cowboy fell with a scream. And from the cliff above, American and Mexican voices shouted excitedly.

A flash of wisdom told Risky that the rurales had crept up through the mesquite to investigate the ringing of the cowbell below the mesa. He knew that by dropping to a knee he had avoided being killed by the first fusillade of lead that slaughtered Bope Kenyon. He heard his mule and bronc squeal in terror and flee into the thorny brush.

Risky didn't hesitate.

With a lunge, he threw himself into the nearest protecting thicket, and scuttled along the sand like an enormous crab. The back of his shirt was raked to ribbons. He doubted that he'd escape.

Shots crashed, and lead clipped branches all around him. He felt a slug go through his hat, another nip his right arm. He didn't know what had happened to the unconscious Hidalgo Pete, nor did he care. He was only interested in escaping the rurales, finding his buckskin and mule, and getting back to the United States.

From the rim of the mesa, guns now blazed, slamming bullets down into the pear at the flash of rural

powder. Stones came hurtling down the cliff to bound into the mesquite, knocking down small trees, and cracking against larger ones. It was plainly a trick to stop the Mexican law from storming the mesa, and also a method to save bullets.

Moving quickly on hands and knees, Risky emerged torn and cut from the clump of pear to a sandy runway. He raised to his feet. He didn't know which way his horse and mule had gone. Nor did he have time to figure it out.

Out of the black shadow of a near-by boulder, a lithe, bare-chested Yaqui brave sprang at him. The blade of a knife gleamed in the dark.

Risky's gun was out and ready, but he feared to shoot, because he'd draw the fire of the 8 Bell outfit and the outlaws on the cliff. He leaped backward, swinging his gun barrel at the stabbing knife in the Indian's hand. Steel rang against steel as the Colt knocked the knife blade aside. And then the Yaqui had grappled with Risky.

They fell hard, rolling over and over. The cowboy caught the Yaqui's knife wrist in his left hand. He couldn't stop the Indian's wild yelling. He tried to crack him on the head with his gun barrel to knock him out before it was too late.

But already rurales were coming to the Yaqui's aid. Like wolves out of the mesquite, peons threw themselves on Risky, clubbing him with weapons, punching, kicking him. They were plainly afraid to shoot because of their foes on the rim of the mesa. Risky struggled to his feet with two hombres on his shoulders. He bucked like a mad bronc, punched, whirled, and went down again.

They had him. He knew it. His



head was spinning, and he didn't know but that they had cracked his ribs with their swinging weapons. His breath came short. To fight any more might mean to feel the slip of a keen-edged knife into his brisket.

"Hold off!" he cried in Spanish. "I surrender. I am no enemy."

A six-gun barrel was rammed hard against his chest. He saw the angry eyes of a rural peering at him. He heard the man say in Spanish that if Risky made one false move he'd die. The flame of the gun would not be seen from the cliff, because its muzzle was pressing the cowboy.

"Gringo!" the rural snarled. "Gringo dog!"

"You had better make certain that Hidalgo Pedro doesn't wake up and vamoze," Risky replied. "I left him cold over yonder."

The officer barked orders for men to go search for the outlaw. Then, the rural supervised a strict search of Risky's person for concealed weapons. Everything that the puncher owned was taken from him. He was dragged to his feet and prodded with guns through the sandy runway of the pear.

The shooting had stopped from the cliff rim and the mesquite. Excited voices spoke on all sides. And an American puncher shouted from the mesa rim:

"Bope! Are yuh all right? Let out a pip. We're goin' ter set fire ter the mesquite."

One of the rurales with Risky evidently understood English, for he immediately informed the other captors of the threat to fire the brushy flats. Risky was hurried along. Reaching a small open spot, he saw horses waiting, but none was his buckskin. Nor did he spy his

mule. About to speak of the animals, he changed his mind.

If the soldiers found that the puncher had been bringing cartridges to their foes, Risky would be worse off than ever. He strongly doubted that the 8 Bell outfit would fire the pear. They needed the mesquite to cover their escape from the mesa. What was more, they might burn up Bope Kenyon, who they still believed was alive.

Risky was pushed up to an hombre who wore ornate trappings and a fancy-band box hat. His clanking sword and chesty manner branded him for a captain.

"Gringo prisoner," a rural told his chief. "He is good for information about the numbers of the enemy on the mesa. He can tell us about the cattle."

"Si," the Mexican officer agreed. "Tie him to a horse. We will retreat. Dawn is near."

Tuckered out and throbbing with pain, Risky offered no resistance. His chance of escape would soon come. He had been wise in giving up. These rurales were in an ugly frame of mind from their night of work.

Only a fourth of them were in uniform. The rest had been recruited from adobe villages and poverty-stricken ranches.

Ordered to the bare back of a shaggy cayuse, Risky let his legs be tied. A lariat loop was tossed over his neck, and a rider took the end of the rope, so that escape was impossible.

There was a gray streak of dawn in the eastern sky as the band rode away, turning right and left in the open alleys of the mesquite. Some of the broncs carried wounded men, who groaned and cursed Hidalgo Pete. But the Mexican outlaw was not a prisoner.



From words spoken around Risky, he realized that the bandit had not been found. It was possible that he had awakened during the fight, crawled away, and hidden in the pear.

As the rurales rode on, fingers of pink groped into the sky, and the red nose of the sun appeared on the horizon. The world lighted rapidly. The brush-covered flats flamed with brilliant colors. And behind Risky, the north cliffs of the receding mesa slept in a soft purple haze.

The captain led the way from the flats to a canyon. The hoofs of the horses clattered deafeningly. Risky counted a score of fighters, some in rags and straw sombreros, others in uniform. He was the only American in the lot.

The band swung around a bend in the defile and trotted to a halt in a sunken bowl, where a camp fire smoked. There, all manner of equipment littered the ground—blankets, saddles, ropes, cooking utensils, two small tents, and an Indian wigwam. Pack burros and change mounts grazed around the camp.

But what interested the puncher most was a white-haired Spaniard in an expensive red serape who sat on a boulder near the fire, staring at the flames. His lean face was lined with worry. He paid no heed to the approach of the troop. And not until Risky was brought up to him, did the Spaniard raise his eyes.

"Is this one of the gringos who raided your hacienda?" the army captain asked the rancher.

The tall Spaniard studied the American waddy with vengeful eyes.

"I don't remember him," the rancher said coldly. "What news has he of my son and my cattle?"

The stocky captain glowered at Risky. "Where is the son of Don

Castilla? And what has that pig from San Pedro done with his cattle? Speak quickly. We have means of making you talk."

Risky McKee chewed his lips. His luck had played out, and he knew he'd have to take the consequences. There was no mercy in this camp for him. The thought of Yaqui torture sent a cold shiver through him.

There was little use protesting that he was not a member of the gang that had apparently raided Don Castilla's ranch, made off with the Spaniard's son, and stolen his cattle. The presence of the 8 Bell cowboys in Hidalgo Pete's band was circumstantial evidence that every American below the border was mixed up in the theft.

Risky thought of his lost mule with the cartridge cases. If the rurales knew that Hidalgo Pete was short of ammunition, they'd charge the mesa. But that would mean the death of the 8 Bell outfit. No, Risky could not divulge the real reason for his trip to Mexico in order to save his life, and thereby cause the death of fellow countrymen, no matter how low they had sunk.

From every angle that he read his cards, Risky's hand was still bad.

"I haven't been on the mesa," the cowboy replied in Spanish. "Believe it or not, I know nothing of a kidnaped boy, or of cattle, or a raid on this gentleman's ranch. You have taken all my personal effects. There are letters and Cattle Association cards to tell who I am. There is nothing more I can say."

A ring of rurales and ragged peons was gathering around. A mocking laugh shook them. And the captain raged with abuse.

The white-haired Don Castilla held up a hand.

"Silence!" he called. "Who is this



American that refuses to cringe in the face of death? Let him speak further."

Risky watched the rural captain draw a six-gun. "He will speak further, Don Castilla. He will tell the truth. He was trying to escape from our trap when we caught him. The Americans are deserting that dog from San Pedro one by one. We will not let another leave. We will kill this gringo, drag his corpse to the foot of the mesa cliff, and let the buzzards feed on it before the eyes of his compatriots."

The tall Spaniard stood up, casting aside his serape. His handsome velvet clothing was torn and stained with crimson. And his right side was bandaged. It was plain that he had fought off the raid on his rancho to the end, and had pursued the outlaws until he dropped.

"Captain," he addressed the rural chief, "if you do that, my son's body will join this American's. I order you to release him. Send him back to the mesa to tell our foes that I will give them the cattle if they will give me back my boy. I have thought it out. There is no other way."

The face of the rural captain purpled with rage.

"It is I who give the orders here, Don Castilla!" he cried. "This gringo dies. What is the life of your son against that of an enemy of Mexico? You are a simple rancher. I am a soldier. There is a price on the head of that dog from San Pedro. My men will divide the reward before another day."

Several peons and soldiers cut Risky's bound legs, and dragged him from the horse. He saw Don Castilla pale. The tall Spaniard stepped back, lifting a protesting arm. But the troops jeered him.

And the rural captain cocked his six-gun.

"Run!" he ordered Risky. "I will shoot you like a fleeing coyote."

Risky didn't move. His gray eyes took in the surrounding cliffs, which offered no hiding places. He saw the rurales drawing weapons. A dozen bullets would strike him before he got twenty yards.

## CHAPTER IV.

### GUNMAN'S BLUFF.

THERE seemed no trick or turn of events that could save the cowboy, and he knew it. Words would only delay the inevitable. He heard the clatter of horses galloping down the canyon, but paid no attention to them. His eyes were on Don Castilla, who was trembling with emotion.

Suddenly, Risky realized that the Spaniard was going to draw a gun to save him. Not because the rancher did not wish to see him die, but because he thought that Risky's death might mean the life of the Spaniard's son who was held captive on Scalp Mesa.

Risky knew that the Spaniard could do nothing with a weapon against the scattered rurales, Yaquis, and peons. The rancher would be killed with him. These men fought for money. They wanted to nail Hidalgo Pete for the reward that hung over his head.

With a grim smile, Risky addressed the captain.

"I won't run, hombre," he said. "I'll walk, an' you can shoot me in the back like a yellow dog."

"*Caramba!*" the captain cried wrathfully. "Run, you gringo rat! Run!"

*Crash!* A shot crashed from up the canyon, and a bullet whined over the heads of the troops.



Every one of them whirled, including the captain and the Spaniard. Fear struck deep in their hearts. They might have suspected that Hidalgo Pete was arriving. But the rider who had fired the shot was an American, who galloped between two uniformed rurales.

Risky recognized the tall, lean, buckskin-clad figure of Sufferin' Joe, who waved his smoking weapon.

"Halt!" the rural captain shouted, stabbing his weapon forward.

"I've got a piece o' news from Uncle Sam!" Sufferin' Joe's healthy voice boomed. "Drill me, hombres, an' yuh'll have a hornet's nest about yore ears."

"Buzztails!" Risky exclaimed, falling back. "The old coot has lost his mind."

He glimpsed a flashing Ranger badge over Sufferin' Joe's heart, but he knew that his pard could not have joined the border patrol again. Sufferin' Joe once had been a map maker for the Rangers. There was a chance that he had brought his old badge with him. But he was not a member now. He was taking a dreadful chance in masquerading as a Ranger. If word got back to the United States, the old scout would pay heavily.

Risky watched his lanky pard dismount with the two blue-uniformed hombres who had come with him. Perhaps they were the pair who had chased Risky near the Pass of the Conquistadores. Their bronses were streaked with sweat, and they looked worried.

Sufferin' Joe had an air of great confidence and importance.

"Are yuh the boss hyar?" the scout addressed the tall Spaniard, ignoring Risky completely.

Risky gritted his teeth. His impulse was to call Sufferin' Joe's hand, unmask him for what he was,

and send him back where he came from. But to do so meant to cause trouble for the baldhead.

The tall Spaniard waved Sufferin' Joe to the stocky rural captain, who was eying the baldhead's strange buckskin garb and shining badge.

"Who gives permission for a Ranger to enter my country?" the captain demanded angrily.

Sufferin' Joe glanced at Risky and frowned distastefully. "I see yuh've put a loop over one o' them bandits that we chased over hyar," the scout said seriously. "Yuh shore saved me a heap o' trouble."

Risky clenched his fists, but he did not speak.

"Talk sense!" the rural captain roared. "I do not understand the gringo language so well. This prisoner will die. You will see him with your very eyes. And you too, Señor Ranger, will die if you have no permission by my government to be in Mexico."

Sufferin' Joe chuckled mirthlessly. "General," he said to the captain, "yuh shore know a lot o' funny jokes. I'd powerfully like ter spend more time with yuh. But I've got an operation fer appendicitis waitin' me back home. An' thar's also a little matter o' hangin' two o' yore Mexican spies what shot up a feller called Jack Scuppers."

"Two of my spies!" the rural captain exclaimed. "Impossible."

Risky McKee felt hollow in the stomach. He could sense what his pard was up to now. There was really no beating Sufferin' Joe at the tricky business of horse trading. And he was employing the same sort of tactics. Risky knew that his pard was referring to the two riders in the sombreros who had followed Jack Scuppers to his ranch.

"Shore," the baldhead chuckled.



"Them straw-hatted peons crossed inter my country without no permit. We've got 'em on ice fer shootin' an American. I thought I better ride down hyar ter talk ter yuh about 'em."

There was an angry growl among the troopers who plainly realized that it was two of their number who had been captured in the United States.

"Señor Jack Scuppers!" the rural captain raged. "He is a bandit who rides with that dog from San Pedro. If you hang my two soldiers, I will hang every gringo in Mexico."

"Waal, now that wouldn't be awful polite o' yuh," Sufferin' Joe said, blinking his eyes. "We ain't anxious ter hang nobody. It gives me an awful attack o' jitters ter see men swingin' from trees. I was figurin' that mebbe we could remain good friends, all along. If yo're so anxious ter get them two soldiers back, mebbe it could be arranged."

Risky watched the tall Spaniard bend forward. "I will explain in Spanish, señor," he said to Sufferin' Joe, and then turned and spoke in his native tongue to the troops.

"We will pay nothing!" the rural captain exclaimed.

"I ain't askin' fer dinero," Sufferin' Joe said, and he glowered at Risky McKee. "That low-down, belly-crawlin' son of a coyote might interest me, though," he added, pointing a lanky finger at his ranch boss. "I've got a heap o' legal matters fer him ter answer ter. You bet! I'd almost be willin' ter trade yuh our two prisoners in the United States fer that jasper right thar."

The tall Spaniard translated Sufferin' Joe's words.

Risky stood silent, his face a cold mask. Inwardly, he was raging at his pard's trickery. Sufferin' Joe was not speaking for American law.

He was throwing a big bluff with that Ranger badge. It was true that he had said nothing about being a Ranger. And he might have captured the two Mexicans who had been sending heliograph messages to the Pass of the Conquistadores. But his attempt to trade prisoners was entirely on his own hands.

Risky faced the rural captain. "Shoot me an' get it over with," he snapped. "I ain't going anywhere with that hombre."

A wicked smile curled the captain's lips. His eyes narrowed and, for a moment, Risky thought that the man saw through the baldhead's bluff. But it was not so.

"Gringo," the captain addressed Risky McKee, "nothing would give me so much pleasure as to leave your corpse to the buzzards. But I am a patriot. I must think of my two soldiers who risked their lives in your vile country. I surrender you to the Ranger. And I hope you die a thousand deaths."

Sufferin' Joe cackled like a hen that has just laid an egg. "We'll only have ter hang him once," he said. "When I fix a rope, it don't ever break." He made a wry face. "Gosh, that pain is stabbin' me ag'in. I better be goin'."

The rural captain barked orders for Risky to be lashed to the back of a shaggy bronc. Then he turned to Sufferin' Joe, removing his band-box hat and bowing gracefully.

"You are an hombre of great courage and wisdom," the captain said. "I wish you luck. I trust my two soldiers will return at once."

"The faster I get home, the faster they come back," Sufferin' Joe replied, and he bowed, whipping off his hat, and grinning toothlessly.

Risky, who was being tied to the back of the horse, could have punched the baldhead square in the



nose for that foolish bow. He knew that his pard was laughing at him. Sufferin' Joe would never get over talking about his coup. And sooner or later, the Rangers were going to hear about it, and both Risky and Sufferin' Joe would have a lot of explaining to do.

"Adios!" the rural captain called.

"*Hasta luego!*" Sufferin' Joe replied. "Until we meet again."

Taking the halter rope of Risky's mustang, the baldhead turned up the canyon on his bronc, and threw in his spurs.

Risky wouldn't have been surprised at the crash of a dozen rifles behind him. He didn't trust the rural captain. Not until he and Sufferin' Joe turned a bend in the defile and were out of sight of the troop did Risky feel safe.

His gray eyes fastened hard on Sufferin' Joe's leathery face.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, you faker!" Risky growled.

"Look hyar," the baldhead retorted, "it ain't fair ter call me a liar. Don't yuh go doin' it now, 'cause I doubt if I'm goin' ter make the trip home without cavin' in. I'm plumb shore I caught somethin' from that Jack Scuppers skunk. He got ter yellin' in his sleep about rurales an' stolen cattle. An' I ain't shore but what I feel the same kind o' fit comin' on."

A warm feeling of gratitude swept Risky McKee. He could not help smiling at his lanky pard. Risky could read Sufferin' Joe like a book. He knew that the baldhead had been ready to throw away his life to save his boss. Sufferin' Joe's loyalty touched the cowboy deeply.

"Thanks, partner," Risky said sincerely. "I hate to disappoint you. But we ain't going home."

"I knowed I was hearin' funny voices an' imaginin' things," the

baldhead growled. "Risky, am I in Mexico or still snorin' in my bunk back at the ranch? I could swear that yuh was tied ter a bronc, but I know it ain't so."

"An' just as soon as we get out of this canyon," Risky replied, "you're cutting my ropes. I've lost one good mule with two cases of cartridges down in the prickly pear. The 8 Bell outfit is disgracing our country. They've thrown in with Hidalgo Pete. They've got Don Castilla's son a prisoner on Scalp Mesa."

"Thar go them funny voices ag'in," the scout chuckled. "I ain't payin' no attention ter them. I'm headin' straight fer home."

"It won't do you no good, pard," Risky snapped. "I'll only come back. Better let me loose now."

Sufferin' Joe drew his bronc to a halt. He cast a nervous eye back down the canyon, but the rurales could not be seen. He tweaked an ear, then rubbed his lanky chin.

"Risky, this has been a bad bet," he grumbled. "I had an awful time capturin' them two riders in the sombreros. They might starve ter death if I leave 'em roped ter that tree back on our range. I promised that rural captain that I'd set 'em free. I don't want ter go back on my word. We better head across the border."

"An' leave the 8 Bell outfit to murder Don Castilla's son?" the cowboy asked. "And what about those two cases of cartridges on our mule? If Hidalgo Pete gets them, we'll stand accused of supplying bullets to Mexican outlaws. We'll have Uncle Sam talkin' turkey to us."

Sufferin' Joe drew a bowie knife and ran his thumb along the edge.

"Are yuh takin' me with yuh?" he asked.



A hard grin twisted Risky's lips. "Not unless you take off that old Ranger badge."

"I never told nobody I was still with the Rangers," the baldhead protested.

"No, but you let them think it."

"I can't stop nobody's brain from gettin' all twisted up wrong," Sufferin' Joe growled. "I have a tough enough time tryin' ter think straight myself. Ever since I was thrown from that bronc, five years ago, I get dizzy spells. My heart gets ter thumpin' like a rabbit's foot. An' when it rains——"

"Aw, cut it out, for Pete's sakes," Risky pleaded, "an' let me loose! We've got some gun work to do."

Dismounting, Sufferin' Joe heaved a weary sigh, and moved to slash his rancher's bonds.

## CHAPTER V.

### UP THE MESA.

THE mustang that had been lent to Sufferin' Joe to take his prisoner back to the United States was a poor substitute for Risky's buckskin. The cowboy had to ride the animal bareback. His pard luckily had brought an extra six-gun, plenty of ammunition, and a rifle. Risky holstered the Colt, and filled the empty loops of his cartridge belt with bullets.

He was anxious to be on the go and still worried about the troops. There was a chance that the rurales might spy on him and Sufferin' Joe. The pair would have been up against it in a race.

Turning up the canyon, they rode hard to the mountains. But not for long. Their route swung back to the west. After climbing from the defile, they dodged through gulches and across benches, making for the mesquite-covered flats.

Every means was taken to keep hidden in the rough country.

"That captain ain't no fool," Sufferin' Joe remarked. "He'll watch the pear country like a hawk. He'll know about us soon enough."

"An' so will Hidalgo Pete," Risky added. "We're up against big odds, pard."

"That's the kind we like," the scout said, making a face. "What's the plan?"

Emerging from a deep arroyo, Risky halted at the edge of the flats. He could look across the tops of the prickly pear to the cliffs of Scalp Mesa sleeping in the distance. There were a great many sandy alleys through the thorny jungle to the table-land. Darkness would cover their approach. But they could not wait.

"Hidalgo Pete has no ammunition to waste, Sufferin' Joe," Risky said. "His men used the bullets that they were saving, on the rurales. They won't shoot at us until they're sure their lead will count."

"It only takes one slug ter beef a man," the scout growled. "An' if I know mules, that critter of ours won't stay in the prickly pear all day an' roast ter death. It will make for the mesa, whar there's grass an' water."

"The Scalp River passes the mesa on the west," Risky said. "That mule will be over there, or I'm a Chinaman. An' my buckskin might follow it. Come on."

Touched with steel spurs, their horses leaped out of the arroyo and into the mesquite. They took the narrow runways in the hope that eyes from the mountains would not spy them. But they hadn't gone a half a mile before Risky heard the far echo of three shots.

It was plainly a signal. The two punchers had been seen. It wouldn't



be long before the rurales started pursuit.

Risky took reckless chances with the shaggy mustang. The animal had a hard mouth, and it refused to turn at the pressure of the bridle rein. He was forced to let the horse have its head many times. Like an Indian pony, the animal had a habit of darting under low-hanging limbs, as if eager to brush its rider off.

Sufferin' Joe spurred to the lead, hoping to make the mustang follow his mount. But that only made matters worse.

The heat grew more intense every passing minute as the sun climbed higher into the sky.

Wet with sweat, pricked by sharp thorns, shirts torn, the two waddies drove on. They didn't know if the rurales were behind them or not. They couldn't see more than a hundred yards in the dense growth of mesquite and prickly pear. Only the high cliffs of Scalp Mesa were visible at their left.

It was two hours before Risky and Sufferin' Joe found the bed of Scalp River. What had started as a good-sized current up in the mountains was now a small, dirty creek winding through the brush, losing its water every moment in the thirsty sands of the flats. In two more miles, the river would vanish altogether.

Risky plunged down the bank to the shallows, and halted.

For a while, he listened intently, but heard nothing. He placed his fingers to his parched lips and whistled shrilly. There was no answer from his lost buckskin.

"We might try riding north," he suggested. "The bronc would have turned in the direction of home."

"Shore," Sufferin' Joe grumbled. "But them Mexicans are up that way."

"We'll have to do it," Risky replied. "Mebbe we'll stumble onto tracks. Those rurales can't see us any more than we can see them."

They trotted northward along the shallow creek. There were plenty of tracks to be found. Most of the sign had been left by wild steers, deer, and antelope. On the banks of the creek, rattlers were coiled. Gila monsters scurried away at their approach. And buzzards flew out of the taller mesquite trees.

After a mile of riding, Risky found the print of mule shoes. And what was better, the sign left by a shod bronc. With a whoop, he pressed on.

Rounding a bend, he spied his mule lying shoulder-deep in the stream, grunting with satisfaction over its cooling bath. And near the mule, Risky's buckskin bronc was trying to rub its saddle off on the side of a big boulder.

Both animals threw up their heads at the approach of the punchers. Risky slowed down and spoke to his bronc. The buckskin flicked its ears. He rode up to it and caught its dangling reins.

Sufferin' Joe stopped the mule as it waded out of the stream.

"Unless Jack Scuppers bought waterproof cartridges," the scout remarked, "these bullets are worthless. So is the grub that I packed."

"Keep in the creek bed as much as possible," Risky warned. "We don't want to leave any sign."

Glad to have his buckskin under him once more, Risky turned back down the river, keeping in the shallows where no sign would be left. He knew that the flight of the buzzards away from the water would telegraph his presence to any one watching for him. Soon, he left the river for the pear again.



Dismounting, he went back on foot to rub out his trail from the water's edge into the mesquite. And returning to Sufferin' Joe, they opened the mule's packs.

"We'll bury the cartridges," Risky said. "That's one way of getting rid of them."

"It's a darn shame ter waste all that ammunition," the scout remarked.

Risky emptied the cartridge cases into a hole in the sand. Covering the traces of the cache, he replaced the wooden cases on the mule and threw a diamond hitch.

"My conscience feels a lot better," he told his bald-headed pard. "Now, our business in Mexico is as clean as a whistle. Except for Don Castilla's son an' those gun-slinging 8 Bell punchers, we'd be on our way home."

Sufferin' Joe had lifted his head. His eyes glinted.

"There's no goin' back now, Risky," he whispered. "Listen."

The cowboy tensed. Faintly, the sound of jingling spurs and bridle rings reached his ears. Then came the thudding of hoofs, the splashing of water. Riders were going down the river. They seemed to pass the place where Risky and Sufferin' Joe had turned into the mesquite.

"Rurales!" Risky whispered. "They spotted us by those flyin' buzzards."

"They're goin' to attack the mesa," Sufferin' Joe said in a low tone. "Unless it's Hidalgo Pete lookin' for the mule."

"Hidalgo Pete saw it last night," Risky added. "He wouldn't be afraid to look around the mesa. Anyway, Sufferin' Joe, it's a break for us. If Hidalgo Pete is off the mesa, we stand a better chance to save the Spaniard's kid. An' if the

rurales attack from the north, we might get onto the mesa from the west."

He swung to the saddle.

"What about the mule?" Sufferin' Joe asked.

"Take it with us," Risky said. "It might get us past the mesa guards, just like your Ranger badge got you into the rural camp. It's just about as worthless."

Sufferin' Joe cackled as he mounted.

At a fast clip, the two waddies rode westward until they were north-west of the great table-land. The mule followed them without the need of a halter rope. They made excellent time through the mesquite. And turning south, luck favored them in providing a deep arroyo to cover their approach.

Risky kept his ears alert for sound of distant shooting. The closer he and his pard came to the mesa cliffs, the more care he took to keep hidden. The dead silence worried him. He knew the peril that he was taking his pard into. Experience told him that he was a fool, that he could not defeat those hombres on the mesa, and that he'd die for trying to win this gamble.

Trouble started with the sudden whoop of an American voice from the cliffs ahead of Risky. He halted abruptly. And then he heard the hammering of hoofs in the mesquite behind him. Shouts echoed. Riders were coming hard through every sandy runway. It sounded as if his and Sufferin' Joe's escape was completely cut off, except by way of Scalp Mesa.

"They've been waitin' fer us!" Sufferin' Joe exclaimed.

"Rattle your hocks!" Risky yelled. "Hidalgo Pete's behind us. We can make the mesa."



With a leap, their broncs were out of cover and racing for the steep wall of the table-land.

Risky saw the crowns of two ten-gallon hats on the rim above. Gun in hand, he fired quickly, making the owners of the hats duck. His buckskin took the first part of the cliff with enough speed to carry it twenty feet up. There, Risky threw himself from the saddle. On foot, he glanced behind and saw Sufferin' Joe and the mule climbing rapidly.

Behind his pard, down in the mesquite, a dozen ragged riders were racing toward the mesa, yowling like hungry wolves. But there were no shots. Ammunition was being saved.

Risky attacked the heights of the cliff. Digging his toes into the clay and rock, he ascended rapidly, all the while hearing American voices above yelling at him to surrender.

The puncher did not save his lead. He had plenty to waste. Wheeling every few feet, he snapped shots down into the mesquite where Hidalgo Pete's gang was scattering. Then, climbing on again, he re-loaded.

"Catch the mule!" Hidalgo Pete's voice shouted from the mesa. "It brings our ammunition."

"An' I've got all the bullets it will take, right in my gun belt!" Risky shouted back. "Hurry up, Sufferin' Joe."

He went over the rim of the cliff with a rush, six-gun ready. The grass was deep enough to hide half a dozen hombres from his eyes. And there was chaparral and dwarfed cedar. He caught a glimpse of the broad terraces of the mesa beyond. A big herd of stock was grazing the table-land, in the center of which stood an adobe hut with smoke curling from its chimney.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE BANDIT BLADE.

ON a beautiful golden palomino horse, Hidalgo Pete was fleeing for the adobe hut. His wide sombrero brim curled in the wind. The silver threads of his velvet vest glinted in the sunlight. He rode half turned, watching for Risky McKee.

The cowboy only glanced at him. Risky was more interested in the deep grass and chaparral where he knew foes lay hidden. Ducking low, he drove two bullets into the cover in the hope of awakening their fire. But the 8 Bell men did not show themselves. They might have been waiting for better shots.

Behind Risky, the mule came up over the rim of the cliff and trotted onto the mesa. His buckskin was next, followed by Sufferin' Joe's bronc and its owner.

"Look out for the brush!" Risky yelled.

With that, he charged the nearest chaparral, gun blazing.

"They ain't got no shells!" Sufferin' Joe shouted.

Risky was in the chaparral when the figures of two American punchers swiftly leaped at him from cover. Their faces were twisted with hatred. He knew them at a glance for members of the 8 Bell. They were not shooting. They charged him with swinging gun barrels, cursing him, challenging him to shoot them.

"Stand back!" Risky cried.

But they came on, hungry for the kill, anxious to get his ammunition.

Risky leaped in under the swinging barrel of the first 8 Bell hombre. The rifle almost caught him on the skull. It swept away his hat. And then he had collided with his foe.

He would have given the fellow a



feel of his own six-gun steel on the head, but he hadn't the opportunity. He buried a left uppercut into the man's brisket. The blow straightened the 8 Bell hombre up with a gusty grunt that told that his wind had been knocked out of him. He fell floundering.

Darting away from him, Risky whirled to his second foe. He spied Sufferin' Joe making for the man, swinging a rifle barrel at the down-chopping weapon of the 8 Bell hombre. Their weapons met with a crash.

Risky yelled wrathfully and charged to the aid of his pard. But Sufferin' Joe was equal to the contest. Before Risky got to him, the baldhead had punched the man in the teeth with the butt of his rifle. With a yowl, the 8 Bell man fell.

"Nail Hidalgo Pete!" Sufferin' Joe shouted. "I'll hold the jackals below the mesa cliff with bullets."

Risky didn't hesitate. He saw Sufferin' Joe grab the two 8 Bell puncher's weapons and turn to the rim of the cliff.

Running for his buckskin bronc, Risky jumped for the saddle and spurred hard. He saw that Hidalgo Pete had reached the adobe hut.

If any hombre had bullets left in the outlaw gang, it would be Hidalgo Pete. The bandit chief was evidently going to hole up in the mud-walled dwelling, shoot from the windows, and keep Risky in the open for his men to finish.

With a yip, the cowboy sent his buckskin racing across the mesa. He passed his mule and Sufferin' Joe's bronc. The smash of a six-gun behind told him that his pard was fighting Hidalgo Pete's gang. And there were answering gun blasts to prove that the bandits still had a few cartridges.

Risky had bullets to waste. Fir-

ing from the saddle, he drove hot lead at the windows of the adobe hut, knocking out the glass, and cracking the dried-mud walls beside the sills. He had to keep Hidalgo Pete from firing back. There was still another hundred yards to go.

A tongue of flame spat from a small loophole near the front door. Risky ducked, but not quickly enough. He heard the whine of Hidalgo Pete's lead. It cut him across the left arm like a keen-edged knife.

"He'll get me, next shot!" the puncher ejaculated.

He saw the barrel of the bandit's rifle vanish from the loophole. In five more seconds, Risky was thundering up to the rear of the hut. His buckskin came to a plowing halt. The cowboy was out of the saddle before the animal had stopped skidding.

Darting right and left, Risky flung himself against the wall of the dwelling to get out of sight of the loopholes and windows. Ejecting empty cartridges and filling the chamber of his gun with fresh bullets, he called for Hidalgo Pete.

"Come out an' fight, you yellow snake!"

A mocking laugh was the outlaw's reply. And then, "Señor is one big fool! If he runs, I will shoot him. He can't stay here forever, because my men will kill him."

Gritting his teeth, Risky edged to a broken window, when another voice called to him.

"McKee," came the voice of an 8 Bell cowboy, "this is one pot that yuh lose. We're goin' easy with yuh because yuh brought the bullets from Jack Scuppers. If they ain't aboard that mule, I hate ter think what the boss is goin' to do."

"Boss!" Risky exclaimed under his breath. "Callin' that murderin' snake boss of the 8 Bell outfit."



Stabbing his six-gun into the window, Risky raked the interior with shots. There was a high-pitched cry of alarm. Risky withdrew his weapon. He recognized the tone of a Spanish boy. He listened to the young hombre pleading with him not to kill him.

Biting his lips, Risky tried to plan his next step. And as he stood close to the mud wall, his eyes traveled back across the mesa to the cliff. He saw Sufferin' Joe crawling back from the rim of the table-land to reload an empty gun.

At that moment, Risky's ears detected a crunching sound above his head. It came from the edge of the flat roof of the adobe hut. His six-gun whipped up. But he was too late. He just glimpsed a dark object falling through the air. It was a stone the size of a cannonball. He couldn't dodge it.

The stone struck him a glancing blow on the side of the skull. Risky's mind went blank. He was stunned. His knees buckled, and he fell in a heap, shuddering. His face struck the earth.

Suddenly, his brain was whirling, and he felt terribly sick at his stomach. He was fighting hard to keep conscious. He thought men were leaping down from the roof around him. But he could not get up. His gun hand seemed paralyzed, and he gasped for breath.

"Got him!" a voice kept yelling.

"Drag him inside!" another shouted from a window. "Bring the mule with the packs."

Strong hands clutched Risky. His weapon was snatched away, then his cartridge belt. He felt himself drawn over the ground around the corner of the dwelling and to the front door. A numbing pain crept through his head as his paralyzed nerves came to life.

Unable to fight, the cowboy knew that his hands were being tied behind him and that he was being bolstered to his feet. He couldn't stand. Dark figures that he couldn't identify shoved him against a wall and fastened his wrists to the iron bars of a window, so that he wouldn't fall.

Slowly, Risky's head cleared, and his eyes took focus. Time was passing rapidly for him in his daze. He saw two wooden cases being brought into the hut and opened. He identified the expensive velvet clothes of Hidalgo Pete who opened the mule cases.

A scream of rage tore from the bandit leader's lips. "The bullets are gone!"

Risky smiled grimly through his agony.

An 8 Bell cowboy hurled a pail of water into his face, and it helped to revive him.

"What did yuh do with those cartridges?" the puncher demanded.

Risky studied them. There were three 8 Bell cowboys and Hidalgo Pete. In another room of the adobe hut, they evidently had Don Castilla's son captive. There was no sound from the boy. Risky swallowed hard.

"It looks like I've got a hole card, don't it?" he managed to say, surprised at the sound of his voice.

Hidalgo Pete jerked a knife from his crimson sash, stepped forward and put the point at Risky's chest.

"Tell me, gringo, or I'll cut your heart out!"

Outside, a gun was crashing, and the voice of Sufferin' Joe shouted: "Risky! I'm comin'."

"You don't win, outlaw," Risky told Hidalgo Pete. "The rurales won't take long to get here when they hear that shootin'. You better start carvin'."



Sputtering with rage, the Mexican bandit slapped Risky across the face with the flat blade of his weapon. Then, turning to the 8 Bell men, he ordered:

"You have the cartridges from this dog's belt. Stop that hombre on the mesa. Kill him! I will take care of this fool. He will die slowly."

Risky stared hard at the 8 Bell punchers. "Nice gents, you Americans have for friends," he remarked dryly.

The tough-jawed foreman of the 8 Bell frowned. "Don't be a fool, McKee," he said. "We need those bullets badly. It means our lives. Come clean, an' I'll see that you go across the border. Those rurales haven't nerve enough to fight us."

"Stark," Risky replied to the foreman by name, "you ain't fit to associate with the lowest convict in an American prison. If I come out of this alive, don't ever show your yellow face in my country. I'll draw on you on sight. You've got Don Castilla's son here. You raided his ranch. You'll never run his stock across the line for sale."

The 8 Bell foreman chuckled mirthlessly. "I reckon that speech tips yore hand, McKee," he said. "I always thought yuh was a good gambler, but yo're nothin' but a tin-horn." He turned to the door of the side room, from a window of which he'd have the range of Sufferin' Joe on the western side of the mesa.

Hidalgo Pete waved the two other 8 Bell men away.

"This knife, Señor McKee," the Mexican bandit snarled, "can do many amazing things. I show you what it is like to skin a rabbit."

Clutching Risky's shirt front, Hidalgo Pete tore away what remained of it after the prickly-pear trip, leaving the puncher's chest bare.

## CHAPTER VII.

### BURNING POWDER.

RISKY tensed. His bound hands were anchored to the window bars behind him, but his feet had been neglected. He drew back as if to get away from Hidalgo Pete's knife blade. He noted that the 8 Bell punchers had vanished into the side room, where guns were exploding. He heard Sufferin' Joe's shots outside.

"I hate to do this, Mex," Risky said tonelessly, "but I reckon it's necessary."

With that, he clutched the window bars behind him and lifted his feet up from the floor in a movement too swift for Hidalgo Pete to avoid. Kicking straight out, Risky caught the Mexican in the chest. It was a paralyzing attack. He hurled Hidalgo Pete clear across the room, and against the closed front door of the adobe hut.

The bandit's teeth glistened, his black eyes bulged, and his face went ghastly pale. Hidalgo Pete could not cry out. His wind was gone. He collapsed in a heap, dropping his knife. His hands went to his stomach, and he rolled on the floor, gasping, stricken with agony.

The 8 Bell cowboys in the adjoining room did not know what happened. The crash of their guns was deafening. And Risky could tell that Sufferin' Joe was still alive, for his weapon was sending slugs into the adobe walls. He feared for a moment that the scout would work around to the northern side of the hut, spy Risky's figure at the window bars, and mistake him for an outlaw. A shot would end the life of his boss.

Risky watched Hidalgo Pete roll to the front door, and try to lift himself up by the handle. The



Mexican's face had turned purple. He still could not speak. He evidently craved fresh air. He managed to open the door, and he crawled outside, and lay on the ground, trembling, sweat rolling from his brow.

Risky was trying desperately to get his hands free from the window bars. But he knew that he was licked. He could do nothing with the bonds. He jerked, twisted his wrists, struggled like a tied-up colt.

Then, knowing that he had but a fraction of a minute more before Hidalgo Pete recovered, Risky threw himself forward in an attempt to wrench the iron bar from its mooring. He never felt the bonds hold him. He pitched clear across the room and piled up against the wall, his hands free.

Astonished, he whirled on his hands and knees, staring back at the window. Outside, the lean, drawn face of Don Castilla appeared. A bowie knife was in the Spaniard's hand, with which he had cut Risky's ropes. He held a six-gun in the other.

"How did you get here!" Risky exclaimed, springing to his feet.

Then he saw that Don Castilla was in peon's garb. The marks of the thorns of the prickly pear were upon him. It was plain that he had crawled through the mesquite to the mesa and across the grassy terraces, foot by foot.

"My son," the Spaniard said. "Where is he?"

Risky leaped across the room. "Your gun!" he cried. "Give it to me! I'm no bandit. I came here to help you."

"I know, Señor McKee," Don Castilla replied, shoving his weapon through the bars. "I saw those credentials that the rurales stole. I know your reputation. I can not

fight. My trip was too much for my old bones."

As Risky snatched the weapon, he saw Don Castilla clutch the window sill to keep from falling.

The puncher whirled, earing back the hammer of the weapon. Luck favored him at that moment. He was just in time to find the 8 Bell punchers darting into the room by the side door. Guns were in their hands. They were yelling that Sufferin' Joe was circling the hut to the north. Their words were never finished. They spied Risky McKee, and they whipped their weapons into aim.

*Crash! Bang!* But Risky's gun thundered first.

He went down to a knee as he fired. His first bullet drove the 8 Bell foreman back against the other two gringo punchers. Then, Risky fanned the weapon by brushing the hammer back with a left hand as he held the trigger back with a right finger. His second and third shot dropped the following cowboys in their tracks.

Grim as a gambler playing his last hand, Risky turned away from the shuddering figures.

"Hidalgo Pete!" he shouted out the front door. "I'm coming for you. It's me, Risky McKee."

He threw himself across the room and dived out the front door. Before he struck the ground, he saw the Mexican outlaw crawling along ten feet beyond the doorway. Hidalgo Pete's lips were twisted in a hateful snarl. He held a six-gun, resting an elbow on the ground for support. The weapon was pointed at the hut, and the hammer was drawn back.

But Hidalgo Pete, breathing hard from the blow taken in the midriff, could not have expected such a swift charge.



Risky was shooting even while in the air. His aim had to be good. He punched his gun forward, driving the bullet for Hidalgo Pete's scowling forehead. He felt his weapon kick, and saw the flame of the Mexican's Colt. Risky's lead was already striking when Hidalgo Pete's gun roared.

Thrown back by the cowboy's lead, the Mexican sent his shot wildly into the roof of the adobe hut. A black hole appeared as if by magic between Hidalgo Pete's glittering eyes. The light went out in those eyes. The Mexican never cried out. He slumped forward, dead.

Landing hard, Risky struggled to his hands and knees. He heard the voice of Sufferin' Joe. Looking up, he saw his bald-headed pard racing toward him.

"The wolf pack is on the mesa!" Sufferin' Joe called. "Get into the house."

Risky struggled to his feet. "An' let those rurales trap us?" he asked. "Nothing doing. We're leaving before it's too late." He jerked a thumb to the corner of the building. "Don't drill Don Castilla."

The Spaniard was staggering into view, guiding himself by the adobe wall of the house.

"My son?" he asked weakly.

"Inside," Risky replied. "I heard him a while ago. What's happened to the rurales?"

"They are coming from the north, señor," the Spaniard said. "I saw them from the mesa rim when I arrived. They have heard the battle. They will trap the bandits."

Risky thumbed fresh cartridges from Hidalgo Pete's gun belt into his weapon.

"We'll have to do some tall ridin', pard," he said to Sufferin' Joe. "That rural captain will hang you

higher than a kite for posin' as a Ranger."

Sufferin' Joe made a wry face. "An' yuh'll swing with me, don't forget," he growled.

Risky moved to the corner of the hut, and glanced across the mesa. He spied a dozen peons and other members of Hidalgo Pete's gang sneaking from boulder to brush toward him. They were not shooting. They were saving the few bullets they had left.

Behind them, up the mesa cliff to the rim of the table-land, came a score of hombres. Some were in uniform. Others were bare-chested Indians. The law sent a blistering volley at the remnants of Hidalgo Pete's raiders, catching them unawares.

Bandits dropped like tenpins.

Risky turned to the front door of the adobe hut. "Adios, Don Castilla!" he called. "My ranch has a welcome sign out for you any time."

"Adios, Señor McKee," the Spaniard's voice came back. "My son, he is safe. A thousand thanks!"

Risky and Sufferin' Joe were running for their brones. Bullets whistled over their heads, fired by the rurales who were charging the hut. Flinging themselves into the saddles, Risky and his pard turned east across the mesa.

The grazing mule lifted its head to watch them, then glanced back at the rurales. With a snort, the mule leaped after its owner. The animal apparently knew what was good for it.

Spurring hard across the table-land, Risky rode turned in the saddle, looking back. He saw the figures of Don Castilla and an eight-year-old boy appear in the doorway of the hut. They waved their arms.

Risky chuckled.

"If we're ever caught with empty



bullet loops again near Scalp Mesa, pard," he said to Sufferin' Joe, "we shore will know where to find a supply of cartridges."

Sufferin' Joe snorted. "I won't live that long, Risky. This hyar trip has been too much fer me. I feel my heart poundin' along the road ter death. An' somethin' pizenous bit me in the back o' the neck. I kin feel it swellin' up, an' the germs eatin' thar way up inter my brain."

Risky glanced at the rear of Sufferin' Joe's neck. "Mebbe it wouldn't be so bad if you'd take that mesquite thorn out of your collar," he remarked. "It's the first time I ever heard you beef about something that was really a fact."

Sufferin' Joe clawed the thorn from the back of his collar, stared at it, and said miserably:

"Jest as I thought, the barb from a pizen mesquite, what kills yuh quicker than lightnin'."

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### WHEN RANGERS AND INDIANS MET

RANGERS were out to get a large band of Indian horse thieves that had raided ranches and stolen valuable horses, which they were driving into Mexico. The Rangers caught up with an advance guard and cut some of them off from the main body.

These were led by a young chief, who was tall, strong, and brave. Although he was badly wounded, he would not give up. After a while, it was seen that his right arm was broken and hung limply at his side. He raced away, lying flat on his pony's back, and clinging with his good arm around the animal's neck.

There was a running fight, and the Indian's horse was killed. When it dropped, its rider slipped off and crawled into a small thicket, where he lay hidden. The Rangers approached and assured him that, if he would surrender, he would not be harmed. But he stubbornly refused.

Ranger Andy McCarthy then dismounted and walked over to the thicket. The Indian got up and came out of hiding. He strode toward the Ranger, who commanded him to stop and surrender. The Indian continued to advance. As he

drew near, McCarthy grabbed him by the throat, and hit him over the head with his six-gun. An arrow was sticking in the Ranger's horse, one of many that had been shot at it by the Indians, and the young chief, as soon as he caught sight of it, thrust his left hand forward, pulled the arrow out, and drove it deep into McCarthy's heart.

At the same instant, the Ranger sent one bullet into the redskin's head, and both fell together. They had to be pulled apart to release their death grip.

McCarthy was wrapped in his blanket and buried there. His comrades piled big stones on his grave to keep the wolves from digging up his body. They scalped the dead chief and left him where he had fallen.

The main body of the raiding band went on to Mexico with about two thousand stolen horses. After selling the animals they returned.

They traveled day and night and the Rangers could not catch up with them. They slipped away in the darkness, and got safely back to their village. The stolen horses were not recovered, and no information that could convict the Indians was ever obtained.



# Horseshoe Branded

By George  
C. Henderson

Author of  
"Fugitive Cowboy," etc.



WITH a sobbing gasp, "Ranny" Powell jerked his wiry, lanky body into a twisting, squirming ball, which threatened suddenly to unwind and burst the thongs that held him prisoner.

He bobbed his head up and down and shook it from side to side, as if this would remove the gag from his mouth. He worked his legs like pistons, gritting his teeth at the stabbing pain which shot through his battered head at each move. He could feel a paralyzing numbness creeping over his arms and legs, and it was that which drove him to such desperate efforts. If he waited too

long, he would not have strength enough even to put up a struggle.

Ranny was covered with mud from head to foot, and already his clothes were covered with snow, which fell gently but steadily upon him. To add to his predicament, it was pitch dark. He could not even see the horse thieves who were laughing and chuckling as they quietly drove the Box T broncs out of the pasture and headed them upward toward the pine ridge.

His ear, close to the ground, detected the *clop-clop* of approaching hoofs. A shadowy rider loomed close to him, face concealed by ker-



chief mask and hat pulled low. Even in the depth of his misery Ranny noted that the rustler rode a spotted brone, tiger-spot or pinto, he could not tell which.

Ranny's bound wrists were pressed against the jagged surface of a rough fence rail. He was working them back and forth, sawing at the rope that held his hands, quivering every time a splinter dug into his flesh. He did not stop working, even when the boss rustler leaned far forward in his saddle and peered down at him through the falling snow.

"Horse guard," chuckled the thief. "Ha-ha-ha! What a joke on Pete Lindsay of the Box T! I'd like to see his face when he finds his hired gunny tied up half froze and his horse herd gone. Haw-haw-haw."

Ranny Powell made frantic sounds through the gag that almost filled his mouth.

Again the horse thief guffawed heartily. This rustler had a keen sense of humor. His voice was deep and husky. Occasionally he coughed, as if he were getting a cold.

"You ain't no cowboy," he jeered. "Yo're a jingler kid. A nubbin' just out of the shuck. I never tuk anybody as easy as I nabbed you. I'd hate to be in yore place when Lindsay starts bootin' yuh off the ranch."

Ranny scarcely heard what the horse thief was saying. A sudden thrill shot through him. The sharp point of a nail had jabbed into his wrist, sending a warm spurt of fluid over the flesh. Never had a pain been more welcome, because Ranny knew this nail meant quick freedom for him.

Frantically he caught the rope that bound his hands on that nail and sawed it back and forth. He could feel the tight strands giving way.

His hands were behind his back,

so the boss horse thief could not see what he was doing. The outlaw thought that Ranny was only squirming helplessly about.

Ranny, being close to the ground, heard sounds plainly. He could hear the drum and thunder of many hoofs pounding along the trail, growing louder as the stolen cavvy reached the dry, hard-frozen hillside.

He could hear also the sound of music and laughter that came from the Box T ranch house only a few hundred yards distant, where Lindsay and his punchers were whooping it up in celebration of a successful fall round-up. The beef had been shipped. The Box T brones had all been gathered in the home pasture, so that the next day they could be driven down to winter range in a protected valley, where they could find grazing and browse even during the heaviest snows.

By turning on his left side, Ranny could even see the yellow lamplight that made a square, glowing patch of the ranch-house window. But with all that caterwauling and belling in the big warm house, the cowboys would not be able to hear the sudden staccato beat of horses' hoofs when the stolen ponies hit that stretch of frozen ground.

"So near and yet so far," Ranny was thinking. "If only I could let out one good yell, it would sound the alarm. Pete will never forgive me for lettin' myself get caught so easy."

Cold, icy snow got in Ranny's eyes and fell down his neck. Through the falling flakes in the utter darkness, the mounted horse thief who still lingered, was a black blur, an almost unreal shadow.

"I'm Bronc Hagen," the desperado was saying. "But you'll never recognize me, Ranny, when you see me again. It's too dark, my face is



masked and my voice is disguised. Some day I'll tell you who I am, and then you'll be due for a big surprise."

Ranny felt his wrists pull free, and a fresh tingling pulsation of life surged through him. He had a fighting chance. The instant "Bronc" Hagen turned his back, he would jerk the gag out of his mouth and give a wild yell. The Box T waddies would turn out and Hagen would be in for it. Bronc did not know that some swift saddlers had been placed in the barn, ready for just such trouble as this.

The outlaw's horse was so close to Ranny now that the steel-shod hoofs splashed ice cold mud in the young puncher's face. Bronc Hagen was leaning far over in his hull, pointing a six-gun at the jingler.

"Don't try no funny business, jingler," warned Bronc. "I only knocked you down when you let me sneak up on yuh from behind. I could've killed yuh, just as easy. I was right behind you when Pete Lindsay was givin' you yore orders. 'Keep a sharp lookout for Bronc Hagen's hoss thieves,' he says to yuh. 'I'm givin' you yore chance to prove that yo're somethin' more than a jingler kid.' Them's his very words. But the boss had hardly gone afore yuh let me walk up behint yuh and crack yore haid with my gun barrel."

Ranny could barely see the gun in the darkness. Sight of the weapon gave him a bright idea. If only he could make Bronc Hagen fire that Colt it would sound the warning.

The young cowboy felt cautiously around on the ground until his fingers closed over a broken tree limb, half buried in the slush. Gripping the stick, he pulled it out of the mud and suddenly slashed hard at the horse's leg so close to his head.

There was a blinding flash. A ter-

rific explosion. Ranny felt his skull racked by a jarring concussion and he knew no more.

When Ranny Powell recovered consciousness, a driving rain was dashing in his face. He was soaked through and through, shivering, and his head felt as big as a balloon.

He seemed to be choking, but it was several minutes before he realized a gag was responsible for this. Feebly, inch by inch, he lifted icy, benumbed fingers to his face and managed to pull aside the rawhide thong that held the gag between his bruised lips.

Instantly he let out a yell, but it was merely a hoarse gurgle that could be heard only a few feet away. Through the beating rain he saw a light still shining in the ranch-house window, although now no sounds of merriment came from the Box T headquarters.

Awkwardly he tried to rise, only to tumble forward on his face. His legs were still bound. Shivering as if from ague, he beat his hands together before he was able to untie the ropes that held his ankles.

Except for the driving rain, all was silent. The horse pasture gaped empty, the gate still open as Bronc Hagen's rustlers had left it. Not a sound came from the Box T ranch house.

"Hey!" croaked Ranny. "Thieves—rustlers!" He was on his feet, staggering in the direction of the house. His hoarse cries did not carry any farther than the noise of his splashing boots.

His numb legs gave way and he fell half a dozen times before he reached the kitchen door, lifted the latch, and tumbled to his knees on the rough board floor.

"Help! Hoss thieves. Get after them!" he groaned, and drummed on the floor with his boots.



There was no answer. No sound came from the living room, where a big lamp still stood lighted on the long pine table.

Rising he lurched into the room and then paused when he saw the bewhiskered old cook, lolling in a chair with a whisky bottle beside him. All the other hands were gone and their rigging was gone with them, which told Ranny that they had ridden in pursuit of the thieves.

"Gosh," he muttered. "My trick worked. Bronc fired his gun when I spooked his bronc. Then something knocked me out."

Ranny began pawing over himself to find if he had been shot. He couldn't find a wound. Glowing coals in the fireplace warmed him as he changed into warm garments and rubbed circulation back into his arms and legs.

The drunken cook snored on and Ranny did not try to waken him.

Now, only one thought was drumming through his brain. He must find guns, saddle up, and help recover the broncs that had been stolen right under his nose.

"Pete will be mad," he kept thinking. "He'll send me back to work as a roustabout. Maybe fire me. It was my first test, and I failed."

In an old mirror used by the boys for shaving, he caught a glimpse of his face. There on his right cheek and around his temple was the bright-reddish imprint of a horseshoe.

"Bronc's pony kicked me in the haid," he growled. "That's what knocked me out. The bullet missed me altogether."

Ranny was a tall, curly-haired, good-looking puncher, but that horseshoe brand on his cheek gave him a hard appearance and made him seem much older. Luckily for him he had other boots and clothes,

so that in a short time he was ready to take the trail again.

He found spare guns in the boss's office and when he buckled these on and donned a yellow slicker over them, he was once more a very businesslike buckaroo. The cartridge belt was full of fat .45 shells, his guns were dry, a slouch hat covered his head and he had his plan of battle all mapped out.

When he found an extra horse that had been left in the stable, saddled it and mounted, he was feeling almost normal.

"If it warn't for this burning horseshoe brand on my face, I'd hardly know I'd been in a ruckus," he mused as he spurred away in a direction opposite to that taken by the horse thieves.

He had a hunch that the rustlers had headed toward the snow-clad hills only to deceive him. Horses would freeze to death in no time back there in the rugged Sierras. So instead of reading sign, he headed for the settlements.

## II.

Ranny's body ached and burned and his head throbbed as he set out through the cold rain, leaving the drunk cook still snoozing beside the dying fire at the Box T ranch house. But a fierce desire to make good drove him on.

Pete Lindsay, hard-boiled boss of the Box T, had hired him against the advice of his friends, when Ranny had drifted into this range country, a penniless boomer. Ranny's folks had died, leaving him an orphan. Lonesome and heartsick, he had ridden the grubline across the country, seeking a place where he could settle down.

His youthful appearance, jolly nature, and good-looking face had



made it hard for him to hold a job, because the cattle bosses all wanted older and more experienced men.

Ranny was a good cowboy, but he didn't look tough enough. At the Box T, Pete Lindsay in his rough-spoken way had been fair to Ranny Powell. He had put the kid on as a spare roustabout, peeling potatoes and cutting wood. Then he had made him night jingler and finally had trusted him to guard the horse corral against the threat of an invasion by Bronc Hagen.

On the very first night of Ranny's guard, Bronc had struck! The band of horses was gone. And it wasn't likely that the Box T waddies would be able to find the band of desperadoes on such a dark night.

Ranny's horse tossed its head and nickered. Ahead of him on a cross trail, riders suddenly appeared, dark shapes in the gloom.

With the born instinct of a gunman, Ranny dug in the spurs, jumping his pony into a thicket, just as the command to halt rang out.

A gun roared. It was followed by a volley of shots that rattled through the twigs and branches all around the young cowboy. Ranny had his hands full fighting his mount, which threatened to take the bit in its teeth and scoot out of there.

Over among the gunmen, a loud voice was bellowing angry commands.

"Stop shooting, you fools!" barked the voice. "We don't know who it is. Maybe it's only a riderless bronc, one of our ponies. Hey there! If you're a rider, come out. This is only Rawhide Wilkins and his bunch of loco lead-swappers."

"All right," sang out Ranny, recognizing "Rawhide's" voice. "This is Ranny Powell of the Box T lookin' for stolen horses. Bronc Hagen raided us. Run off all our ponies."

Ranny guided his jumpy, skittish mount out of the brush and rode to meet Rawhide Wilkins and his crew. Cowboys, hat and slickers dripping, crowded around Ranny and listened to his story.

"They tried to raid us, too," grunted shaggy-haired Rawhide Wilkins as they headed toward Wilkins's ranch. "But we heard them and run them off. That's why the boys was so handy with their guns when they heard yuh."

On Rawhide's insistence, Ranny rode with them to the ranch where hot coffee and flapjacks were ready to eat. Ranny was famished and felt the need of a hot stimulant.

When he stepped into the lamp-light, all of Wilkins's men stared at the horseshoe brand on his cheek and then burst out laughing.

"Looky here," cried Rawhide himself. "The weaner's let a bronc step on him. He must've been layin' down."

The loud laughter of Rawhide's men stopped Ranny's explanation. They kidded and ragged him. They opined that it served Pete Lindsay right for putting a weaner on guard against Bronc Hagen's raiders!

Ranny took it good-naturedly, but inwardly he was raging. He knew as well as they did that Lindsay would fire him for this! That horseshoe brand on his face made him all the more ridiculous.

He gulped down his coffee and departed amid the jeers of Rawhide's salty punchers. At the hitch rack he saw a number of horses and he scrutinized them as he hurried past. At the end of the rack he saw Rawhide's horse—a spotted pony. Bronc Hagen had ridden a spotted horse, either a pinto or a tiger-spot.

Was Rawhide Wilkins really the outlaw? That would explain his men being on the trail in this driv-



ing storm. It would explain their quick-trigger shooting at some one they couldn't see.

Ranny's mind was alive with suspicions as he rode on toward the next ranch, which was more of a nester outfit than anything else. He came to a series of corrals, old sheds, and then a cluster of sod shanties.

The door of the biggest shanty opened and a big, good-looking cattleman in slouch hat and slicker stepped out as Ranny dismounted. This jasper was Todd Riordan, boss of the outfit. Some of the other sod-house doors were opened and men, women, or children peered out, but only Todd Riordan braved the storm to greet the newcomer.

"Hello, Mr. Riordan," burst out Ranny. "I'm Ranny Powell from the Box T. Thieves just run off our horses."

Todd Riordan stepped forward, his big features twisting angrily in the lamplight that fell through the doorway.

"Are you accusin' us——" he started to say.

"No, no," Ranny interrupted him. "I want your help. I think I know the crooks. But I got no proof."

Riordan stared at Ranny Powell fixedly. When he saw the horseshoe mark on the young puncher's face, he began to grin, and glanced toward a little group of men that huddled in the doorway of the biggest shack.

"Boys," he chuckled, "it's Box T's jingler kid and he's been stepped on by a hoss."

A roar of laughter went up from the men in the sod house. Ranny was thankful for the darkness that hid the flush on his cheeks.

"That ain't so," he said hotly. "I was bound. Layin' on the ground, when a bronc kicked me."

Another burst of laughter greeted Ranny's words. A cowboy who will let a horse step on him is considered pretty awkward. Ranny knew he was in for it.

The pounding of hoofs on the up-trail drew attention away from Ranny. Horsemen came tearing toward the group of sod shanties. Todd Riordan settled his hands to his guns and barked a command to the other nesters, who were accustomed to the hostility of the big cattlemen.

Bulky, black-whiskered Pete Lindsay, Box T boss, came racing up to Ranny, followed by his men. Pete's gun was out and covering the young jingler. The group fairly bristled with rifle barrels.

"Hoist 'em, yuh treacherous skunk!" barked Lindsay. "Get up them hands or I'll plug you."

Ranny stared at his boss and slowly raised his hands.

"See here," he blurted. "I ain't done nothin'. The hoss thieves knocked me out——"

Rough hands grabbed Ranny's guns and pulled them from the holsters. A fist smashed him in the face, cutting off his flow of words.

"See here, boss," shouted an old hand. "He's stole yore guns and belt."

A rope was thrown around Ranny's neck and drawn tight. Others tried to grab him and tie his hands, but he fought them off, tore at the choking rope, finally wormed it off his head.

"Wait," he bawled. "Listen to me. Yo're makin' a mistake, Mr. Lindsay. Call off them wolves. I can explain everything."

Thick-bodied, black-bearded Pete Lindsay rammed his bronc in between his men and Ranny, shouting for his hands to stop the rough stuff. Todd Riordan and his sod-busters



had not made a move, but all the nesters had gathered behind Todd, buckling on their guns, ready to defend their rights. Under Riordan's leadership they had successfully defended themselves against the cattlemen thus far.

Ranny, bare-headed, spitting out crimson, his guns gone, found himself sitting his horse in the path of light that fell upon him from the open doorway.

"Speak up, jingler," barked Lindsay. "How come yuh didn't sound the alarm, if yo're so honest?"

"The slugger snuk up behind me and knocked me out," said Ranny Powell. "I never knowed what hit me."

"Yuh blunderin' gun dummy," growled the Box T boss. "I should 'a' knowed better than trust a pup like you. I warned you to watch sharp. You knowed Bronc Hagen was prowling around. Yet yuh let him ketch you like yuh war a tenderfoot."

"In the darkness, with the snow falling, them horses making a racket, I couldn't help it," blurted Ranny. "I know I failed. But I was tricked. Real slick. They stirred up the ponies. When I looked through the fence to see what was wrong, a slugger was waitin' to crack me one. Them crooks never made a noise. Then they bound and gagged me."

"He lies," yelled a Box T hand. "Look at the horseshoe mark on his face. That proves he's the rustler whose hoss we shot from under him. The dyin' bronc kicked the thief afore he got away."

### III.

Cowboys crowded close to stare at the red imprint of the horseshoe on the side of Ranny's face and fore-

head. They began to laugh and hoot as if it were a great joke. Pete Lindsay guffawed heartily, slapping his great thighs.

"Rustler-branded by a hoss!" he hooted. "Yo're right, cowboys. He's the thief we unhorsed. Bring out that saddle we tuk off the dead hoss of the outlaw that escaped."

Ranny stared at his boss and his one-time friends blankly. Slowly it dawned on him that the Box T really had evidence against him. When a cowboy came forward carrying Ranny's saddle, the young puncher's heart sank. Now he knew what had happened. The thief that had ridden Ranny's pony away had been unhorsed.

In dead silence the grim cowboys and cattlemen glared at Ranny Powell. In the lamplight that came through the door, there was his mark on the thick leather skirt, RANNY. He had burned that name into the leather himself.

"Yes, it's my saddle," he said slowly. "But I can explain——"

The words were hardly out of his mouth before the Box T waddies rushed him again, closing about him like a pack of lobos. This time it was Todd Riordan who shoved in to block their way, waving a gun in each hand, yelling for them to back up. Behind him came a surly mob of ragged nesters also with drawn guns, ready on the drop of a hat to obey Todd's command.

The tall, slicker-clad, good-looking leader of the sod-busters was the real boss of this little colony, and no mistake.

"Stand back," roared Riordan. "I won't stand for you lynching this youngster here. He's entitled to a trial. You got to listen to his side of the case."

"Gun the nesters," shouted a hot-



headed Box T puncher. "They're all thieves. Throw down on them."

"Shut up, all of yuh," bellowed Pete Lindsay. "Riordan is right. Ranny's only a youngster after all. And he's going to have a trial. Leave him alone."

Todd Riordan was at Lindsay's side, looking up at the Box T boss.

"Better take the kid into my shanty and talk to him first, Mr. Lindsay," suggested Riordan. "If he's guilty, maybe he'll tell us the real name of the hoss thief leader and where to find him."

Lindsay issued an order and presently Ranny Powell found himself in Todd Riordan's sod house, facing Todd and Pete Lindsay, while the rest of the crew waited outside in the rain.

Quickly, Ranny told his story. Not until he told of seeing Rawhide Wilkins with a spotted pony like the rustler's did either Pete or Todd utter a word. Then it was Todd who gave a sharp whistle.

"Holy cats!" burst out Todd Riordan. "Do you reckon that Rawhide really is a hoss thief, Mister Lindsay? The kid's story sounds straight."

Pete ran thick fingers through his matted black hair and scowled.

"It's funny," he grumbled. "Rawhide out ridin' so late in the storm. Him shootin' at Ranny and makin' such a joke of the horseshoe marks on his face. I know for a fact he rides a pinto."

Lindsay, Todd Riordan, and Ranny Powell talked it over earnestly. Ranny felt stunned. Even if they did catch the real hoss thief, he was ruined. No rancher would trust him on guard, after the easy way he had been caught by Bronc Hagen. Lindsay would be sure to fire him.

Besides, Ranny was not con-

vinced at all that Rawhide Wilkins was the rustler. If such were the case, the Box T would have a hard time proving it.

"I know what I'll do," said Pete Lindsay abruptly. "We'll go to Rawhide's place right now, read sign, try to find proof against him, and have a show-down, afore he can cover up his tracks. We'll take Ranny along. I want you, too, Riordan. You seem to know yore business."

Todd Riordan readily agreed to go along. After a consultation with his nesters, Todd joined the Box T cowboys, who were starting off through the rain with Ranny in their midst.

The downpour grew worse. Men pulled their slickers closer about them, hunched forward in their saddles, hat brims drawn down, running rivulets of water.

Ranny found himself riding between Pete and Todd. Todd Riordan kept talking to the young cowboy encouragingly. Several times he got a full length ahead of the prisoner, as if he felt that there was no danger of Ranny trying to escape.

Ranny realized that he owed his life to Todd. It was Riordan's attitude that had prevented the others from binding young Powell's arms and legs. Suddenly it dawned on him that Todd was giving him a chance to make a break.

Steel-shod hoofs threw up mud and water as the cowboys pounded up hills, around curves and through thick patches of brush and trees, headed for Rawhide's ranch. At a pitch-black crossing, Todd again pulled ahead, leaving the way clear.

With a jab of spurs and a jerk of the rein, Ranny sent his mustang off the road, down into the patch of hazelnut brush and spindling pines.

"There he goes!" yelled Todd



Riordan, and fired. "Powell's getting away."

Milling, excited horsemen crowded in confusion on the road, firing wildly into the thickets on all sides. The crossroads made it doubly confusing. They did not know which way to turn.

Ranny's mount made little noise on the muddy turf as he ducked under dripping branches, keeping to a walk. The firing of guns did not bother him. None of the bullets reached him.

Luckily he knew this country well, so that in half an hour he was on a clear trail headed for the Box T Ranch. The rain had let up by the time he dismounted in the back yard and entered the house. The bleary-eyed cook was preparing breakfast. He showed no interest at sight of Ranny. That meant that Cookie did not know the latest news.

"Hello, Cookie," said Ranny. "I tangled with them hoss thieves and come off second best. They got my guns. Let me borrow yours."

The cook shrugged twitchy shoulders and stabbed a grimy thumb toward his bedroom without a word.

Ranny found an old belt, filled with cartridges, and a single battered six-gun in a broken-down holster. Wearing these, he went to a window and looked out. On a distant ridge he saw riders, heading his way, fast.

Cookie was making coffee when he emerged.

"See here, Cookie," said Ranny. "Who started all that racket here at the house last night? If it warn't for that, you'd have heard the hoss thieves."

"The boss started the fiddler to playin'," grunted Cookie. "Maybe you want to bawl him out."

The drum and thunder of hoofs

sounding closer and closer caused Ranny to hurry outside, mount his mustang and spur into the nearest timber. This time he headed for Todd Riordan's settlement. A new suspicion was preying on his mind. Those horses had been heavily mortgaged. The mortgage holder would be the big loser. Had Pete Lindsay been in cahoots with the hoss thieves to cheat the mortgage holder?

The more Ranny thought of it, the blacker it looked for Pete Lindsay. Pete had often said he'd like to get his hooks into the city money lenders. He had put an inexperienced jingler kid on guard. Then he had started a lot of racket at the house so that the crew would not hear the outlaws getting away with the brones. At least, that's the way it looked to Ranny Powell.

Six Box T gunmen swung toward Ranny, firing at him with rifles. They parted into groups of three, fanning out to cut off Ranny's escape in all directions.

The young cowboy jogged his bronc with the spurs, but the pony would not go any faster. Above him towered the white-capped, snow-clad peaks. To the right and left was level pasture land. On that level prairie the pursuers would catch him in no time and he could not live in the icy mountains.

He took the only course and plunged into a racing, tumbling stream that threatened to sweep his cayuse off its feet.

*Br-r-reel!* A rifle bullet buzzed off a boulder close beside him. Other slugs plugged into the churning water.

His pony lost its footing, went down, wetting Ranny clear up to his hips. He yanked the six-gun out of its old sheath to keep it from getting wet, and was about to slip down behind the bronc and grab



its tail, when he felt hoofs catch on solid ground again.

Up that bank he saw thick, green brush—shelter that meant life to him. Behind him he heard yells and the thunder of hoofbeats. A bullet cut a burning path across his ribs.

He turned in the saddle, lifted the old Colt and fired without trying to hit any one. He couldn't bring himself to shoot men who only a few hours ago had been his saddle pards.

Straining and heaving, the mustang clawed up the slippery bank with its iron-shod hoofs, and lurched heavily into a woodland path.

A parting bullet knocked bark from a pine tree only inches from Ranny, and then he was safe in the brush. Dismounted, he tied the reins and crept back to the crossing.

A bulky, black-whiskered man was just riding into the water. It was Pete Lindsay, Box T boss.

"Keep back!" yelled Ranny, and fired a shot into the water in front of Lindsay. "If yuh try to cross, I'll kill you."

Lindsay swung his mustang about and jumped it behind some trees.

"It's the thievin' kid," yelled the Box T boss at his men, who also had sought protection among the trees. "It's Ranny, guarding the crossing so's we can't get acrost after them hoss thieves. Now we know he's a murdering skunk."

Ranny could hear his boss and the Box T men talking. Now they were sure he was a crook. By his flight, he had convicted himself.

With a sinking heart he hurried to his pony and quietly rode away, deeper and deeper into the chaparral. He had several minutes' start, and he knew this rough country perfectly.

"I'm ruined," he muttered. "Every cowboy in the whole country will be

gunning for me now. Todd Riordan is my only friend."

He headed for the nesters' settlement, keeping to side trails, dropping down into deep gorges, climbing up steep slopes where he had to get off and pull the pony up with him.

When he finally reached Riordan's group of sod houses, the corrals were empty except for a few crowbaits. There was a plain trail in the mud showing which way the nesters had ridden.

Ranny set out to follow them, a heartsick youngster, who hardly knew what he was doing, who did not know which way to turn.

#### IV.

Tall, long-legged, blond-haired Ranny Powell had plenty of time to think as he followed the nesters through the woods along a shallow creek. Only a few hours ago he had been a happy cowboy, standing guard against Bronc Hagen's hoss thieves. Now he was a fugitive, in danger of being killed at any minute.

Vividly he remembered Bronc Hagen leaning down in his saddle, pointing a gun at the bound and helpless Ranny, boasting that the young jingler would not know him the next time they met.

"That's proof that Bronc is some one I know," mused Ranny. "But who? It might be Rawhide Wilkins. He was out that night. He shot at me. And he rides a spotted horse like the rustler boss. It might be Pete Lindsay. Gosh, he shore had the fiddler make so much noise that the boys couldn't hear the thieves, and, besides, he threatened to gyp them mortgage holders!"

Suddenly he stopped and stared at



the ground. The tracks of the nester gunnies had vanished. They had taken to the water to cover their trail.

When Ranny cut sign on them again, he was amazed to find that the nesters were driving a bunch of horses. There were fresh hoofmarks, droppings, plain as day.

A six-gun roared and Ranny felt his pony falling. He flung himself from the saddle, just as more shots came blasting from a hazelnut thicket close by.

With a triumphant whoop, a runty, hook-nosed jasper came charging out into the open, lowering his Colt to fire at Ranny, who had stumbled and rolled over on jumping from his shot horse.

A slug clipped through Ranny's hair. Another knocked mud in his eyes. Brushing the slime from his face with one hand, he turned a steaming Colt on the runty killer. He had never seen the gunny before, but introductions weren't necessary, with both men slinging lead.

The sawed-off killer was so close that Ranny heard the impact of his .45 slug as it hit the gunman in the chest. The plugged man plunged headlong off his pony, a long-legged, fresh-looking bay. Instantly Ranny was on his feet, grabbing for those reins.

The bay escaped him, plunging into the brush. Ranny lurched after the bronc, holstering his gun. The reins, catching on a forked limb, brought the mustang to a halt, and in another instant Ranny Powell was in the saddle.

He spurred back to the fallen man, who was dead, took the fellow's guns and filled cartridge belt, and rode on. Abruptly he made a turn and found himself facing six-guns

and rifles in the hands of five men. The nearest man was a tall, slicker-clad Todd Riordan.

"Don't shoot, men," yelled Todd. "It's the jingler kid, Ranny Powell. Hello there, Ranny."

Slowly, wordlessly, Ranny let the bay carry him toward the five nester gunmen. Beyond them he saw the horse herd, stopping to graze. They were Box T branded brones, the stolen ponies.

"Glad yuh come, Ranny," continued Todd in a deep, husky voice. "We've found the stolen hosses."

"Do tell," said Ranny. "Where are yuh takin' 'em?"

"To town. It's closer and easier driving than to take 'em back to the Box T. Yuh shore called yore shots, youngster. Rawhide Wilkins and his men stole these hosses. We chased them and they scooted."

Every nerve in Ranny's body was jumping. He was remembering a voice. A chuckling, guffawing voice that was punctuated by a cough—Bronc Hagen, the rustler.

Todd Riordan was chuckling, laughing as he peered at Ranny's face.

"Blamed if the horseshoe brand ain't almost faded from yore cheek," he chortled, and then coughed.

Ranny was heeled to the eyes now. He had double guns in his holsters, fully loaded, guns he had taken from the slain man.

"You hoss thieves!" he cried. "Get 'em up. You ain't foolin' me no longer. I recognize your voice, Todd Riordan, alias Bronc Hagen. Yore voice and yore cough."

It was a mad thing to do. One man against five. It was suicide, yet Ranny would have kept his drop on all five if his mustang hadn't suddenly reared up.



Instantly gunfire broke loose. All five of the horse thieves unlimbered their smoke-poles and began shooting. The bay's rearing had turned into bucking that sent Ranny head over heels to the ground.

He held onto his guns at the expense of rooting up sod with his nose. His flaming guns emptied a saddle and wounded one charging horse, causing the attackers suddenly to drop from their nags behind rocks and logs. They made too good targets sitting up in their hulls.

Ranny rolled over behind a boulder, triggering lead, yelling at the top of his voice.

"Come on and fight, yuh skunks!" he howled. "Take yore medicine, Bronc Hagen. I might have knowed yore sod-busters was sneak thieves. I'll pay yuh back for tying me up and framing me as a thief."

From a distance sounded alarm shots. The Box T cowboys were coming.

"We've got to rush him," cried Todd Riordan. "We can't let him keep us bottled up here until the Box T comes. At him, boys."

There was a rush of booted feet, a roar of guns that filled the glade with thunder. Bullets knocked rock dust in Ranny's eyes and one parted his hair, but he was not hurt. A rustler dropped, and the others fell to the ground again.

But now Todd Riordan was in a position from which he could hit Ranny. His first bullet burned across Ranny's shoulder blades and

caused the young puncher to drop low.

"Surrender, kid," urged Todd. "I don't want to kill you. You can join us. The Box T will never ketch up with us in these hills."

"Shoot and tarnation take yuh," burst out Ranny. "I'm no hoss thief."

Todd Riordan's next shot hit Ranny's left arm, knocking one Colt from his fingers, jerking him around. With a wild howl Todd charged forward, thinking the kid was helpless.

Eyes glazed by the shock of that shot, crimson dropping from his fingers, Ranny crouched there and shot it out with Todd Riordan alias Bronc Hagen.

The wild yells of approaching Box T men scared the other horse thieves away, but Todd stayed to fight it out.

Tall, clear-eyed, fearless, the two range riders stood up and battled to the finish. It was Todd who grabbed at his head and suddenly pitched forward on his face, just as Pete Lindsay and the Box T came charging in.

Guns covered Ranny, who had suddenly sat down, feeling very weak and faint, but Pete Lindsay rushed to the jingler, put an arm about his shoulders, shook his hand.

"I've been a fool," cried Pete. "Ranny's ace-high. He's licked the hoss thieves and got us back our brones almost single-handed. I'll larrup the first feller that says a word against him. From to-day on, he's a top hand on the Box T."

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# The Whistlin' Kid and the Lost Brands

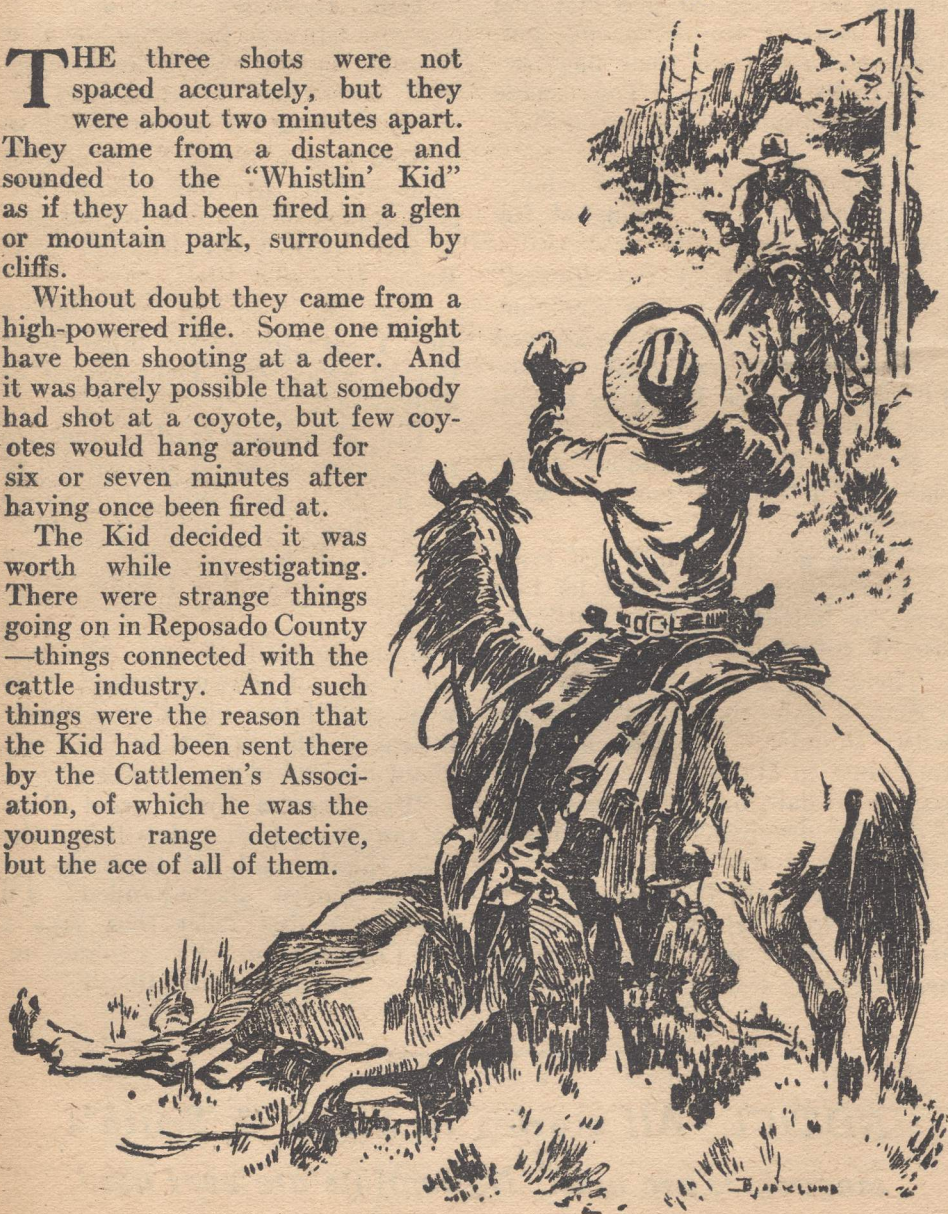
By Emery Jackson

Author of "The Whistlin' Kid's Hidden Play," etc.

THE three shots were not spaced accurately, but they were about two minutes apart. They came from a distance and sounded to the "Whistlin' Kid" as if they had been fired in a glen or mountain park, surrounded by cliffs.

Without doubt they came from a high-powered rifle. Some one might have been shooting at a deer. And it was barely possible that somebody had shot at a coyote, but few coyotes would hang around for six or seven minutes after having once been fired at.

The Kid decided it was worth while investigating. There were strange things going on in Reposado County—things connected with the cattle industry. And such things were the reason that the Kid had been sent there by the Cattlemen's Association, of which he was the youngest range detective, but the ace of all of them.





He was coming down a deep draw in the foothills, heading for the sage flats that made up the common range of the Reposado cowmen. It was good cow country, with plenty of curly grama grass, with two unfailing creeks flowing through, furnishing the reason for the owners to use the general grazing and only fatten inside their own wire.

These conditions also were responsible for the curious happenings that were causing the loss of many cattle, though not by actual rustling.

Two more rifle shots sounded, making five in all.

The Kid had been whistling his favorite tune, the melancholy air of "The Cowboy's Lament," which often seemed to fit in very aptly with his job. Now he stopped, spoke to Speed, his buckskin horse, and loped out of the draw.

There was nothing in sight on the flat, not even a distant dust cloud.

The sound of the shots had come from his right.

He loped along the base of the foothills, and within half a mile he cut fresh sign of three riders entering a gulch, and not coming out again.

The Kid followed the sign. The gulch opened up into one of the natural parks frequent in certain regions, an ideal place for holding cattle. A creek flowed through; there was good grass and trees. Some Hereford steers were bunched in three small herds, and the Kid wondered why—also why they were huddled together, not standing or feeding.

The sign split, each rider going a different way.

A swift, light shadow drifted over the ground. The Kid looked up and saw, high in the blue sky, a buzzard between him and the sun. It was

only a speck, but it rapidly became larger.

It was not cruising, soaring on the air currents in circles and spirals, but plummeting down with folded wings. That meant it had sighted a meal and was hurrying to get there first.

There was dead meat somewhere not far away. It was the Kid's hunch that it was very close at hand, right in the little park.

It did not take him long to find part of it, then the rest. Five prime steers had been shot, their carcasses left lying as they fell, with well-aimed bullets in brain or heart. One shot to each.

The thing that amazed the Kid was the fact that each animal had been branded on the left shoulder, but the brand was missing!

A square of hide, bearing the brand, had been flayed from every one of them, leaving the red flesh exposed, save where flies were already crawling. Those critters had only been dead a short time.

But he could not understand why they had been killed. Not as "slow elk," to be sold for meat. In that case, they would not have been left in the hot sun; the flaying of the hide would not have ended with removing the brands. They would have been skinned as soon as possible, for several reasons.

It seemed a senseless proceeding, unless it was spite work. It looked to the Kid as if only five had been killed, because only these five held the same brand.

All the steers in the park were, in a sense, strays. They would be gathered up in the fall, turned over to the "reps" of the various owners.

But nobody could claim these steers, dead or alive. With the brands missing, not even the owner would know them for his.



Buzzards would leave bones and most of the hide. Coyotes would scatter the bones, but even after they were through there would be most of the hide intact. Riders finding the remains, soon or late, would look for the brand.

The Kid did not doubt that there were other carcasses scattered over Reposado County with their brands lost, their ownership destroyed.

Why?

At association headquarters the word had come from Reposado that there was trouble, and for a range detective, the best available, to be sent at once. It had been a telegram, and it had given no further information, save to add two words. The Kid had the message in his wallet now. He did not have to look at it to remember the text.

**TROUBLE IN REPOSADO COUNTY  
STOP SEND BEST AVAILABLE MAN  
STOP NOT RUSTLING**

**VERNON ROTHWELL**

Rothwell was the head of the Reposado local owners' organization, owner of the VR spread, a large and prosperous outfit.

The Kid had a list of the other owners, all of them members of the C. A. The telegram would help to identify him, although he had also with him his identity warrant and his badge.

He wanted to have a look at the owners and, if possible, the outfits, before he announced himself. This looked like inside work.

If so, was it always in this manner—a wanton killing by an expert marksman, with sidlers to round up the steers he was after? A wanton waste of meat. Sixty dollars gone with every scoring slug.

If all losses had been in this fashion, the owners could not possibly check up accurately. They might know, at round-up, that their in-

crease was short, or even entirely missing.

It was a puzzle, and the Kid's reaction was that there was more to it than a mere case of spite or jealousy. This was a deliberate, crafty destruction.

He wondered about the three riders. Unless there was a way out of the park they were still there. In that case—

*Brang!* This report was sharp and clear, its origin close at hand.

A slug crossed the Kid's chest, plucked at the loose folds of his neckerchief, but did not touch his shirt.

That was *shooting*. The same kind of shooting that had slain the steers with one bullet apiece. The Kid was certain that the sharpshooter could have killed him, if he had wanted to, that he had deliberately placed his lead where he wanted. This was a warning.

The Kid was in a bad position. He had his six-gun in its holster, and there were few who could begin to match his speed and accuracy with a .45 Colt; but the sniper was beyond the range of any hogleg.

Speed, well trained, as much a veteran of the danger trail as his master, merely flicked his ears, as the hum of the bullet came to them.

The Kid made one motion, raising his hands above his shoulders, then sat still in his saddle, his lips barely sounding the "Lament."

## II.

Two men rode out toward him, from different directions. The Kid figured that, with the sniper, they formed a triangle of which he was now the center.

They did not seem different from ordinary cowpokes. Their eyes were cold, and their bronzed faces expres-



sionless as masks. They gave out a distinct impression of unfriendliness. The brands on their ponies were different. They might be their own, not part of an outfit's working cavvy.

He eyed them coolly as they closed in.

His hawkish-featured face, as brown as an Indian's, showed no expression. Neither did his dark eyes, but there was latent fire in them.

"You're wise to hold still, cowboy," said one of them. "Next shot could spill you from your riggin' with a slug in your brain."

"Like two of them dead steers lyin' out there," said the Kid quietly. "The other three got it in the heart. It was fine shootin'."

He watched them keenly for any change of countenance. There was none.

"Did *you* do it?" asked the other rider.

"I ain't totin' a rifle," said the Kid.

"You might have one hid out."

"Well, I ain't. To turn about, gents, did either of *you* do it—or the hombre thet jest ventilated my bandanna?"

"You tell the answers, we'll do the questions. Shuck his artillery, Ike."

Ike did so, and the Kid made no resistance. It would be suicide. But he was sure he would recognize Ike again, if it was a hundred years before he met him again.

The man was as cold-blooded as a lizard, the Kid decided. He had a long nose with a cleft at the end. His mouth was crookedly set on his narrow face, his eyes were close together, mean, and the color of creek agates. Below the left one were three pockmarks in a cluster, like a tiny ace of clubs.

The other man was not so distinc-

tive of feature, but he had an old scar on his chin, and he lacked the little finger of his right hand. The Kid wondered why he did not wear gloves.

Immediately the third man appeared. He had put his rifle into the saddle scabbard, adjusting it beneath his thigh as he rode in.

The Kid's face, with his dark eyes and hair, had an Indian cast, although he was one hundred per cent white American. But this man was half Indian, the rest Spanish, probably a mixture of many breeds.

Whatever else he could or could not do, he could shoot, and he was proud of it. He twirled a thin mustache as he came, his beady eyes filled with complacency. Cruelty and low cunning were stamped upon his mongrel face.

He rode a splendid pinto, and saddle and bridle were ornamented with hand carving and silver rosettes. The conchas on his chaps were silver. So were his spurs, with rowels as large as pesos.

The Kid had lowered his hands after they took his gun. He sat with them now on his saddle horn.

"Some coyote killed them steers, has been killin' others," said Ike, who seemed the spokesman, if not the leader. "We're lookin' fer him."

"Or fer somebody you kin *say* is him," thought the Kid.

"Thet's why we come in here, hearin' the shots. What was *you* doin' here?"

"I heard the shots. I was curious. I trailed your sign in here. Reckon the man you want must have come in some other way. Mebbe across the divide," said the Kid. But he did not believe it.

"You ridin' fer any outfit round here?"

"Not yit."

"Huntin' a pay roll?"



"Mister," said the Kid patiently, "where I hail from, they don't ask a stranger questions or hold him up this a way. Not when they know when he come in this park, like you do. You saw me come in after you. Gimme my six-gun, an' I'll argue the point with the three of you, give an' take, odds even."

"We ain't through with you yit. You might have shot from the ridge, like you said, come in here fer a stall."

"Did you see me flay out them brands?"

"We saw enough. We've talked enough. We're takin' you to see the boss."

"Let's go an' git this over with," said the Kid. "You're holdin' all the cards. I ain't got even a white chip."

If they were "right," he could identify himself, but he did not trust them any more than he trusted a shedding rattlesnake. Ike and the man who lacked a finger rode on either side of him. The breed rode behind him. He had as much chance to get away as a dead fish in a frying pan.

Ike had the Kid's six-gun, shoved down behind belt and waistband.

So the four rode out the glen, through the ravine, where they had to go single file, with the Kid No. 3.

They turned left, riding along the cliffs in the direction from which the Kid had come.

Reposado, the name of the county, meant "quiet," or "peaceful." It might have been, once, the Kid reflected, but not now.

None of them spoke until they came to a creek flowing out of a canyon, one of the two that watered the common range. Then the breed broke the silence.

He spoke in Spanish. The Kid

understood every word, but gave no sign of it.

"I must ride into town to meet the chief. You two can handle this Whistlin' Kid. Hold him at the cabin."

He used the Spanish term, "*Muchacho Silbido*," meaning the "Whistlin' Kid."

The two words hit the Kid's mind like blows. They knew who he was! Or suspected it. There had been a leak somewhere. He had caught them, almost in the act. They knew him for a range dick, knew his reputation.

The creek was swift, hock-deep for the horses. The breed rode off with a leer. Ike spoke to the Kid.

"This crick is tricky. The ford's narrow. There's quicksand either side. Take it easy, hombre."

The Kid's face was as still as an Indian's as he nodded, but his veins tingled.

They hit the water three abreast. In the middle of the stream the Kid poked Speed back of the cinch with his spur. He might be out of chips in this one-sided game, but the buckskin had an ace to play.

It suddenly reared, snorting and pawing, weaving from side to side.

Ike was on the Kid's left. As Speed swerved into Ike's mount, the Kid sent a short-arm jolt at the jaw of the man on his right. It landed nicely, sending the hombre slumping from his saddle.

In the same second, the Kid grabbed his six-gun from Ike's belt, and as Ike's mount plunged, one hind leg in the quicksand, the Kid leaned forward in his saddle, and Speed lunged ahead, throwing up spray as he made the opposite bank, and whirled about on the space of a dollar.

Ike, his horse partly bogged, drew his own gun and fired. The bullet



snicked through the brim of the Kid's hat.

Now the Kid, with his own hogleg in his hand, faced them.

The nine-fingered man had been partly revived by his dip. He was floundering in the water, clinging to his saddle horn.

"I've a mind to shoot it out with you two skunks," said the Kid, "but it'd be too much like murder, even if the pair of you was in the clear. Chuck your guns into the crick, both of you, or I'll cripple you. You may be on the level, but you don't act like it or look like it."

Ike's horse was back on the gravel bar that made the ford. He aimed his hogleg, but the Kid's spoke first. The other's weapon flew into the water.

"Thet's *one*," said the Kid. "How about the other?"

"Nine-fingers" pitched away his gun. Both the weapons were in the quicksand, not to be retrieved.

"I might see you later," said the Kid. "So long."

He heard them cursing, as he touched spurs to Speed.

The breed had reined in, was looking back, reaching for his rifle. He got it out just before the Kid and Speed dived into an arroyo.

He was not so good a shot from the saddle, and the creek was between them. The slug whined high. And Speed once more proved his right to his name. Dust rose from his flying heels.

The Kid made a hogback ridge, raced around it. Falda, the cow town that served Repasado County cowmen, boasted a sheriff and was not, according to the Kid's directions, more than ten miles away.

He made it, across the flat, inside the hour, stopped at the only hotel—The Cowboy's Rest—stabled

Speed, saw him well looked after, and registered for a room.

He was not yet ready to proclaim himself or his mission, and he learned that the sheriff and his deputy were out of town.

### III.

The Cowboy's Rest catered to riders and owners. The meals were good, the beds not so bad. There were gambling layouts in the bar-room, faro, roulette, and poker.

In back, the hotel keeper had what he called a menagerie. It consisted of a bad-tempered cinnamon bear cub—teased too much by visitors—a mangy badger, a young coyote, a miserable porcupine with half its quills missing, and a cage holding four rattlesnakes that smelled worse than the rest of the exhibition put together.

The Kid did not much like the looks of Jacks, the owner, who was probably running the games as well as the hotel. He was a shifty-eyed individual who tried to appear as a hail fellow well met, but overplayed his hand, in the range detective's opinion.

Well after supper, the Kid bought chips for stud, played with varying luck that kept him about even, watching the gradually growing crowd. He watched the deal, but could detect nothing crooked.

He cottoned to one man who sat in, handled his cards with sound judgment, a keen old-timer, not to be easily bamboozled, not one to stand for it if he thought he was being done.

His interest mounted when he heard the old-timer called "Vern," and again "Rothwell."

This was the owner of the VR spread, who had sent the telegram



to the C. A. A return wire had been sent to Rothwell.

#### SENDING BEST MAN PETE PRENTISS SOON AS POSSIBLE

It might be that return wire that caused the leak by which Ike, the breed, and the man with the missing finger had known of his coming. Depot agents in such small towns were sometimes gossipy to their pards, or to those who made it worth their while.

It was not yet clear how Pete Prentiss was known to the trio as "*El Muchacho Silbido*," the "Whistlin' Kid," as many called him, because of his habit of whistling when he was thinking or working on a problem.

But he knew that news travels far and fast where folks are interested. Men who were rustlers or engaged in illegal traffic with cattle would watch convictions, learn the names and descriptions of successful range detectives, who were often forced to appear in court—and thus get publicity they did not want.

Once the Kid tilted against Rothwell for several plays, won on a hidden jack. The ranch owner congratulated him.

"You shore played that jest right, son. Fooled me, with my three nines. Let's have a round on thet."

The Kid chose a cigar, excused himself.

"Hard liquor an' me don't git along," he said. "I don't mind buyin' it, but I don't like to drink it."

"I admire your resolution, son," said Rothwell. "Me, I find a lile redeye helps my rheumatiz'. Or I think it does," he added, with a twinkle in his eyes.

Rothwell watched the shift of every card, the face of every player.

Things began to come his way, and he started a winning streak.

"Looks like I was more lucky with cards than cows," he commented. "I need to be. If this fall round-up don't show more increase an' less decrease than the last—Well, let *that* ride."

He peered at his hole card and shut up like a clam. The Kid noticed nobody else said anything about cows. Things in Reposado County were evidently at a stage when it was felt wisest not to discuss them or even to mention them. It had created a condition where men began to suspect each other, to discredit what was said about losses.

Just before midnight, four men entered. The Kid had seen three of them before. They were Ike, the half-breed, and Nine-fingers. He studied the fourth carefully, under cover of looking at his cards.

The man limped. He was very thin, his cheeks sunken, his eyes hollow—piercing, restless eyes that never seemed to look anybody in the face, yet did not miss anything. His skin was an unhealthy yellow, his mouth was a slit.

This, the Kid imagined, was the one called the Boss, by the breed the "chief," to whom the breed had ridden to report.

The range detective tossed in his hand. He knew the four had seen him. Had said something about him. His right hand dropped to his lap. If they wanted to start anything he was ready for them.

They came to the stud table, led by the lame man. He stopped opposite the Kid.

"My name's Bowes," he said. "I run a hawss ranch 'bout three mile out of town. The four of us gentle colts fer the spreads. I don't do much bustin' myself nowadays,



sence I got my leg broke in three places. I don't know your name, pardner, but I want to apologize to you fer my three riders, likewise fer myself."

He was lying well, the Kid thought, in saying he did not know who the Kid was.

"We'll let thet slide," the Kid said.

Bowes turned to Rothwell.

"Reckon, mebbe, the boys was a bit overanxious to git thet reward hung up by you spread owners, Rothwell. Anyways, they heard shootin' in Arrowwood Park, seemed like, an' they rid in to investigate. Found five primes, with the brands cut out."

Rothwell snorted a loud, fervent, and fervid description of what he thought of such villains.

"Go ahead," he said. "You found five, so what?"

"Then this hombre comes ridin' in. We watch him, an' he looks at the steers. He was a stranger, an' we was prob'ly hasty. Ike gits an idea he might have shot from the ridge an' come in later, but this gent allows he couldn't have shot 'em an' likewise skinned the brands out without them seein' him. Which was sound logic. Ike here sees it, now. He ain't overquick at times, but he acknowledges his error. Me likewise, bein' responsible fer him. This here mystery of missin' brands is still a mystery. An' I'm apologizin', Mr.——"

"The name is Prentiss. Pete Prentiss," said the Kid.

He had made up his mind to trust Rothwell, and he wanted to see what effect the mention of his name might have on Bowes and his men.

They did not give themselves away. They remained stony-faced but cordial.

Rothwell did not, either. He was too good a poker player, a quick thinker, as the Kid had figured him. He knew now that the Kid was a range dick, the range dick asked for, but he did not twitch a muscle.

Bowes wanted to buy drinks for the house. The Kid explained that he did not use hard liquor. Bowes ordered, just the same, and the Kid took a cigar.

"No hard feelin's?" asked Bowes.

"None by me," said the Kid.

Rothwell cashed in at the stud game, after he had won a pot from the Kid, who broke even on the evening.

"How about a bite to eat," he asked the Kid. "Too late fer the hotel, but the chink kin decorate a ham steak with eggs in a way thet is sure intriguin'?"

"I kin always use good food," said the Kid. "Let's go."

Bowes and his men watched them leave, their eyes slitted. The Kid saw them in the mirror back of the bar.

"They know who I am," he said to Rothwell, when they were well away from the saloon.

He told Rothwell what had happened at the creek.

"At thet, you've got nothin' on 'em," said the owner.

"Not much," admitted the Kid. "They'll sabe thet you an' me'll be talkin' together. An' they'd like to put me in the discard."

"You'd best be keerful," said Rothwell. "Better come out to my ranch ter-night. I don't bank heavy on Jacks."

"Me neither. But I'm goin' back to the hotel. There's times I bait my own hook. It's risky, but it's excitin'. It's why I quit pokin' cows."

"I know how you feel, son," said



Rothwell. "Here's the chink's place."

Then, over their ham and eggs, fried potatoes, lima beans, tomatoes, apple pie, and coffee, they talked turkey.

"The owners thet have been losin' stock," said Rothwell, "happen, like me, to have all joined the Stockmen's Insurance and Investment Association. They guarantee us fifty dollars fer every stolen or destroyed steer, after reasonable proof is turned in."

"And you can't prove a steer with a stripped brand belongs to any one of you," said the Kid.

"No. There was rustlin' last year an' the year before, which made us listen to the agent of the S. I. I. A. But we can't collect on a dead steer, unless we kin check the brand."

"These hombres might be workin' fer thet outfit," said the Kid. "What about their investments?"

"They loan mortgages on spreads."

"An' foreclose, when it looks good."

"Mebbe," said Rothwell. "I ain't no financier."

The Kid began to see some light.

"Could you send a rider down the line to send a telegram fer me," he asked. "I don't trust this local agent. He tipped off Bowes. I want to git a line on thet S. I. I. A. outfit."

"I sure kin. I don't trust the agent none too much myself. He's sort o' juggled cars, off an' on."

They finished the supper. Rothwell mounted and rode away. The Kid returned to the hotel bar, where he saw Bowes, with his three men, seated at a table with Jacks, the proprietor. They greeted him cordially, and the Kid yawned. He saw a flicker in their eyes as he announced he was going to bed.

#### IV.

The rooms were pretty crude, but they had walls that reached all the way to the ceiling. A lamp burned on a table at the end of the hall upstairs. The Kid's key turned easily in the lock. He struck a match. There was a small lamp on his bureau, but there was no oil in it, the wick sputtered, went out—but not before the Kid had glanced at his bed, seen a faint, writhing motion beneath the coverlet.

He went out, picked up the lamp at the end of the hall, came back. With a swift movement, he turned down the clothes.

There was a sidewinder between the sheets, deadliest and most easily irritated of all snakes. A sleepy man, sliding into bed, would surely have been struck. This was no doubt one of the snakes from Jacks's menagerie.

The reptile reared a third of its stumpy, ugly length, its forked tongue slithering in and out of its horny lips, parted to show the lifting fangs.

The Kid made a loop on the end of one of the whang strings he always carried in his pocket, deftly cast the noose, drew it tight, back of the triangular head. He lifted the writhing snake, and tied the string to the bottom of the bed, so that the snake's rattles rested on the floor and gave it some leverage.

Then he let the enraged snake strike again and again at his neck-erchief, already perforated by the breed's bullet. The yellow venom spurted from the hollow fangs, emptied the poison sacs.

The Kid knew this trick from the Hopi rain-makers, who carry rattlers in their mouths during the three hours needed to replenish the venom.



He released the snake, exhausted by its useless attack, made a bow-knot of it, stuffed it in his pocket, and went downstairs.

The barroom was almost empty, but Jacks, Bowes, Ike, the breed, and Nine-fingers, all sat at a table, sharing a bottle of whisky. The looks on their faces as the Kid came in almost made him chuckle aloud. He knew they had been imagining him dead, or dying.

"One of your pets got away," he said to Jacks. "Must be trained. You ought to sell it to a museum. First one I ever knew could walk upstairs."

The five gaped at him, like so many idiots, as he drew the side-winder from his pocket. As the Kid tossed it on the table, it writhed off it, into the breed's lap.

They all cried out, but the breed fell backward in his chair, his eyes popping, his face the color of ashes. He thought he was a dead man as the Kid laughed aloud at all of them.

"Try something better, next time," he said. "I tame all kinds of creepin', belly-sneakin' vermin."

He left them and went to the lively stable, rigged Speed, and rode out on the flat. He was not going to the VR, but he did not fancy his hotel room. He did not mind risks, but he needed some sleep, and he felt it would be better in the open.

He arrived at the VR in time for breakfast with Rothwell. The wire had been sent, and by noon an answer was brought by the same rider, whom Rothwell had told to wait for it. The Kid glanced at it, handed it to the owner. It was an answer to his request to the Cattlemen's Association for an immediate investigation into the Stockmen's Insurance and Investment Association,

regarding its activities in acquiring cattle ranches:

HAVE BOUGHT OR TAKEN OVER MANY OUTFITS DURING LAST YEAR ON NOTES MORTGAGES OR BY FORCED SALES FROM OWNERS WHO HAVE LOST STOCK ON WHICH THEY COULD NOT PROVE LOSS STOP STILL INVESTIGATING

"There you are," said the Kid. "If those four hombres ain't workin' fer the S. I. I. A., I'm a mud turtle! The association saves fifty dollars on every steer, busts the outfit, takes over, an' collects premiums beside. It's one slick scheme."

"It sure is," said Rothwell. "But how you goin' to prove up on it?"

"I figger on doin' thet same thing to-night," said the Kid.

It was an hour before midnight when the Kid arrived at Bowes's horse ranch. One of Rothwell's riders had announced that the quartet was at the hotel, drinking, playing poker with Jacks. It was more of a consultation than a game, the Kid decided.

Twice they had tried to make away with him, and failed. They were afraid of him, yet they felt he could not pin anything on them in court, even if he could get them arrested.

The Kid had a different notion. He felt sure there was proof and that it was somewhere on Bowes's ranch. He preferred to work alone. There was a full moon, and he poked about the premises with a pretty good idea of what he wanted to find.

At last he discovered it, in an outhouse. A keg, with a label on it addressed to the general manager of the S. I. I. A., all ready to ship, doubtless from a distant point.

It was filled with flaps of hide, packed in brine. Each flap had been



flayed from a prime steer, bearing its brand, insurance against the *company's* insurance. Over ten thousand dollars' worth of savings to the organization. Easy for them to pay Bowes and his men to destroy primes, put the spreads into bankruptcy. A slick scheme, and a new one.

The Kid reheaded the keg, changed the label to read addressed to the Cattlemen's Association, set it on a table of the main room of Bowes's ranch house. It was not far from dawn, and they would soon be coming back.

He found a clumsy closet in one corner, formed by a curtain across the angle. Behind it were odds and ends of clothing on hooks, some shoes and boots on the floor. It made an ideal hiding place.

Then he went outside, smoked a couple of quirlies, settled himself on a bench to wait. The sky was gray when he saw dust at the ranch gate. He stayed until he saw there were five riders before he slipped back to the room. The fifth man, he judged—and hoped—was Jacks.

The five came stamping in from the front. They were well primed with liquor, Jacks the soberest.

"Where's thet keg?" he said. "Got to get rid of thet, right away. What in blazes is *this*?"

They were staring at the keg when the Kid stepped out from behind the curtain. His six-gun covered all of them.

"Thet's my proof," he said. "You know who I am. Back to the wall, all of you!" Slowly they retreated.

"You ain't got a rifle beaded on me now," the Kid said to the half-breed. "I know *you're* yeller. You showed it when the snake slid into your lap. You collect the artillery an' set it on this end o' the table. Then you kin help me hog tie the

bunch. I'll wind up with *you*, myself."

The breed did his bidding, as the rest backed up. The Kid saw that he did a good job of it.

"All right," he said, "now back up to me."

The breed obeyed. Suddenly he stumbled, fell to his knees, flung himself backward, thrusting with his feet, claspings the Kid's ankles, bringing the Kid down on all fours.

The Kid rolled sidewise, and his gun belt dropped, slashed by the knife the breed had driven for his belly. At that, it cut a muscle, almost penetrated, brought a gush of crimson as the Kid kicked at the other's wrist.

His gun hand was below him as he rolled, and he fired from the floor at the breed as he reached for his *cuchillo*, while Bowes and Ike came in, hurling themselves on him, trussed as they were.

The breed curled up, howling like a stuck pig. But he was far from done. He was a tough hombre.

He got out his knife, but the break had given the Kid time to rise, a slow, scarlet stream staining his Levis, dripping to the ground.

He stepped over Bowes and Ike easily enough. They were scotched snakes, licked to a frazzle. But the breed dived for him, and the Kid's weakened leg gave way.

He managed to grab the breed's wrist with his left hand as the other fought with a frantic fury, in a final flurry of despair.

The Kid deliberately dropped his gun. He did not want to kill the man, only to hand him over to justice. The *cuchillo* pricked his wrist, and then he put both hands to work, grinding the breed's small bones until he yelped like a lamed coyote. He lost his knife, but he snapped at



the Kid with bared teeth, snarling and cursing.

Then the Kid slugged him, left and right to the jaw. The breed's eyes rolled up, his jaw dropped, and he lay still.

The Kid got up once more, looked them over.

Bowes and Ike could listen. The breed was beyond hearing for the present, but he would get the bad news soon enough.

"You're all through, hombres," said the Kid, as he made a pad of his bandanna for his hurt. "And I ain't, by a long shot. You snakes don't bite deep enough. The VR boys will be along right soon, likewise Rothwell. I told him to saunter along after sunup. I'm right glad you happened to show, Jacks. I had a hunch you was in this."

The breed began to come to, moaning.

"You're lucky, so fur," the Kid told him. "We'll have you plugged up, presently, in jail. You got a cracked rib an' a sore jaw. Some day you'll have a dislocated neck."

He whistled to them as they wriggled.

The tune was the "Lament." It seemed to fit and fill the occasion, until the rapid beat of hoofs proclaimed the arrival of the riders from the VR.

That was shore one slick scheme, all right. But the hombres who were back of it, like Jacks, Bowes, Ike, and the breed, will git what's comin' to 'em, all right, when the Kid makes his report. Watch for another thrillin' story about the range dick in an early issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



EIGHT ON LINE

### ANCIENT INDIAN TOYS

Toys, that are believed to be more than a thousand years old, have been dug up at St. Lawrence Island, in Alaska. Such toys would cost modern parents hundreds of dollars each, in these days of ivory scarcity. But it's not likely that even millionaires would give their children finely carved articles that would grace the cabinet of a collector.

The people who lived in Alaska many hundreds of years before Columbus crossed the Atlantic, had the custom of using ivory from the tusks of the walrus for toys, handles, darts, buttons, combs, and numerous other articles of utility or ornament. Even snow goggles were delicately worked from ivory, and many of the articles found show artistic taste and great skill in handicraft.

These interesting relics of a by-gone age, were dug up under the di-

rection of Henry B. Collins, of the Smithsonian Institution. Among the toys were little kyaks, with crude figures of men that could be placed in the boats, a tiny polar bear, toy harpoon heads with which the children learned their first lessons in spearing fish.

Even wrist guards, which protected the hunters against animals and fish, were carved in ivory. There were also tiny whales, fashioned from the bark of trees.

By a careful study of these remnants of an ivory age, Collins declares that the Eskimos undoubtedly came from Asia, at a very remote period. Previous students of early Eskimo culture believed that the Hudson Bay region was the cradle of the Eskimo race. But this theory has been upset by these latest findings of carved ivory articles in Alaska.

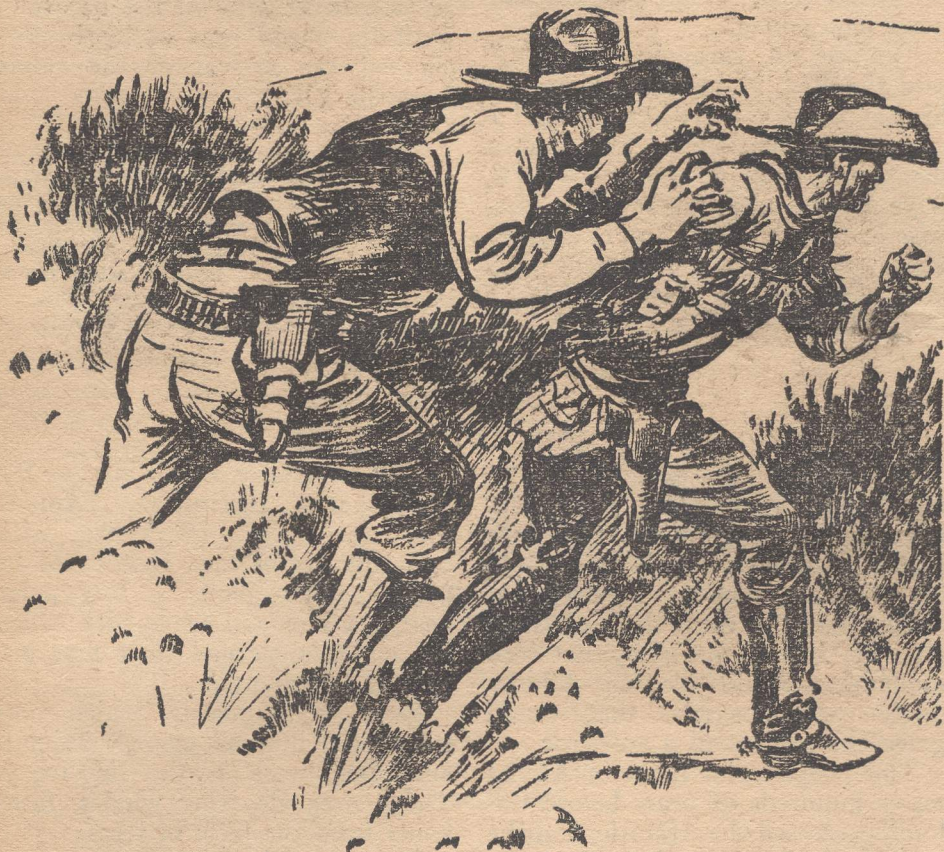


# Smoky Round-up on the Overland

A "Freckles Malone" Novelette

By Ward M. Stevens

Author of "Kid Wolf At Dead Man's Gap," etc.



## CHAPTER I.

### PILGRIMS AT POISON POOL.

THE eyes of "Freckles" Malone were wind-stung and burned by alkali, and at first he thought they were deceiving him. Surely that dim, slow-moving blur on the horizon wasn't a prairie schooner. If

so, it was far off the track. Emigrant wagons kept pretty close to the Carson River, or paid a bitter penalty of hardship and thirst. Death lurked here in the sinks, a death lingering but sure.

"It is a wagon," he muttered, "and it's headed right for Poison Pool!"

Malone was riding the Pony Mail





from Bosque Station to Painted Rock, and was now almost at the end of his grueling run. There was only one more relay station—where he would change mounts for the tenth time—between him and the Rock. There he would turn the mail over to his relief rider and enjoy a two days' rest.

Instead of following the banks of the Carson, the Overland mail riders cut straight across the sinks at this

point for a distance of thirteen miles. This was all right for the swift-running ponies, fresh at each relay, but for a wagon outfit it was extremely dangerous. Most of Nevada, or the "Washoe Country," as it was called, was a harsh, uncharted wilderness.

"The mail must go through!" That was the motto of the Overland, and nothing must delay the precious letters in the padlocked pockets of the *mochila*.

There were some rules, however, that were made to be broken. Valuable as time was, Freckles Malone



couldn't allow those luckless emigrants to go to their fate. He'd have to warn them about that deadly spring.

He turned his lathered bronc toward the south and that slowly moving blur, urging the weary animal to even greater speed. With luck, he might make up the time on his next relay.

Freckles Malone came by his name naturally enough, for his lean face was profusely dotted with sun spots. He had what often goes with freckles—a shock of fiery-red hair and a pair of vivid-blue eyes, plus a square and rather pugnacious jaw. He was considered to be the Overland's crack rider.

Like most of the couriers, Malone was lithe and light of build, and his shoulders seemed very broad in contrast to the slimness of his waist and the wiriness of his buckskin-clad legs. Although young in years, the redhead was old in experience; before joining the Overland he had been with the Butterfield system in Arizona.

By the time Malone was within hailing distance of the wagon, it had come to a halt alongside the water hole. Already they had begun to fill their kegs, and the courier had to shout several times before they stopped long enough to glance around at him.

"Why, howdy, younker," greeted one of the wagon men. "By gollies, when I first heared yuh I took yuh fer an Injun. Want water, do yuh?"

"Not any of *that* water!" cried the mail rider, bringing his foam-flecked cayuse to a sliding halt. "Don't any of yuh touch it! And don't let yore oxen get to it, either. It's poison!"

The pilgrim stared at him in surprise and dismay, then blinked at the pool. The others—two bewhiskered

men and a tired-looking woman with a little child in her arms—gathered around Malone looking worried and much perplexed.

"The water looks all right to me," said the middle-aged leader of the outfit.

It did look all right and was very clear, except for a faint amber tint, but Freckles knew that it was heavily charged with compounds of arsenic. It was one of the worst naturally poisoned springs in the Washoe.

An experienced plainsman could have seen at a glance that the water was unwholesome. Scattered all about were the skeletons of wild animals that had perished from drinking it, and only beasts crazed by thirst would touch such water at all. Instinct warned them.

These people had neither knowledge nor instinct to protect them, and had it not been for Malone they would have been drinking their fill of the poisonous stuff. When they realized the narrowness of their escape, they looked at each other in horror.

"Thanks, friend, fer tellin' us," said the emigrant when the mail rider had made himself understood. "But—but what'll we do? We're a-burnin' up with thirst, all of us! We cain't—"

"Take my canteen," said the courier. "It will help some."

The container didn't hold much, and there was hardly enough for a drink for each of the wayfarers. Even that little, however, worked a miracle. The baby stopped its fretful whimpering, the woman was able to smile, and a load seemed to be lifted from the shoulders of the men.

"How did yuh happen to leave the Carson?" Malone asked them while they drank.



"We heard thet it was a shorter cut this a way," was the innocent reply.

It was a short cut to death, and Malone told them so, advising them to cut back to the Carson and follow the main trail to California.

"But we cain't git back thar," protested the other emigrant. "Them bulls will never pull the wagon thar without water. Jist look at 'em."

Malone could see that the oxen were exhausted. Their swollen tongues were out and they were as thin as rails. He could count the ribs of the poor beasts, and their hipbones protruded gauntly. They wouldn't last long without water.

"It isn't just water that you folks lack, it's grub," said the redhead. "Am I right?"

The pioneers had been too proud to admit being in need, but now they were forced to confess that they were as famished as their oxen. Their story filled him with pity. He was especially sorry for the woman and the little tot.

"I've got to go on with the mail, amigos," he told them.

"Can yuh—send help?" faltered the leader.

"I'll do better than that," promised Freckles Malone. "You camp right here and I'll be back to-night with a wagon of grub and good water. Think yuh can make out until then?"

The spotty-faced rider didn't wait to hear their thanks, for he'd lost a good deal of precious time already. He was grinning, though, as he hammered away, for there was nothing he enjoyed more than doing good turns, unless it was a brisk, rousing fight with fists or guns.

And, if he'd only known, he had something of that coming to him, too.

## CHAPTER II.

### TROUBLE AT PAINTED ROCK.

SWEN SWENSON, the Swede cook and handy man at Painted Rock, wiped his big red hands on his floppy apron and glanced at his huge silver watch with an air of perplexity. He shook it vigorously, held it to his ear, then thrust it back into his pants pocket and went to his galley window to peer out at the silent and empty Overland Trail.

"Freckles he ban late!" he muttered uneasily. "Dat not happen very often, by Yiminy!"

Swenson was Malone's best friend; they had been together since the Arizona days, and the cook would cheerfully have given his life for his mail rider pard. Swen had just finished cooking a tasty meal for him, confident that he would be on the dot as usual. Flapjacks with strips of fried venison—Malone's favorite dish. With a sigh the Swede put it on the back of the stove to keep it warm, then sat down and began peeling spuds for the regular station supper.

Painted Rock was a "home" station, marking the end of a division. There was a large corral filled with ponies, a well-stocked storehouse, and a blacksmith and wheelwright's shop as well as the main station building, a long, flat-roofed structure with sod walls.

Nearly a quarter of an hour had passed before Swen's heart was gladdened by the pounding of hoofs. Leaving his pan of potatoes, the lanky, rawboned Swede waved a gleeful salutation from the kitchen doorway. Sure enough, it was Malone, dust-covered, weary, but smiling broadly. He vaulted off his bronc in front of the station.

The relief rider had been waiting for twenty minutes, and as soon as



the two stock handlers had transferred the *mochila* from Malone's pony to his own, he was away like an arrow, bound west.

"The flapyacks ban ready, Freckles!" Swen yelled delightedly. "For a while I tank yure hoss broke leg or somet'ing."

"Not as bad as that, Swen," laughed the redhead, coming into the kitchen with his spurs clanking. "Whew, but I'm hungry! Yuh'd better get busy on another stack of flapjacks, amigo, while I start with these. While I'm eatin' I'll tell yuh what delayed me."

The kind-hearted Swede shook his head sympathetically as Malone explained the pitiful plight of the emigrants. He agreed to help Freckles load up some provisions.

"I ban got a gude side of bacon I'll send 'em," he said heartily. "I can spare some flour, too, some sugar, beans, potatoes and t'ings. Coffee, too, by yings!"

He accompanied Freckles Malone out to one of the sheds. Whipple, one of the stock tenders, heard the story and volunteered to help them hitch a team to one of the wagons. Malone filled a big barrel with pure, fresh water.

In contrast with the alkali sinks, the country roundabout Painted Rock was a paradise. It was nearly sundown now, and the air was cool and stimulating. The station was built near the river, and elders and cottonwoods grew thick and tall. The grass was lush in the valley and the clover knee-high in places. The emigrants would soon fatten up their oxen when they reached the Carson.

"Have yuh told Jerome yet—what yuh aim to do, I mean?" Whipple asked Malone.

They had the wagon nearly loaded now, and the redhead chuckled. "I'll tell him when I'm ready to start."

There was no love lost between Malone and the Painted Rock agent, Al Jerome. The agent seemed to have taken a violent dislike to the freckled mail rider. While he was in charge of the station, he had no authority to discharge other employees; if he'd had, Malone would have been fired long ago.

"Yere come him and Sark right now," warned Whipple suddenly.

Jerome came striding toward the team and wagon accompanied by Sark, the station's blacksmith and the agent's crony.

"What in blazes are yuh doin', Malone?" Jerome demanded waspishly.

Al Jerome, a man of thirty-five, was tall and angular. He was very swarthy, and his eyebrows, meeting in the center of his gaunt face, gave him a disagreeable, scowling expression. Buckteeth and a lantern jaw didn't add anything to his beauty.

Malone patiently told him about the emigrants and of his promise to help them. Jerome listened with gathering anger.

"What do yuh think the Overland is, a charity outfit?" he cut in violently. "Do yuh think we can furnish every danged fool gold-rusher with grub?"

"Not all, maybe, but this case is different," Freckles said quietly. "I said I'd bring them some water and provisions, and I'm shore goin' to do it."

"Yo're stealin' grub thet belongs to the comp'ny, thet's what yo're doin'!" snarled Jerome. "If yuh think I won't report it, copper-top, yo're loco!"

"I'll report it, too—to Mr. Majors," Malone snapped. "He'll approve of what I'm doin', and if he shouldn't I'll pay for the stuff myself, out of my wages."

"And, by Yiminy, out of my



wages, too!" roared the yellow-haired Swede.

"Who asked *you* anything, Swede?" sneered Sark, the blacksmith.

He was a huge, barrel-chested hombre with arms so long that his hands nearly reached his knees. His coarse, red-veined face bore a stupid expression. Jerome had the brains, Sark the brute force. Although the blacksmith could straighten out a horseshoe with his bare hands, he could neither read nor write.

"I forbid you to leave the station, Swenson!" ordered Jerome.

It hadn't been Swen's intention to leave; he was only helping Freckles load the wagon. The agent's command, however, roused the gangling Swede's ire.

"You yackinapes get yore own supper!" he cried. "I ban go 'long with Freckles."

"Malone," rasped Jerome, taking a step forward and coming face to face with the mail rider, "you're a thief, thet's what yuh are! Takin' this stuff is stealin', and this ain't the first time yuh've stole. How about them ponies we've been losin' right along? Yuh've been stealin' 'em an'——"

He'd already said too much, and he got no further. The wiry right arm of Freckles Malone streaked out like a striking rattler. His knuckles landed on Jerome's mouth with a tooth-loosening jolt.

"Why, you——" spluttered the agent, staggering backward and just managing to keep his buckling knees from giving way altogether. "Jist fer thet, yuh blasted carrot-top, I'll show yuh——"

He lunged for Malone, both fists flailing. The redhead was still smiling, but with lips alone. His eyes seemed to emit blue sparks. And he tore into Al Jerome like a buzz saw!

Nimble side-stepping the agent's rush, he slashed at him with lefts and rights that came a hundred to the minute. He knocked Jerome's head sidewise with hooks and straightened it again with uppercuts. A looping right hand smashed the agent's jaw and rolled him under the wheels of the wagon.

Then the blacksmith leaped into the fracas. He was a good seventy pounds heavier than the mail rider, and he jumped at him from behind. He struck Malone in the back of the head and knocked him flat.

Swen Swenson leaped from the wagon where he'd been standing. The blacksmith was big, but he didn't look big to the lanky Swede! Roaring like an angry bull, Swen swung at Sark like a wood-chopper. And he landed!

The blacksmith hardly knew what hit him. He folded up like an accordion, and he made much the same sort of noise. Sark probably thought a horse had kicked him.

"You ban want more?" Swen roared, picking a singletree from off the ground.

Sark groaned and rolled over on his face, covering his head with his paws for protection. Jerome lay where he had fallen, breathing heavily. The pair had enough, for the time being, at least.

"Come on, Swen," panted Malone, who had scrambled to his feet. "Let's get started. There's folks waitin' on us."

### CHAPTER III.

#### MORE STOLEN PONIES.

AFTER midnight, when Dennis and Whipple, the two stock tenders, were sound asleep and snoring, Agent Jerome crawled from his bunk, dressed himself and awoke his crony, the blacksmith. Both men



tiptoed out of the sleeping quarters into the main room of the station where Jerome lighted a lantern, an old-fashioned affair with horn lenses.

Going outside, they went directly to the pony corral. There was a brilliant moon, and they kept close to the stockade under the shadow of the trees. Both had provided themselves with reatas. The lantern was wrapped in a piece of blanket.

"Two more?" Sark whispered hoarsely.

"Six of 'em this time," replied the agent. "And we mustn't forget the prize *bayo coyote*. We ought to get double price for thet un."

Opening the corral gate, they entered the inclosure with their paraphernalia. Evidently they were experienced in such night work, for in a very short time they emerged again with seven bronses, Jerome having decided to take another one for good measure. Carefully shutting the gates, they led their spoils away from the station and across the grassy meadows. After going for nearly a mile, they climbed through the entrance of a gloomy ravine.

Before they had gone far they saw the ruddy glow of a banked camp fire. A curt voice hailed them, and they heard the threatening click of a gun hammer.

"Who's thar?"

"It's me—Jerome," the agent called back quickly. "Tell Jack thet we're yere. And lend us a hand, will yuh, with these bronses?"

More fuel was thrown on the fire, and in the blaze of light which illumined the clearing, half a dozen men could be seen, all of them wrapped in blankets. Beyond was a crude corral where thirty or forty horses were moving about. Aspens were rustling, and a small stream rippled somewhere near by.

It was the camp of Jack Norfield, crooked California horse dealer. He was the first hombre to be awakened by the sentry, but in a few minutes the entire party was stirring.

"What's this, Jerome? Yuh've brought *seven* this time?" ejaculated the dealer, drawing on his boots and coming out into the red circle of firelight. "Ain't yuh takin' a dang fool risk? Yuh don't want to spile things, do yuh?"

"It's all right, Jack," said the agent. "I got a goat now—somebody to blame this on."

Norfield was a stocky, thick-necked man, dressed in Spanish fashion; he wore tight-fitting pantaloons, sash, and vest decorated with silver coins that served as buttons. Cuddled against his hip was a Colt dragoon six-gun, with a handle of elaborately carved ivory.

A more cruel, more brutal face than Norfield's would have been hard to imagine. His nose had been broken at one time and had mended crookedly, his thick lips were disfigured with a twisted knife scar, and his eyes were like chips of black obsidian.

His men were just as repulsive. Rolf Dale and Abe Ludolph were typical riffraff from the California mines, dirty and disheveled. "Buck-eye," the oldest, had a shaggy, discolored beard and bald head; Scar-pin was a loose-lipped and squinty desperado with a murderous record, and Carlos Martinez an example of the worst type of Mexican renegade. They made a fine group of "traders."

"What's the matter with yore face, Jerome, and whar did yuh git the black eye?" Abe Ludolph grinned at the agent.

"Never mind thet!" rasped the agent with a furious oath. "I'm git-tin' even—plenty—with the hombre thet done it. Look over the ponies,



Jack. Thet's a likely-lookin' *grulla*, eh? And yuh ought to be payin' extry fer thet buckskin."

Jack Norfield examined the brons with care, looking into the mouths and feeling them over expertly. He named a price, finally, and after a great deal of haggling, Jerome and Sark accepted it.

"We ought to git more," Sark grunted. "They say good hossflesh is danged near wuth its weight in gold over at the diggin's. An' Overland hosses is the best thar is."

Norfield laughed. "I'm loco to be payin' yuh fer 'em when I could steal 'em fer myself," he said.

"But this way yuh ain't takin' no risks," growled Jerome, "and besides, yo're shore of all the brons yuh want. As fast as they're took," he guffawed, "the comp'ny replaces 'em."

"We'll want at least a hundred and fifty head fer Frisco and Sacramento," Norfield nodded. "Now git this: we're movin' from yere at dawn. We'll be at our headquarters camp. Remember the place?"

Jerome nodded. "Yeah, at the hot springs—a good hide-away," he said. "Well, come on, Sark. Let's get back to the station. We got to git things ready fer Malone."

## CHAPTER IV.

### FIRED!

WHEN Freckles Malone and Swenson returned to Painted Rock with the empty wagon, about nine o'clock the next morning, they saw a stagecoach drawn up alongside the station building. They recognized the big Concord as the official one used by Alexander Majors on his frequent trips of inspection.

"It ban the big boss," the Swede muttered as they unhitched the team.

Freckles Malone and his raw-boned pard were in a cheerful frame of mind, and were well satisfied with their night's work. They had saved the lives of the emigrants, had left hope instead of black despair there at Poison Pool.

Upon entering the main room of the station they found Alexander Majors engaged in earnest talk with Jerome, Sark, and the two stock tenders, Dennis and Whipple.

Majors was the active partner in the Russell, Majors & Waddell Company, the Overland. Freckles liked and respected him, and he always felt that the liking was mutual, as Majors had intrusted him with many special missions. The mail rider was much surprised, however, at the chilliness of Majors's greeting.

"Sit down, Malone," said the Overland chief. "You, too, Swenson. We were just discussing your—er—escapade."

Alexander Majors, tall and stalwart, heavily bearded, had the most penetrating pair of eyes Freckles had ever seen. He was a kindly, yet stern man, and a great believer in discipline. Nobody dared use profanity in his presence, for he was very strict.

Malone glanced at Jerome, who was grinning unpleasantly. The two stock tenders avoided the redhead's glance and looked embarrassed.

"I don't know what Jerome has told yuh, sir," Malone said warmly, "but Swen and I have been on an errand of mercy."

He told the whole story, not omitting the fight he'd had with Jerome, and taking his share of the blame for it. Majors listened without any change of expression.

"I'll pay for the provisions, of course, out of my own pocket," the mail rider concluded.



There was a long silence which Majors broke finally. He extended a pair of gloves toward Freckles Malone.

"Are these yours?" he demanded.

Freckles recognized them and nodded wonderingly. If he remembered rightly, he'd left them on his bunk.

"Whipple," snapped Majors, "tell Malone where you found them."

Whipple glanced at Malone, then looked away again. He seemed sheepish and uncomfortable. Jerome and Sark, however, were smirking with triumph.

"Me and Dennis—well, we picked them gloves up in the corral this mornin'," Whipple faltered. "They wasn't in thar last night."

Freckles still couldn't see what it was all about. It was Majors who enlightened him.

"Seven ponies were stolen from the corral sometime during the night," he frowned, "and the evidence seems to point to you and Swen, Malone. Jerome thinks that after you made off with the supplies you returned and took the broncs. And this isn't the first time that stock has vanished from Painted Rock—more than a dozen ponies, all told, have disappeared. Have you anything to say, Malone?"

Freckles understood now, and his lean face whitened with anger. A ridge of muscle formed along his jaw, and his blue eyes seemed to take fire. He'd been framed. Jerome had planted those gloves in the corral for Whipple and Dennis to find. He could see that neither of the stock tenders had any part in the evil plot; they were only Jerome's innocent tools.

And Majors believed him to be guilty! That, more than anything, hurt the redhead.

Swen Swenson wasn't a very quick thinker, but it finally filtered

through his head that he and his red-haired pard were accused of thievery.

"By the jumpin' Yupiter!" he roared, leaping from his chair and brandishing his bony fists. "If you ban t'ink——"

"Take it easy, amigo," Malone told his pard. Then he turned to Whipple and Dennis. "Yuh think I dropped those gloves in the corral?" he asked quietly.

Whipple scratched his head. "Well, I—I dunno," he mumbled. "We found 'em thar; thet's all I know, an'——"

"We don't think yo're guilty," Dennis blurted. "You wouldn't steal no broncs, Freckles. I don't savvy this, but——"

"Under the circumstances, Malone," said Majors, clearing his throat regretfully, "I'm forced to discharge you from the Overland service. You'll have to go, too, Swenson."

Jerome and Sark grinned at each other so maddeningly that it was all Freckles could do to keep from hurling himself upon the two schemers. But, controlling himself, he went into the adjoining sleeping quarters and began gathering his few belongings together. Swen, shaking all over with rage, did likewise.

"I got a gude mind to yerk Yerome's head off," he muttered. "Where we ban go now, Freckles?"

"Quién sabe," shrugged Malone, "as the Mexicans say, who knows?"

He'd been carrying a six-gun belonging to the Overland, a specially made weapon with an extra, loaded cylinder that could be instantly changed for the empty one. Discarding this, he buckled on his own heavy Colt .45 and well-filled ammunition belt. Then, after pocketing a few knickknacks, he left the bunk



room and started out of the station with Swen.

"Just a minute, Malone," said Majors.

The Overland boss was writing something with a pencil on the back of an envelope, using his knee for a support. He folded the note and handed it to the ex-mail rider.

"An order for your back salary," he said gruffly. "Turn it over to the agent at Bosque Station and he will pay you in full. Good-by, Malone."

Freckles took the paper mechanically, muttered a "good-by," and stumbled for the door. Things looked blurred. The Overland had meant a great deal to him, and to leave it like this, under a cloud—

"Adios, carrot-top," jeered Al Jerome as a final taunt. "Yere's wish-in' yuh luck in the hoss business!"

## CHAPTER V.

FRECKLES AND SWEN, HOSS THIEVES.

THE ruddy and homely face of Swen Swenson was cracked open in an ear-to-ear grin. From time to time he snickered, his lanky sides shaking with a mirth he wasn't able to suppress. Every once in a while he would emit a great snort of laughter, slap his leg and roar out something in Swedish. Malone had been trying to explain something to him, and Swen had finally grasped what the redhead was driving at.

"Well, by Yiminy!" he cackled. "Dat shore ban gude news. What did he say ag'in, Freckles?"

It was a little after noon, and they were a good twenty miles from Painted Rock. Malone's spirits had been so low that he had ridden aimlessly and automatically. Two hours had gone by before he had happened to glance at the penciled note Majors had given him.

It was startling, to say the least!

Malone had felt like throwing his hat aloft and giving a few Indian war whoops. Instantly a great load was taken from his drooping shoulders. Everything was bright again.

"I'll read the note to yuh, Swen," he chuckled. "Just listen to what he has to say!"

Alexander Majors had written as follows:

"DEAR MALONE:

"I'm not firing you and Swen, of course, but I want Jerome to think I am. For several months I've suspected him of fraudulently disposing of Overland horses. I want you to do some undercover work and get the goods on him, if possible. I'm giving you a free hand. Good luck! Report to me at Bosque Station.

"A. MAJORS."

"Yerome, he ban not as smart as he ban t'ink!" chortled the Swede, gleefully smacking his hands together. "What we goin' do now, Freckles?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out, *compadre*," mused the spotty-faced rider as they cantered along.

They had been riding west, following the Overland Trail. In the far distance ahead of them towered the Sierras, lonely and somber. On the sky line they could see Freel and Monument Peaks, mantled with dazzling snow. It was a wilderness that few white men had penetrated.

"Swen, I've got a hunch that Jerome and Sark are in cahoots with somebody else," said Freckles after a while. "Otherwise what would they do with the brones they stole? Maybe it's one of those cutthroat gangs from California that pretend to be buying horses from the Indians."

"Dat ban make our yob harder," said the Swede.

"No, I think it will make it easier," replied the mail rider.

Where would Jerome's friends



have their hide-out? Malone knew the Washoe country as well as any one, and it seemed to him that the gang would be apt to locate somewhere in the wild and mountainous country north of the Carson. And not too far from the trail, either, if they were playing the California horse market.

Following this line of reasoning, Malone decided to take one of the many canyons that led in that direction. First, however, he would have to lay a groundwork.

"To-night, Swen," he told the astonished Swede, "we're goin' to steal some horses."

"You ban crazy, Freckles?" gasped the cook.

"I might be," Freckles chuckled, "before this is over. What do yuh say, let's eat!"

They camped for a few hours, resting their broncs beside a little stream of water that came meandering down from a ravine. Swen had brought some provisions along—grub was something that Swen never forgot—and while eating they made their plans. It was almost dark before they left the creek, and just as they were preparing to move on they saw an hombre coming from the west on mule back.

It would have been hard to guess his age; he might have been fifty or eighty. A gray beard hung nearly to his waist, and his clothes were in tatters. But he was singing gayly, and at the top of his cracked voice:

"I made my pile in Downieville,  
At Gold Hill and Coloma,  
But I lost it all at Brandy Creek  
And now I'm going homa."

Either because he was lonely or because he smelled the odor of cooked food, the old relic hailed Freckles and Swen with enthusiasm and dismounted.

"What's chances of a leetle fodder?" he asked in a shrill voice.

They were glad to share with him, and while he ate they asked questions. The old man had been at the "diggin's," so he said, and was on his way back from California.

"I kinder got offn the trail a-comin' back," he grinned, showing toothless gums. "I jist now hit 'er ag'in. Me and the mule was too durned fer north. Queer country up thet a way," he said, sweeping a bony arm toward the wilderness of the Sierras. "At one place not so fer from yere thar's a b'ilin' spring."

"Yes, I've heard of that boiling spring," Malone nodded. "See any Indians?"

"No Injuns," grunted the old man, "but thar was some white men camped thar at the hot springs. Up to no good, I'll wager. Waal, thanks fer the grub, boys. I'll be moseyin' on."

He was soon lost in the gathering darkness, but the bit of news he'd brought was already fermenting in Malone's mind. Who were those white men the old man had seen? Trappers? Not at that season. The old man might have been loco, but his story was worth looking into, at any rate.

"And now, Swen, we'll steal a few ponies," the redhead chuckled as they jogged westward along the trail. "Black Sand relay is just up ahead."

It was dark when they reached the tiny sod shanty on the trail, for the moon hadn't yet risen on the southeast horizon. There were half a dozen relay ponies in the small corral and, after the dim candlelight winked out in the station, Malone and the Swede edged forward cautiously.

"We'll take three of 'em," whispered Freckles as he gingerly opened



the gate. "Be ready with yore rope, Swen."

Working as silently as possible, they snaked out three of the Overland ponies. Then, with the purloined animals in tow, they galloped due north, away from the Overland. The moon was just coming up like a swollen yellow pumpkin as they hammered into a side canyon. So far so good.

"By Yiminy, Freckles!" cried the Swede in alarm. "This ban first time I ever steal hosses. We get in trouble, sure 'nough."

"No, Swen," the mail rider chuckled, "the idea is to get somebody else in trouble. We're headin' for the hot springs."

## CHAPTER VI.

### RECRUITS FOR NORFIELD.

NORFIELD had chosen the boiling springs as his headquarters for two reasons. It was off the beaten track, and the place was avoided by the Indians, who dreaded and feared it. The natives, naturally enough, thought it to be haunted by evil spirits. They had good reason to think so, for it would have been hard to imagine a region more weird and mysterious.

The water came from the base of a red-colored hill, shooting out of the rock in a forcible spray. The hill was barren; not even a blade of grass grew upon it, although all the neighboring hills were thickly covered with dense timber. The water, although not actually boiling, was extremely hot, and a cloud of steam always hovered over the spring. Although drinkable, the water smelled of sulphur.

Below the steamy fountain was a lake, or, rather, a marsh, for at no point was the water more than an inch deep. Giant bulrushes and

other rank vegetation grew there in profusion, and midges and mosquitoes danced over the dank-smelling quagmire in swarms. On the shore, among the big trees, the horse "traders" had established their camp.

The desperadoes were so sure of themselves that they hadn't bothered to hide their ill-gotten stock. They'd built a corral right beside the marsh.

Jack Norfield was careful enough, however, to keep a sentry posted at all times. His post was on top of the barren knoll above the spring.

"What's up, Ludolph?" Norfield demanded, just as the men were finishing their midday meal. Abe Ludolph, the lookout, was hurrying toward the camp fire.

"Thar's a couple hombres headed this a way, chief," the sentry exclaimed. "They got three extr'y hosses with 'em."

"Mebbe it's Jerome and Sark," growled Norfield. "I sort of expect 'em——"

"It ain't them," Ludolph snapped. "Reckon we'd better fog 'em jist on gen'ral principles?"

Norfield fingered the ivory handle of his Colt dragoon, his bestial face twisting. Then he spat in the direction of the fire.

"We'll wait and see who they are, bein' as thar's jist two of 'em," he decided. "You go back to yore post and keep watch, Ludolph, jist in case some more hombres might be behind 'em."

The gang wasn't kept long in suspense, for the renegades had waited only a few minutes before a pair of riders appeared on the far side of the marsh. They circled the sink deliberately, leading three ponies, a roan, a buckskin, and a black.

With thumbs thrust inside his cartridge belt, Jack Norfield swaggered up to meet them. These newcomers,



he thought with an unpleasant inward chuckle, were either very bold or very ignorant. He noticed that one was a rawboned, gangling hombre with a shock of straw-colored hair, and that the other was a freckled redhead. The former was armed with a big-caliber Sharps rifle, while the latter had a Colt .45 buckled against his thigh.

"What are you hombres a-lookin' fer?" Norfield rasped. His eyes had narrowed to shining slits; for the first time he noted the brands on the strangers' horses. All five bore the Overland burn!

"We just happened to see yore camp," drawled the freckled youngster, "so we thought we'd drop in, bein' as we're in the same business," he added significantly.

He and his companion coolly dismounted, brushing the dust and alkali from their clothing. In the meantime, the other desperadoes had gathered close around them, their faces hard and expressionless, their eyes sullen and suspicious.

"What do yuh mean by thet, fire-top?" demanded the leader of the crew. "And whar did yuh git them bronses?"

The freckled waddy laced a brown cigarette and calmly stepped over to the camp fire for a burning twig with which to light it.

"We noticed the brands on yore *remuda* when we rode by yore corral," he chuckled. "Looks like a reg'lar round-up, don't it? I wonder how long the Overland is goin' to donate bronses."

Several of the desperadoes sniggered, and Jack Norfield's knife-scarred face relaxed a little. They took the two newcomers for thieves like themselves.

"What's yore names?" snapped Norfield.

"My name is Smith—Red Smith,"

replied the freckled youth. "Leastways, yuh can call me that."

"And I suppose yore name's Smith, too?" Norfield leered at the rawboned hombre.

"My name ban Smith, too," nodded the gangling hombre. "Swede Smith. You ban want to buy our hosses? Dey ban purty gude ones, by yings!"

Norfield considered for a long moment, searching the faces of the pair with eyes that were still hard and sharp with suspicion. Then he walked over and examined the three bronses.

"I'll give yuh a hundred dollars fer the three of 'em," he offered finally. "And by the way, how did yuh git these?"

"We stole 'em from Black Sand relay last night," the red-headed youth answered truthfully enough. "It was easy, but not so easy we'd take a hundred for 'em."

After considerable haggling and arguing, Jack Norfield agreed to pay a hundred and fifty, provided the two "Smiths" join his gang.

"Yuh can do better by operatin' with us," Norfield growled. "When we git to Californy, yuh'll git yore share of the proceeds. Ever hear of an hombre named Jerome?" he asked suddenly.

"I think I've heard of him—he works for the Overland, doesn't he?" asked the redhead coolly.

"Yes—and fer me," grinned Norfield wolfishly. "Come on, now, and we'll turn these ponies into our corral with the others. We aim to head west in two-three days."

The two recruits got acquainted with the members of Norfield's gang that afternoon. Most of them remained gruff and unfriendly, not liking the idea of sharing their profits with others. Scarpin and Rolf Dale were especially sour.



At sundown the supper was cooked, it being the turn of Carlos Martinez to prepare the none-too-appetizing meal. "Swede Smith," after sniffing the food and tasting the coffee, looked much disgusted.

They were all just finishing when there was a sudden crackling of twigs in the bushes beyond the supper fire. The sound was accompanied by the metallic clicking of gun hammers.

"Who in blazes——" snarled Jack Norfield.

The gang was quick. The desperadoes rose from their haunches, reaching for holstered guns. The "Smiths," too, leaped to their feet. Unfortunately for them, they weren't quick enough. Two hombres with .45s in their hands came bursting from the brush, and they had the drop!

"Git 'em up, Malone!" snarled a thin and bitter voice. "You, too, yuh blasted Swede, or we'll blow daylight through yuh! We got yuh, and we got yuh plenty!"

It was Al Jerome of Painted Rock, and with him was his blacksmith crony.

## CHAPTER VII.

### STRANGLIN' DEATH.

**FRECKLES MALONE** and Swen Swenson were covered, and to do anything other than raise their hands would have been fatal. While Sark kept the drop, Jerome strode forward and disarmed them, hurling Swen's rifle and Malone's Colt into the brush. The agent's face was twitching with mingled triumph and rage.

"What do yuh mean, Jerome?" Jack Norfield demanded in astonishment. "Do yuh know these hombres?"

"Do we know 'em!" ground out the Painted Rock agent. "We know

'em too danged well! They're spies, Jack! How come they're yere?"

"Why, they—they came yere with some stolen bronses," Norfield cried, "an' they——"

"It was all a stall," said Jerome with an oath. "They didn't steal no horses. All they've done is bluff yuh to a fare-thee-well!"

"If thet's the case," rasped Norfield savagely, "they'll wish they'd never been born. Grab 'em men. Tie their hands behind their backs."

The two prisoners were hurled forcibly to the ground and their arms were jerked behind them and bound securely with lariat ropes. Blows and kicks were showered on them in the meantime. Rolf Dale and Scarpin manhandled the Swede, beating at his defenseless face and body with all they could put hands on. Buckeye and Norfield gave Freckles a going over, roweling his face and shoulders with their spurs and nearly staving in his ribs with their heavy boots.

Struggling would have done no good, and Freckles could only grit his teeth and bear it.

"What's this yere he's got in his pocket?" he heard Jerome grunt as fingers roughly searched through his pocket. "A note. Looks like ol' Majors's writin'."

It was indeed Major's message to Malone. Freckles groaned inwardly, berating his carelessness in not destroying it.

He watched Jerome as he read it. The treacherous agent's sallow face darkened with rage as the significance of the letter dawned upon him. Swearing, he crumpled it up.

"Majors is wise to me—I'm under suspicion," he scowled. "Firin' Malone was jist a blind to fool me and Sark. This explains why Malone and Swede are yere! It explains the



whole thing. I'm through at Painted Rock—through fer good."

"Did yuh bring me some more broncs?" Norfield asked him.

"Yes, a couple more," shrugged Jerome. "The last I'll ever be able to git thet a way. Listen, Jack, we've got to make one last raid. And we'll make it a big one!"

"What yuh got in mind?" Norfield frowned thoughtfully.

"We'll hit Bosque Station to-night!" Jerome cried, his evil eyes glistening with resolve. "Majors is makin' it his headquarters jist now, but thar won't be more than two-three others thar, and we can take 'em by surprise."

"Sounds like too much risk fer a bunch o' hosses," put in Scarpin.

"The pay-roll money's thar, yuh fool!" Jerome burst out. "The pay roll fer the whole division. Two or three thousand! What do yuh say, men? If we start now, we'll make it thar by midnight!"

It sounded good to the desperadoes, and they set about getting ready for the foray, cleaning and loading guns, and cutting out the fastest cayuses in the corral. Jack Norfield had approved of Jerome's plan.

"Well, first we'll tend to the carrot-top and the Swede," rumbled Sark, drawing his six-gun. Holding it to Freckles's temple, he thumbed back the hammer.

"Hold on, Sark!" bellowed Norfield. "Not thet way! It's too easy—too blasted quick. I want them spies to chew their tongues a little afore they cash in their chips. Carlos!" he yelled at the Mexican. "Git two ropes ready. Hangman's knots!"

"Thet's jist as quick a death, if yuh ask me." Jerome shrugged wryly. "I thought yuh wanted 'em to suffer a little."

"They will the way I hang 'em," Norfield laughed scratchily. "Come on, men. Drag 'em over to thet big tree yonder."

Breaking free was out of the question, but Swen Swenson had the satisfaction, at least, of kicking Scarpin in the pit of the stomach. The impact doubled up the vicious-faced gunman and sent him writhing and gasping to the ground.

"Take dat, by Yupiter!" roared the Swede. "And if my hands ban loose, I beat you all to a yelly!"

Nooses were dropped over the heads of both doomed victims, and Carlos Martinez shinned up the trunk of a big cottonwood. About fifteen feet from the ground a thick branch projected at right angles, and the Mexican climbed out on this with the free ends of both ropes.

"Any last message, Malone?" Jerome taunted sardonically. "Mebbe yore mother——"

Greenish flame blazed from the redhead's eyes. "Don't you soil my mother's name with yore dirty lips, Jerome!" he barked. "Yuh'll pay for this, and maybe sooner than yuh think!"

For an answer the Painted Rock agent spat at him.

Jack Norfield was giving careful orders. Grinning, he told the Mexican to take up all the slack in the rope.

"Pull it tight," he urged. "Thet's it. A little more now. Tighter, but don't jerk it. Now fix the other one."

Freckles and Swen, a couple of yards apart, began to gasp for breath as the nooses tightened gradually. Finally they were forced to stand on the very tips of their toes in order to get any air at all.

"Thet's enough," said Norfield with a guffaw, and Carlos made the



ropes fast and scrambled down from the cottonwood.

They were going to leave them like that! It meant a frightfully slow and strangling death. They couldn't stand on tiptoe forever, and the moment they relaxed they would choke horribly.

"Yuh said yuh was hoss stealers," Rolf Dale grinned mockingly, "so we're givin' yuh reg'lar hoss thief medicine."

"*'Sta bien!'*" sniggered the Mexican. "And thees way they weel have plenty of time to theenk. No?"

Scarpin had a sense of humor. He found a piece of cardboard and fastened it to the tree trunk with horseshoe nails. With a blackened stick from the fire he lettered the following:

#### HOSS THIEFS

Then, after flinging some final gibes and insults at their two victims, the gang swung aboard their brones and drummed away.

### CHAPTER VIII.

#### STRUGGLING FOR LIFE.

**FRECKLES MALONE**, tugging and wrenching at the rope that bound his hands behind his back, felt it give a little. Not much, but still enough to fan the dim spark of hope. If he had an hour's time he was sure that he'd be able to free himself.

But an hour! He knew that long before that time he would sag against the rope from sheer exhaustion. Already the calves of his legs were aching and cramped.

"Try—and hold out—Swen," he panted. "I might be able to get my hands loose."

By turning his head slightly he could see the Swede. Swen was gasp-

ing, and trembling on the tips of his boot toes. He spoke with difficulty.

"I tank—I sit down on rope—get it over," he mumbled.

"No, there's still hope, Swen," Freckles encouraged.

If there had been only an inch of slack in the rope he might have been able to kick some earth under his feet and relieve the tension. But it was impossible. He had to stand in that one straining position or be throttled.

With all the strength of his wiry muscles, with all his agility, he struggled with his bonds, heedless of the pain it caused. Already the skin had been torn from his wrists and he felt warm drops on his numbed fingers.

But the worst torture was in his legs, and his feet pained agonizingly. He couldn't hold out more than a few minutes more.

In spite of himself, his body sagged down a little. Instantly the rope tightened about his throat. It came so near cutting off his wind that he could now breathe only with difficulty. His face seemed to swell, and there was a roaring in his ears. At each throb of his heart a wave of heat seemed to rush through his head.

"Looks like—we got to die," he thought. "Jerome and Norfield—have won."

If only he could get a little more time to work at the ropes on his wrists! His strength, though, was ebbing fast.

He wanted to live, to be able to punish the murder gang for this brutality, to save the Overland pay roll. Even in his own extremity, he thought of defenseless Bosque Station and the men there. They would be killed without mercy, unless—

The sun had set, and the deepening shadows of twilight were creep-



ing over the weird marsh. It came to him that he would never see the sun's return. Somewhere a bird was singing a discordant song—a funeral dirge, it seemed to Freckles Malone.

If he had some sort of support for his feet! An idea flashed through his tired brain. He felt another surge of hope.

"Swen!" he cried, craning his neck with difficulty in order to see his Swede pard. "Swen!" There was grief and horror now in Malone's choked cry.

Swen had given up, and the whole weight of his body was pulling at the rope. His head had sagged over on one shoulder and had turned purple. The tongue was protruding between the teeth, and the wide-open eyes were glazing. The Swede's sufferings were over.

With his fingers, Malone began to work feverishly. He still wore his cartridge belt, and he began working it through the wide loops of his trousers waistband. Inch by inch he slid it along, until the buckle was behind him and within his reach. Unbuckling it, he dropped it carefully at his feet.

Then he worked the cartridge-stuffed belt under his feet and stood upon it! It gave him a good two inches of slack. Once again he could breathe, and what a relief to be able to stand flat-footed!

He was able to concentrate now on the rope that held his wrists. Knowing that he must work fast, he twisted and squirmed, pulled and jerked. Little by little he felt his bonds loosen and give away. Then, suddenly, his hands came free, the rope dropping at his feet!

A moment more and the redhead had torn the noose from his neck and was working on Swen's. When he had taken it from the Swede's throat the Overland cook slumped to the

ground, limp and still. He was dead, apparently.

"Those killers! Those low-down sidewinders!" Freckles gasped.

He rolled Swen over on his stomach and desperately tried to bring him back to life and consciousness. For a quarter of an hour he pushed at the Swede's short ribs, all seemingly to no avail.

Then, when Freckles was almost despairing, Swen took a breath of his own accord. Groaning, he stirred a little. Malone ran to the edge of the marsh, moistened his neckerchief with water, and bathed Swen's swollen face.

"Thank Heaven, Swen! Yo're not dead," gasped the mail rider. "How do yuh feel now?"

Swen's eyelids fluttered; he was breathing more easily now, and his face had taken on its usual ruddy color. In a few minutes he was able to lurch to his feet.

"I—I tank I ban all right," he wheezed. "Dat close call, by George!"

The Swede was soon feeling better, and he helped Malone catch two of the most likely-looking horses in the outlaw corral. The redhead had already recovered their guns from where they'd been thrown in the brush. By riding hard and taking every possible short cut, they had a chance of reaching Bosque Station before the renegades. At any rate, they'd get there in time to fight!

## CHAPTER IX.

### AT BOSQUE STATION.

ALEXANDER MAJORS stifled a yawn, rose from his chair and sauntered over to one of the station house's windows. He stood there, peering out into the moon-drenched night. It would soon be time to turn in. At a table under the lamp the



three employees were playing a friendly game of monte, but, as Majors didn't care for cards, he hadn't taken part. The evening stage had gone through two hours before.

"Things are pretty quiet these days, Mr. Majors," said Higgins, the agent at Bosque. "The Indians have been pretty peaceable, and I hope they stay that way."

"They'll start trouble afore winter, jist you mark my words," grumbled Banning, one of the stock tenders.

The Overland boss tugged thoughtfully at his graying beard, casting an uneasy glance toward the small iron safe that stood in a corner of the room. He was watching the corral, too, a large inclosure two hundred yards from the house. Some queer things had been going on of late, and Majors was worried.

All at once he pressed his face closer to the pane, cupping his hands around his narrowed eyes to shut off the glare of the lamp behind him.

Two riders were thundering toward the station; he saw them take shape in the gloom, become larger, closer. He turned swiftly to the other men.

"Some one's coming," he warned. "Better see to your guns."

Their card game instantly forgotten, the three Overland men jumped to their feet. "Pegleg" Johnson, one of the stock handlers, clumped to the door to drop the heavy bar in place.

"If it's Injuns——" Banning mumbled.

"Hold on, boys," snapped Majors. "Wait a minute. Open up the door, Pegleg. I recognize these fellows now. It's Freckles Malone and his Swede friend. They've probably got news for me."

Malone was well liked on the Overland, and Pegleg hastened to lift the bar again. They heard sad-

dles creak outside, and then footsteps hurrying across the gallery.

The agent and stock tenders greeted the newcomers, Freckles and Swen, boisterously with grins and back slappings. Their smiles faded, however, at the sight of Malone's grim face. It was drawn and pale under its sprinkling of sun spots, and his eyes were like hot stars.

"We're in time, are we? Evenin', Mr. Majors," he panted. "We've got a fight on our hands to-night! Turn that lamp down low. They can't be more than a few miles behind us—we saw 'em as we cut over the ridge."

"What do you mean, Freckles?" asked Majors quickly. "What has happened?"

Malone breathlessly told the amazing story of the day's happenings, and of their lucky escape from death. Swen, flushed and almost incoherent with rage, added a few details, flourishing his big and bony fists.

"Why, those low-lived cut-throats!" Higgins cried. "I never liked nor trusted that Jerome hombre, but I never thought he'd go as fer as thet!"

"Yuh say all eight of 'em is on their way yere now?" Pegleg questioned.

"They'll be here any minute!" Malone snapped. "They want the pay roll, and all of the ponies."

"Listen!" said Majors, holding up his hand. He had turned the lamp flame low, and had been peering through the window again.

They could hear the faint throb of hoofs now, but the sound soon ceased. The gang seemed to have taken up a position in the willows just below the corral. The shadows there offered good concealment.

"They've stopped there," Majors muttered. "Wait a minute—here



comes a couple of them toward the house. It looks like——"

"It's Jerome and Sark," whispered Freckles Malone. "I think I know what their scheme is, Mr. Majors. They'll knock and ask to see yuh. Then, when they're in the house, they'll get the drop and those other butchers will swarm in after 'em."

Higgins cocked his six-gun. "Not much!" he rapped out. "We'll open up right now on those two murderin' sneaks, an'——"

"I've got a better idea," said the redhead in a low voice. "Swen and I will hide in the next room. Let 'em in!"

Majors smiled grimly as he nodded approval. At a sign from him, the others holstered their guns again, and Freckles and Swen dodged into the adjoining bunk room. They'd hardly done so when a loud rapping sounded on the station door.

"Who's there?" asked Majors after a pause. He purposely scraped a chair across the floor.

"Is thet you, Majors?" replied Jerome's rasping voice. "It's me—the Painted Rock agent. There's been some trouble at my station, and I'm yere to make my report. Sark is with me."

The Overland boss drew his pistol, glanced at it, and returned it to the pocket of his coat. Striding to the door, he threw it open.

"What's wrong at Painted Rock?" he asked quietly as Al Jerome and the burly blacksmith entered the dim-lit room.

Jerome was trying hard to keep a grin from twisting his thin lips, and his eyes strayed toward the iron safe in the corner.

"Howdy, men," he nodded at Higgins, Banning and Pegleg. "Well, it's Malone ag'in, Majors," he told the Overland chief.

"What do you mean?" asked Majors sharply.

"He's stole some more hosses, and he's——"

Freckles Malone, deciding that Jerome had stalled long enough, came into the room with the quick and silent stride of a panther.

"*Buenas noches*, Señor Jerome," drawled the red-headed mail rider. "Fill yore hand—or get 'em up!"

## CHAPTER X.

### GUNS ROAR AT BOSQUE.

JEROME'S evil face went as gray as ashes, and his eyes widened with terror. To him, Freckles Malone was a ghost from the beyond. Trembling like an aspen leaf, he took a step backward. His mouth had sagged open, and he moved like a man in a dream.

"Yo're through, Jerome!" said the freckled waddy sharply. "Here's where yuh pay in full."

Right behind Malone was Swen Swenson, gripping his huge Sharps rifle like a gigantic club. The look on the Swede's face wasn't good to see!

Sark wasn't as superstitious as the agent, and he was the first to recover from the shock of surprise. With a bellow of anger he reached for his six-gun.

That snapped the tension, and Jerome, too, made a grab for his weapon. The look of horror in his eyes changed to one of deadly hatred.

"This time I'm makin' shore of yuh——" he shrilled.

*Br-rang!* The station shook from floor to ceiling at the throaty roar of a big-caliber Colt. Smoke eddied in a swirling, blue-gray whirlpool. Jerome had been quick on the draw, but not quick enough. With the



thunder of the gun had come the thudding sound of lead upon flesh.

Jerome staggered, falling to his knees with a bullet through his body. But he still kept his grip on his gun. Raising it waveringly, he made a last venomous effort to kill.

"Blast yuh, Malone, I'll—git yuh—I'll——"

His revolver crashed flame, but Malone's Colt spoke again, and quicker. Jerome's bullet smashed into the ceiling as Freckles's sped straight to the mark. The traitor rolled over on his side, gasping his last.

The Swede had been too much enraged to think of pulling the trigger of his Sharps rifle. Instead, he swung it at Sark's head, and he swung with terrific force!

The big blacksmith never knew what hit him. The mighty power of the blow smashed the butt of the rifle to splinters, smashed the hammer off, and bent the heavy barrel like so much lead tubing! With his head crushed as flat as one of Swen's flapjacks, Sark thudded to the floor.

"Yere come the others!" yelled Banning. "Look out! They——"

The Norfield gang was swarming through the doorway. They'd heard the shots and had thought, of course, that Jerome and Sark were having everything all their own way. Now they saw, too late, that the situation was rather different!

Abe Ludolph and Rolf Dale were the first through the door. At the sight of the two dead men on the floor they whirled about to escape, but the combined weight of the others surging in carried them into the room.

"All right, yuh rattlers!" Freckles shouted "Fight!"

And a fight it was to be—to the

bitter finish! Majors had whipped out his pistol and had put the table between him and the charging desperadoes. Pegleg and Higgins had their backs to the far wall, and Banning was alongside the door, his gun already flashing fire.

The gaudily dressed Norfield saw Freckles and Swen, and he gave a yell of surprise and fury. He fired point-blank at Malone, but the red-head had spraddled and dropped low, and he heard the slug go past his ear with a sound like tearing cloth.

*Br-rang! Cr-rang! Whan-ng!* Colts were spitting so fast now that the explosions came in one continuous roar that rose and fell, wave upon wave. Bullets plowed the floor, others pocked the walls, even the ceiling. Glass fell from the windows. The lamp spluttered dimly in the powder fog.

Rolf Dale was killed almost instantly, nailed through the chest by the quick-shooting Higgins.

The desperado called Buckeye, stopping slugs from both Malone and Banning, was the next to drop. Scarpin, too, was hit, but he careened into the wall, leaned against it, and kept shooting.

Freckles Malone had been in many a gun fight, but never in as bitter a struggle as this. The range was so close that it was almost a case of clapping gun muzzles against bodies and pulling triggers. Scarpin's shirt was on fire from burning powder; his mouth was open, and he was screaming, but his yells of pain were unheard amid the bedlam of thundering guns.

Swen was still swinging his bent Sharps. He caught Abe Ludolph squarely on the shoulder with it, and Malone heard the snapping of bones. Again Swen struck, just as Ludolph's



last shot squalled wild, and the desperado got his taste of eternity.

Banning went down, a dark hole between his eyes, and his slayer was Jack Norfield. Malone closed in with him, dropping the hammer of his steaming Colt as the barrel came up in line with the bandit leader's heart.

But his gun was empty. With the empty Colt still in his hand, he struck with all his power at Norfield's evil face. And Norfield dropped like a poleaxed steer.

Lurching dizzily on his feet, Malone whirled around and found that the fight was ended. Carlos Martinez's swarthy features were frozen in a mask of death; he lay on the floor, staring unseeingly at the ceiling. And Scarpin's gun had been silenced forever. It was over, and once again the Overland had won through!

In the gray of the morning, Majors, Higgins, Pegleg and Freckles Malone and his Swede pard stood under one of the big Bosque cottonwoods, staring up at something swinging there at the end of a rope.

It was the lifeless body of Jack Norfield. The early breeze, whipping down from the Sierras, turned it slowly round and round. The desperado leader had paid for his crimes in full. His arms were bound; his head lay on his shoulder.

There had been nothing torturing about his death. He'd been jerked cleanly from the back of a bronc, and his neck had been broken. He'd been spared the suffering he'd caused Swen and Freckles Malone. The desperado leader had pleaded and groveled abjectly for his life, for all that. At the last he'd shown his cheap cowardice.

"We didn't hang him on the tip of his toes," said Swen Swenson, "but this ban yust as gude."

"And it's a lot more permanent," Malone put in grimly.

"I'm sorry we had to hang him, but it's the only way," said Majors gravely. "There's no other law in this country, and we must take it into our own hands."

Making certain that Norfield was quite dead, Higgins and Pegleg cut him down and placed him under a big tarpaulin with his slain companions.

While they were engaged at this, Swen called their attention to something that had just appeared on the eastern sky line. It was a wagon and bull team creeping slowly along the Overland trail.

"Some more emigrants," murmured Alexander Majors. "Gold rushers, California bound. They're a little late for the bandit round-up we've just had here."

For a few minutes Freckles stood watching the tedious approach of the trail outfit. Then his eyes narrowed in a squint and he began to chuckle.

"Why, it's the folks we helped out at Poison Pool, Swen!" he cried. "The grub and water we took 'em must have helped. They've made it through all right!"

"Dat ban gude, by Yupiter!" roared the gangling Swede. "You know what I goin' do? I'm goin' in an' cook big batch of flapjacks. A great big batch, by Yiminy! And these folks can help us eat 'em! Dat ban gude idea, Mr. Majors?"

The Overland boss rubbed his bullet-nicked left arm and smiled in his beard.

"A splendid idea indeed, Mr. Swenson," he said.



# RIVAL CHIEFS' DUEL

Two Cheyenne Indians, Chief Dull Knife and Chief Two Moons, had been rivals for some time. The two had led the Cheyenne raid through Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota in 1878, and Two Moons was anxious to succeed Dull Knife. Many of the tribe wanted him, as he was young and a great fighter. But Dull Knife had been war chief for many years and did not intend to let himself be ousted by a younger warrior.

One night, Sheriff Canton and a posse were trailing a band of Cheyennes, when they discovered three ponies picketed near Clear Creek, below a rocky ravine.

They hunted around and found a lone Indian seated in the sagebrush, his head bent between his knees and covered with his blanket.

Sheriff Canton pulled the blanket aside and saw that it was Dull Knife. His face and head were smeared with blood, which had soaked through the blanket, and he was very weak.

When asked what the trouble was and who had wounded him, he pointed to the ravine and muttered: "Heap fight."

The sheriff with some of his posse went to the bottom of the ravine. There they found Two Moons, quite unconscious from loss of blood. Cold water from the creek was dashed over his head and face, and he revived.

After much questioning, he told the story. The two chiefs had camped in the ravine for the night, and had managed to secure a sup-

ply of fire water from somewhere. Over their drinks, they had talked about their superior qualities. The more they drank, the fiercer became the argument. At last, they decided to settle the matter by fighting a duel.

They fought with buffalo-skinning knives, and both of them were terribly cut and slashed. The rocks and boulders around were splashed with blood, which was dripping from their wounds.

The post surgeon, Doctor Summars, was sent for, and he ordered an ambulance to take the wounded chiefs to the post hospital.

A band of Cheyennes had gathered silently in the ravine, and they would not allow any one to touch Two Moons, and when they left for the Rosebud Reservation, two days later, they took him with them.

Doctor Summars took Dull Knife to the hospital. He did not believe that the man could live, but he made every effort to save him.

Dull Knife's squaw was left alone in the camp, with two saddle ponies and a pack horse. When Doctor Summars called early one morning to see his patient, he was amazed to learn that Dull Knife had left.

His squaw had taken his pony to the gate of the hospital in the night, had slipped in unseen, helped him down the stairs and got him on to his pony. They struck the Rosebud trail and rode for home.

Contrary to all expectations, the two chiefs recovered and lived for years after their bitter fight.



# Slim Harkness Saves



1. Old Man Rawlins sent Slim Harkness into Two Forks to draw some money from the bank and bring it back to Circle R. Rawlins wanted the cash to pay for some cattle he was buying. Slim left the bank with the dinero in a belt under his shirt.



2. He did not linger long in Two Forks, but boarded his speedy bronc, Blacky, and lit a shuck for home. He didn't expect trouble, but he rode with his hand close to his gun as the trail dipped down into brush-choked Coyote Canyon.



3. Halfway through the canyon, a masked man leaped from the brush beside the trail. He held a six-gun in his hand, aimed straight at Slim. "Git 'em up!" he yelled. Slim started to draw. He didn't see the other man casting a rope at him.



4. Slim's draw was blindingly fast, but just as his thumb slipped from the big hammer, the loop snapped down around his shoulders. The next instant, he was yanked backward from Blacky's saddle. His bullet sailed harmlessly skyward.



# The Dinero



5. Slim landed hard on the trail, his head striking a boulder. Bright lights flashed before his eyes, then blackness swallowed him. The holdup men came running up. Kneeling beside him, they expertly bound him, hand and foot.



6. They made no attempt to steal the money belt. Apparently they did not know about it. Instead, they loaded him across his own saddle and lashed him there securely. Then they mounted their own broncs and started riding away from there.

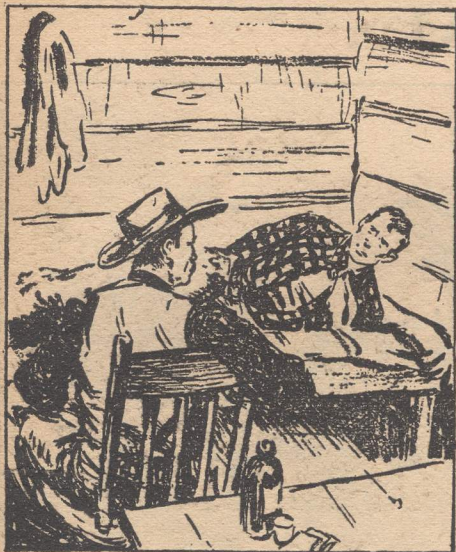


7. After several hours of hard riding through the bad lands, Slim's captors at last reached an isolated cabin, far back in the foothills. A man was waiting for them there—Two-shot Caldwell who Slim believed was his father.



8. Slim had recovered consciousness when he was carried into the shack. But he was still bound and helpless as Two-shot knelt beside him and unbuckled the money belt. With Caldwell was the sad-faced man who seemed to go everywhere with the bandit.





9. Slim was thrown on a bunk. Caldwell sat down near him, told him his scheme. He was going to hold Slim prisoner so that Dan Rawlins would think that Slim had stolen the money. Outlawed, Slim would have to stick with Two-shot.



10. Later that same night, the mysterious sad-faced hombre, who had befriended Slim several times before, knelt outside the cabin. Slowly and silently he started removing the mud chinking between the logs back of the bunk Slim was lying on.



11. It was ticklish work. If Caldwell or the other men heard him, all would be lost. But finally the mysterious, gray-haired hombre had made a hole large enough for him to put his hand through and cut Slim's wrist bonds.



12. Slim was puzzled. He did not know why the sad-faced hombre, apparently a member of Two-shot's gang, should help him. But he did not betray his feelings as the mysterious hombre entered the shack and dropped a gun on Slim's bunk.





13. Caldwell and the two men who had captured Slim were seated at the center table playing poker. They thought Slim was helpless, and did not watch him closely. However, the young waddy suddenly sat up, gun in hand, covering them all.



14. As they whirled to face him, one of Two-shot's men ripped loose a six-gun. Slim fired, and the man dropped. The other two raised their hands. The unarmed, sad-faced man stood motionless in one corner. Two-shot cursed luridly.



15. Slim climbed from the bunk and stepped toward the table. He kept Caldwell and the other hombre covered as he picked up the money belt. And then Two-shot suddenly kicked the table, tipping it over, knocking the lamp to the floor.



16. Slim dashed for the door. He couldn't fight two men in a darkened cabin. And he had to save the dinero. He found Blacky outside, mounted bareback, and galloped off. Guns roared from the cabin, but the bullets went wild. Slim was free.

Next Week: "Slim Harkness Snags An Outlaw."



# Buckaroo Trails A Sheriff

By Walker  
Tompkins

Author of  
"Death Corrals The Buckaroo,"  
etc.



## CHAPTER I.

### SUSPICIOUS SADDLE TRAMP.

AS they rode through the wild mountain trail deep in the Big Bend waste lands, Webb Sterling would have bet his last peseta that "Pecos" Klint was intending to murder him.

Either that, or the filthy-garbed saddle bum was biding his time to stage a hold-up and relieve Sterling of his big coal-black mustang, Skeeter.

"Otherwise, why's he been so danged anxious to ride with me ever

since I met up with him at Lava Spring this mornin'?" pondered the red-headed cowboy as the two men rode stirrup to stirrup along the rocky trail. "I shore got tuh keep my eyes peeled with this scummy jigger, an' that's a fact."

Sterling was headed for the Rio Grande, aiming on crossing the river into old Mexico where he would be safe from gringo law. Although innocent of the murder of which he was accused, he had a thousand-dollar reward on his scalp.



Glancing sidewise at Pecos Klint, the waddy could not restrain a shudder of distaste.

The saddle tramp had a gray, matted beard that reminded Webb of a saloon swamper's mop. His tanned face was livid with old bullet and knife scars, and he wore his twin .45s thonged down to his thighs.

Dressed in a red-checked shirt

his spurs were caked with horsehair and dried crimson, and the crowbait he rode was plainly a victim of intense cruelty. The bronc hadn't even been fed enough.

"So yore moniker is jest plain Lone Star Buckaroo, hey?" leered Klint, in the nasty tone he had used ever since he had met the cowboy back at Lava Spring, where Sterling had halted to water his horse and fill his canteen. "An' yo're follerin' the lonesomest trail in southwest Texas. That, an' you not tellin'



that had never been laundered in the months Klint had worn it, the hombre's outfit was completed with patched Levis tucked into warped, high-heeled boots. The rowels of

yore name, makes me wonder if yuh ain't a owl-hooter, sen."

Sterling's mouth compressed angrily. For months now, since he had hit the outlaw trail in order to



shield his twin brother from a killing committed in self-defense back in Lonesome town, Webb Sterling had been known only as the "Lone Star Buckaroo."

No other man had questioned that nickname, for nicknames were common in the West. That Pecos Klint, obviously a long-rider himself, should question the name made Sterling's blood boil.

"You told me yuh was ridin' my way, an' hitched yoreself ontuh me this mornin'," returned the cowboy tartly. "I ain't asked you no questions, an' I ain't honin' tuh answer any."

Klint chuckled deep in his beard and shoved back his battered old Stetson to point down the trail. The sun had already set, throwing the Ocotillo Mountains into blue shadow.

"We're comin' tuh a ledge whar we'll have tuh ride single file, son," said the saddle tramp. "Rattle yore black's hocks up ahaid thar, will yuh? This fuzztail o' mine's nervous on narrow trails, but he'll foller yore bronc."

Buckaroo stiffened in his saddle. He had spotted Klint for a horse thief or a murderer from the outset, when Klint had insisted on being his trail partner to the Rio Grande.

Now, he saw an obvious attempt to get behind Sterling's back, where a single swift bullet would do its work. Klint needed a fine stock saddle and a sturdy bronc such as Sterling owned.

"You're goin' ahead o' me, Klint," retorted the ranny in a cold voice, as his right hand dropped to the red pipestone butt of his Colt .45, "even if yuh have tuh git down an' lead yore cayuse. Savvy?"

For a moment, hatred smoldered in Klint's gray, bloodshot eyes. Then he shrugged and spurred his

bronc forward along the narrow trail overlooking a steep ravine.

Hand still clinging to Colt butt, Webb Sterling spurred his Skeeter horse along the trail behind Klint. Every nerve and muscle was braced for a show-down, for when they got off the trail ledge where Klint could wheel his horse, Sterling expected the saddle bum to take advantage of the dusk and start a gun fight.

But if such a plan was in the saddle bum's mind, fate moved unexpectedly to prevent any treacherous gun play.

As the two horsemen rounded the ledge, they came in full view of a two-story log cabin, across the front of which in rustic letters was the sign:

SIXPRONG LODGE.  
BONY AGNEW, Prop.

Lamplight glowed a friendly welcome from windows set in the heavy cedar logs. The wide front door was open, illuminating well-stocked shelves of a general store inside.

"Waal! A tradin' post an' hotel!" cackled Pecos Klint, his tense muscles relaxing. "Hyar's whar we kin bed down fer the night without havin' tuh spread our soogans on a mattress o' pine needles."

The cowboy breathed a silent sigh of relief. He knew that Klint was primed for a show-down. Whether it was his horse or his life that the saddle bum wanted, he did not know. Possibly Klint had seen his description on a "wanted" poster and was tailing him to collect the reward when they got close enough to the law for him to make a capture.

"Howdy, gents!" came a genial call from the dusk-shadowed porch of the Sixprong Lodge. "Yo're jest in time fer supper."

The two trail-weary hombres dis-



mounted and looped reins over rustic hitch bars out in front of Agnew's place. Striding up to meet them in the blue twilight came a scrawny human skeleton with a bald head that was ivory-colored above the sun tan of his face.

"I'm Bony Agnew," cackled the toothless old trading-post proprietor, extending a clawlike hand to Klint and Sterling in turn. "If yo're intendin' tuh roost at my hotel fer the night, yuh'll find a barn around behind, with plenty o' hay an' grain fer yore nags. Yuh hone tuh have a single room with a double bed?"

Sterling grimaced.

"Separate rooms, please. I'm—I'm Buckaroo, an' this gent is named Pecos Klint. We jest happened tuh meet up with each other on the trail this mornin'."

An hour later, the two had groomed and grained their horses and had filled their own stomachs with a steaming meal prepared by the old trader.

Taking precaution against any possible attempt at a horse robbery during the night, Sterling had borrowed a halter chain and padlock from Bony Agnew, and locked Skeeter to the stall.

"Reckon I'll be turnin' in, Mr. Agnew," remarked the Lone Star Buckaroo, after he had finished eating. "Rid a long trail tuh-day, an' I'm plenty tired."

Agnew, busy stoking his corncob pipe with shaved plug, beamed in fatherly appreciation of the cowboy, as he waved upstairs.

"Yore room is No. 4, facin' the front, yuh red-headed rannihan!" chuckled the trader. "Good blankets an' straw tick, so I know yuh'll rest well."

Agnew's eyes followed Sterling as he walked up the stairway to the hotel portion of the trading-post

lodge. The Texan was over six feet in height, with metallic blue eyes and flaming red hair that held a slight wave.

His marble-streaked Stetson was pinned up in front with a Comanche arrowhead trinket. The black shirt had white crescent pockets and Mexican peso coins for buttons, the sleeves tucked into brass-studded leather cuffs.

Chocolate-brown chaps had nickel tie conchas, and the kangaroo boots were decorated with scarlet Lone Star emblems, which matched the pipestone butts of the twin Colt .45 six-guns he wore at either hip.

Striking a match inside the narrow corridor upstairs, Webb Sterling located a door with the numeral "4" carved into the cedar slabs. Entering, he unbuckled his gun harness and lighted a kerosene lamp.

Undressing and climbing into bed, the Lone Star Buckaroo was fast asleep in a few moments, sleeping the dreamless repose enjoyed by healthy men who are weary from physical toil.

A lantern-bright, oval moon lifting above the jagged pines to the east of Sixprong Lodge awakened Sterling an hour later, the silvery bar of light falling through his open window and striking him full in the face.

In the act of getting up to draw down the shade, the cowboy's attention was attracted by the harsh tones of Pecos Klint's voice, in the storeroom downstairs.

"Hyar's a twenty-dollar gold piece fer my night's lodgin', Agnew. If yuh'll give me my change now, I reckon I'll turn in."

Sterling could hear the old man thumping his way behind the counter, immediately below the bedroom floor.

"Have tuh open my safe tuh git



that much change, Klint. Won't take but a second."

Alarm widened the cowboy's eyes. The trusting old trader was opening his safe, in the presence of a scurvy saddle bum like Pecos Klint!

Sliding out of bed, Sterling found a large knot hole in the floor planks near his bed, with lamplight streaming up from the store below. On hands and knees, he peered down.

What he saw brought a gasp of alarm to his lips.

Bald-headed old Agnew was opening the black steel door of an ancient safe, behind the counter. And leaning over that counter, behind Agnew's back, Pecos Klint was lifting a six-gun like a club over the proprietor's head!

Before Sterling could cry out a warning to the old storekeeper in the room below, he saw Klint's six-gun fall in a short arc that ended suddenly against Agnew's bald skull.

With a grunt of pain, the trader slumped unconscious at the foot of his opened safe. Chuckling with triumph, Pecos Klint vaulted over the low counter and began rummaging in the safe.

## CHAPTER II.

### NIGHT VISITOR.

**H**AULING on his chaps and strapping cartridge belts about his waist, the Lone Star Buckaroo slid on bare, noiseless feet to his door, tripped the latch, and glided out into the darkness of the outer corridor.

Both six-guns palmed, Sterling thumbed back the knurled hammers as he crept silently toward the head of the stairway which led down into Agnew's store.

"The dirty sidewinder!" panted the waddy to himself, as he reached the stair top. "Conkin' a innocent

old hombre like that an' robbin' him o' his hard-earned dinero! I had Klint ticketed fer a scurvy bum, but not that low!"

Creeping halfway down the stairs, the Lone Star Buckaroo caught a full view of the thief, on his knees in front of the old man's safe.

A grin of satisfaction was parting Klint's bar-mop beard, as he hauled out a green tin box, plainly filled with cash.

Getting to his feet, Klint stepped callously on old man Agnew's limp form underfoot and prepared to open the cash box.

"Hands up, Klint! I've caught yuh with the goods!"

A bestial snarl blew from Klint's beard as Sterling's icy voice rang out in the tense silence of the frontier trading post.

Glancing up swiftly, the crouching outlaw caught sight of the Lone Star Buckaroo poised on the stairs, across the room. Jutting from the cowboy's rope-calloused hands were a pair of long-barreled Colt .45s.

"Drop that cash box an' lift yore dewclaws, Klint!" repeated Sterling, taking another step downward. "It'd give me a lot o' pleasure tuh send a slug through yore briskit!"

Snarling an oath of defiance, the criminal hugged the green metal box to his chest and let his right hand fly with blurring speed to one triggerless Colt at his hip.

With incredible speed, Klint got the gun out of leather. But before he could tilt the weapon for a shot at the Texas cowprod, Sterling's guns blazed together.

*Brrrang! Brrrang!* Smashing lead knocked Pecos Klint flat on his back, behind the counter.

His fall was cushioned by Agnew's sprawled-out figure, and as if by a miracle, Pecos was not killed.

Sterling strode grimly down the



stairs, unable to see Klint because of the intervening counter. He did not see the bearded crook lifting his gun into aim at the single kerosene lamp which hung from a hook on the ceiling beam.

*Brram!* The shot was echoed by a jangle of flying glass and smashed tin, and Sixprong Lodge was plunged into instant darkness.

Leaping back against the wall, Webb Sterling batted his eyes to accustom them to the faint moonlight which poured in through the windows.

He heard Klint coughing, over behind the counter. Swishing noises told of the outlaw's crawling on hands and knees behind the counter, making for the opposite wall.

"Stop, Klint, or I'll drill yuh ag'in!"

A gasping, taunting laugh was his answer, and a second later the cowboy caught sight of a lunging figure crossing the room.

*Crash!* Glass jangled, as Pecos Klint, seemingly unharmed by the cowboy's bullets, did a running dive through a pane of window glass.

With an angry cry, Webb Sterling leaped across the room and flung open the door. He was in time to see Pecos Klint vanish around the corner, sprinting like a ghost.

Leaping outside, the cowboy ran the full length of the log trading post, guns in hand, smoke still trailing from the muzzles.

Skidding around the corner, he raised both six-guns and triggered a hot burst of lead at the outlaw's zig-zagging figure.

"Klint's headin' fer the barn tuh git a hoss!" grated the cowboy. "Reckon I'll discourage that idea!"

With lead singing like bees around his ears, Pecos Klint realized the impossibility of reaching the

barn and saddling his horse for a get-away.

Breathing like a steam engine, the saddle tramp turned at right angles and vanished into the blackness of the pine forest.

"Reckon he's bad wounded," muttered Sterling, holstering his six-guns. "I know danged well my slugs hit him. An' anyway, I couldn't trail him through the woods at night."

Returning to the lodge, Sterling found a lamp and lighted it. Then he carried the lamp over to the counter, picked up a whisky bottle from a shelf, and made his way to where Bony Agnew lay, groaning feebly.

Lifting the old man and cradling his head in his lap, Sterling forced the neck of the whisky bottle between the proprietor's lips and forced the fiery drink down Agnew's throat.

Within a few minutes, the old man had sputtered his way back to consciousness, to find Webb Sterling bandaging the ugly welt behind his head.

"What — happened — Buckaroo?" gasped the old man, as the cowboy helped him to a chair behind the counter.

Briefly, the cowboy explained what he had seen. As he finished telling how Agnew had escaped, the waddy's eyes fell on the green cash box lying on the floor. Two bullet holes had punctured the metal top of the box.

"Oh-oh!" cried the Lone Star Buckaroo, getting the box and handing it to Agnew. "He didn't make a git-away with yore cash, like he figgered. An' look—thar's my two slugs, embedded in this hyar bundle o' greenbacks! They saved the danged thief's life tuh-night. I aimed tuh drill his heart, when I



seen him drawin' down on me, but he was huggin' this box o' cash agin' his chest!"

Bony Agnew inspected the bullet-drilled bundle of money inside the box and wagged his bandaged head in appreciation.

"I'm too trustin' tuh be livin' 'way out hyar in the wilds, I reckon!" he said, with an attempt at a grin. "I got you tuh thank fer savin' my life tuh-night, I reckon. Leastwise, it's a cinch yuh saved my life's earnin's fer me."

The red-headed waddy grinned, and watched the old trader put his bullet-drilled cash box back into the safe, close the vault door, and twirl the combination dial.

"If ever I kin do a favor for you, son, don't hesitate tuh call on me!" panted the old man, his eyes bright with gratitude. "Yuh risked yore life tuh-night, doin' what yuh done!"

Waving off the old man's thanks, the Lone Star Buckaroo made his way back upstairs to his interrupted sleep. But before he could remove his gun belts a second time, a thudding of hoofbeats rang out on the gravel-strewn trail outside.

"Did that Klint skunk git a hoss after all?" cried the waddy. "I didn't figger he'd stop runnin' short o' sunrise."

Leaping to his open window, guns in hand, Sterling looked out.

But it was not Pecos Klint on the horse outside. Instead, it was a towering stranger in a black sombrero. Lamplight coming out of Agnew's windows illuminated a nickel-plated star on the hombre's vest front, as he swung to the ground outside and trailed his spurs up the gravel walk.

A lawman! Webb Sterling's veins ran cold. For an outlaw on the

dodge, to be anywhere close to a star-toter meant peril.

The door opened downstairs, and Webb Sterling heard Agnew's cracked voice raised in his usual cordial welcome to strangers.

"Howdy, feller! Yuh want lodgin' fer the night, I reckon."

Sterling heard the lawman's high-heeled boots clumping across the plank floor downstairs, to pause in front of Agnew's chair.

"Yeah, reckon I do. But d'yuh mind tellin' me whether yuh got a lodger hyar tuh-night who stands six feet without his Stetson an' has flamin'-red hair? He's an outlaw named Webb Sterlin', an' I been folle-lerin' his trail. It turned in hyar!"

### CHAPTER III.

#### AGNEW'S BOTTLE.

TIME seemed to stand still for Webb Sterling, as he flattened himself against the crude log walls of the bedroom and strained his eardrums to pick up Agnew's words.

A red-headed outlaw, six feet tall!

It was impossible that the old codger downstairs would not get wise to the fact that his recent benefactor was Webb Sterling, the wanted outlaw.

"Well, speak up, feller!" boomed the lawman, his voice strained with weariness and impatience. "Is a red-headed stranger stayin' hyar tuh-night?"

Sterling's pores oozed sweat as he waited, heart pounding, muscles tense. His only bet would be to grab up his boots and get out the bedroom window before that burly lawman came upstairs.

"Uh—a red-headed crook, yuh say? Name of Webb Sterlin'?" Agnew's voice was high-pitched with nervous fear. "Why—uh—



yes, a hombre answerin' tuh that description come hyar tuh-night, sheriff. He shore did. But—he's gone. Yep! He knocked me out with his gun, sheriff, an' when I come to—jest a few minutes afore you rid up—this Webb Sterlin' hombre had vamosed. Took all the cash out o' my till an' some .45 ca'tridges—an' left! His hoss was tied out in front!"

The Lone Star Buckaroo wilted. Relief ballooned his cheeks. Old man Agnew had lied to save him from the clutches of the law! With rare fast thinking for a man whose skull had lately been struck with a gun butt, Agnew had turned his bandaged head into a trump card in Sterling's behalf!

"Robbed yuh, huh?" came the sheriff's voice, drenched with disappointment. "The mangy skunk! I been trailin' him ever since I got word he was headin' this direction. How long ago did he bat yore noggin? How much head start's he got on me?"

Sterling could visualize old Agnew glancing at the clock.

"Mighty nigh two hour ago, sheriff. I was out fer eighty minutes by the clock, by jumpin' juniper! Jest peel back this bandage an' look at the goose egg I got on my cranium hyar!"

Stooping to peer through a crack in the bedroom floor, Webb Sterling saw the big-chested sheriff examining the old man's battered head. Then the lawman straightened up, thrust out a hand.

"My name's Tom Lane," he introduced himself. "I'm sheriff o' Ocotillo County." His next words filled Sterling with a new dread: "Seein's as how my hoss is wore out, an' me, too, I won't trail Sterlin' any more tuh-night. Especially with him havin' a two-hour head

start on me. Yuh got a bedroom upstairs?"

Sterling, holding his breath, waited for old Agnew to lie further and state that his lodge was full up. But apparently the old man was afraid to run that bluff.

"Yep, Room No. 6, at the head o' the stairs, sheriff. I—I'll scrape yuh up some grub, if yuh ain't et, while you take yore hoss out tuh the stable. Fork down all o' that oat hay yuh wants—it goes with the price o' yore lodgin'!"

Sterling clenched his fists in an agony of suspense, as he heard Sheriff Tom Lane head back outside and start leading his lather-drenched horse out to the stable.

"Danged funny, if Agnew was as anxious tuh help me as he seemed tuh be, that he wouldn't 'a' taken out that hoss hisself!" groaned the cowboy. "As it is, the sheriff'll spot my black mustang, an' know danged well Agnew's lyin'. I got tuh light a shuck out o' here afore he gits back!"

With frantic haste, the waddy began dressing. Downstairs, he could hear old Agnew busy with pots and pans, preparing a belated meal for the sheriff of Ocotillo County.

Fully dressed and with guns loosened in their holsters, Webb Sterling made his way out into the corridor.

Then he ducked back into his bedroom, as he heard the front door open and Tom Lane's booming voice fill the room downstairs.

"Reckon I'll eat afore I go out tuh the barn an' bed down my hoss, if yuh don't mind," the lawman said. "I'm plumb tuckered out—been ridin' since sun-up."

Sterling's jaw muscles knotted with indecision; the situation was even more critical now than before.

The sheriff would not discover his distinctive black mustang out in the



barn, for a few more minutes. Whenever Lane did see the horse, he undoubtedly would remember the reward posters saying that Sterling's horse was branded with a Bar Hatchet iron, on the neck below the mane on the left side.

On the other hand, the few moment's respite were in vain, for Sterling could not leave the hotel now by the main stairway, without being seen by the waiting sheriff downstairs. And although Sheriff Tom Lane of Ocotillo County had never laid eyes on him before, Sterling knew that at one glimpse of his telltale red hair, Lane would go for his guns.

"Got tuh risk a broken laig an' try the window!" panted the outlaw to himself. "It's a twelve-foot drop, so I ought tuh make it. It's a cinch I got tuh rattle my hocks out o' here while the sheriff's busy eatin', or I won't git Skeeter tuh make my git-away on!"

Straddling one leg over the sill, Sterling froze into a statue as he heard footsteps coming up the stairs. Was the sheriff coming up to investigate, after all?"

Realizing that he could not wriggle his way through the narrow window in time, should the lawman open his door for a look-see, Sterling stepped back inside and flattened himself against the wall, one six-gun cocked and ready.

"I won't kill a sheriff, even in self-defense!" thought the waddy. "I'd give myself up an' hang fer the killin'. I was supposed tuh have done, rather than croak a tin-badger who's jest doin' his duty!"

The footsteps came straight down the hall, halted outside his door. In the moonlight which flooded the room, Sterling saw the door swinging open.

He braced himself, his shoulder

blades to the wall, invisible in the darkness.

"I'll make up yore bed fer yuh, sheriff," came the loud voice of Bony Agnew, outside the cowboy's door. "You jest make yoreself comfortable down thar, until the coffee biles."

The sheriff's tired "O. K." drifted up the stairway.

A second later, Bony Agnew's scrawny neck and bandaged head appeared inside the doorway.

"Pssst! Buckaroo! I've come tuh help yuh!"

Sterling hesitated, wondering whether to trust the old man. But after all, Agnew had had plenty of chance to betray him to the waiting lawman downstairs.

Slipping forward across the room, the Lone Star Buckaroo halted in front of the bent old trader. He felt Agnew slip something cold and shiny into his hand. It was a small bottle.

"I'm figurin' that yo're Webb Sterlin', young feller!" whispered the trader, giving the waddy no chance to speak. "If yuh are Sterlin', then yuh ain't no real outlaw, else yuh'd have croaked me an' swiped my dinero when yuh had the chance tuh-night."

Sterling shook the old man's hand, his throat tight with emotions that welled in his heart.

"If yuh ain't Webb Sterlin', yo're O. K. But if yuh are, use this stuff, an' then get a good night's rest. Don't be foolish an' try tuh make a git-away tuh-night. Yuh'd just git us both in trouble, because that Tom Lane's a cagy customer."

Before Sterling could speak, the old man had slipped out of the room and closed the door. The waddy could hear him noisily making a bed in a room farther down the hall, for



the use of the exhausted sheriff of Ocotillo County.

"I wonder what he meant?" muttered Sterling. "It's a cinch I dassn't stay hyar all night, an' be seen by the sheriff come mornin'. He'd recognize me by my red hair in an instant."

Striking a match with a thumb-nail, the Texas waddy stared at the mysterious bottle Agnew had thrust in his palm. And then a wide grin of understanding dawned on him, as he read the label:

**BLACK HAIR DYE.** Unexcelled for coloring beards, hair, mustaches, et cetera. Why be troubled with gray hair? This dye will defy detection. Easily washed out if desired. Positively will not harm hair roots or scalp.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### STERLING MEETS THE LAW.

A CHEERY call to breakfast aroused Sheriff Tom Lane of Ocotillo County, after a fine night's sleep in Agnew's spacious bedroom in Sixprong Lodge.

The sheriff roused himself, doused his face with ice water contained in a cracked pitcher on the crude dresser, and went about the job of dressing.

Peering outside, Lane was thrilled by the unending panorama of purple mountains, deep-blue valleys, and verdant pine forest which clothed the rugged Big Bend bad lands.

Clapping on his black sombrero, Sheriff Tom Lane made his way downstairs.

Seated at a split-pole table in Agnew's dining room was a good-looking young cow-puncher clad in black shirt, batwing chaps and with a red bandanna knotted loosely about his throat.

A shock of jet-black, wavy hair set off the waddy's clean-cut fea-

tures, and his metallic blue eyes met the sheriff's in genial, unwavering greeting.

"Howdy, sheriff!" greeted Bony Agnew, emerging from the kitchen with a steaming stack of flapjacks. "Tom Lane, I want yuh tuh meet a young friend o' mine. Hombre I call Buckaroo."

Buckaroo got to his feet, white teeth flashing in a smile of greeting as he extended a rope-horny palm to clasp the lawman's.

"Right glad tuh meet yuh, sheriff."

"An' the same tuh you, son. Live around hyar?"

The black-haired waddy was busy with flapjacks and maple sirup, so that the sheriff did not notice anything unusual about the cowboy's not glancing up at his question.

"Nope. Just driftin'. Honin' tuh rent my lass' rope. Was headin' fer the Rio Grande this mornin'."

The sheriff seated himself before a mountain of flapjacks, drank a swig of black coffee unsweetened or creamed, and then began inserting thick slabs of sowbelly between each pancake.

"Yuh ain't seen a red-headed jasper ridin' around these parts, have yuh?" asked the lawman casually.

Webb Sterling felt the black-dyed hairs on his neck nape prickle with apprehension.

Badly in need of rest for himself as well as Skeeter, he had taken Agnew's advice, disguised his distinctive red hair, and slept the rest of the night with the soundness of a baby.

He had hoped to breakfast and be on his way before the sheriff arose; but Tom Lane had reason to be an early riser also.

"A red-headed rannihan, huh?" mused the cowboy. "Reckon I've



seen lots of 'em, sheriff. What kind of a hoss did he ride?"

Lane swallowed a heavy portion of flapjacks, then chewed out through a second batch of bacon:

"Don't rightly know, son. Hard tellin'. Mebbe any kind of a bronc. All I know is that a saloon keeper over in Indianola tipped me off that a big red-headed jasper, about yore build, was ridin' south along this trail. Ten chances tuh one, this saloon keeper said, it was Webb Sterlin', the outlaw."

Buckaroo's eyebrows—also dyed a raven hue—arched.

"Webb Sterlin'? I've heard o' him. Kilt a no-account card sharp name o' Stand-pat Prolo over in Lonesome town, didn't he?"

Lane nodded. The cowboy voiced his questions with utmost casualness, for he wanted to pump the sheriff and see just how much information the Texas Rangers and other law-enforcement bodies knew about him.

"That's the hombre, son," returned Tom Lane, gulping down more coffee. "Accordin' to a letter I got a couple months back from Sheriff Hurley Bell o' Lonesome, he said as how this Prolo skunk needed killin'. But that wa'n't no excuse fer Sterlin' tuh take the law intuh his own hands the way he done."

Sterling masked his eyes behind his coffee-cup rim. In mind's eye, he relived the lurid night at the Val Verde Saloon when his brother "Chuck" had shot down "Stand-pat" Prolo, a clipped heartbeat before Prolo would have murdered him with a derringer.

The same instant Chuck's bullet had drilled Prolo under the top of the poker table, Webb Sterling's gun had smashed out the saloon light.

The two had made their get-away

in the night, fleeing for Chuck's Bar Hatchet spread on the Rio Grande. But when Sheriff Bell and his posse got to the Bar Hatchet, they found Chuck there with his wife and infant son, while Webb Sterling hit the trail into Chihuahua.

Because no man knew exactly what had happened during the peril-packed clock ticks when Prolo had gone to a just death, Webb Sterling's flight from Texas was taken as evidence that he had been Prolo's killer.

Thus had the Lone Star Buckaroo's owl-hoot existence begun. But it was worth it, in Webb's opinion, for it gave Chuck his freedom to go on providing for his lovely bride and little son.

"Mebbe Sterlin' ain't as bad as he's painted," put in Bony Agnew, returning from the kitchen with a fresh platter of bacon. "From the range gossip I've picked up, he was a well-liked young jigger with plenty o' friends, an' this Prolo skunk was surrounded by crooks who'd have lynched Webb if he'd stayed around Lonesome."

Sheriff Tom Lane looked up quizzically at the bandage-headed old trading-post keeper.

"Them's funny words tuh be comin' from you, Agnew!" he accused. "Didn't Sterlin' bash you on the bean last night an' rob yore till? Yo're danged lucky he didn't kill yuh."

Agnew, conscious that he had "spoken out of character," retreated to the kitchen in confusion.

"Waal, reckon I'll be goin' on my way," announced the black-headed cow-puncher, getting to his feet and stretching with catlike grace. "If I run acrost this bandick yo're chasin', sheriff, I'll shore git in touch with yuh. I could use the thousand-



buck reward they got on his top-knot."

Tom Lane pushed back his chair and grunted.

"A reward hunter, huh?" he gibed, a thrust which brought a crimson stain over Buckaroo's face. "Waal, it happens that what ol' Agnew said was true. Sterlin' is a wanted man, but I've heard he's O. K. an' as fit as whang leather. Prolo was a snake, if thar ever was one; I run him out o' my county over tuh Lonesome. But Sterlin's a murderer in the eyes of the law, an' I'm swore tuh arrest him if I lays eyes on him. It's up to a jury over in Big Bend County tuh say whether he's guilty of a crime or not."

Sterling made his way to the door, striving to keep his stride easy. Every instant that he was around Tom Lane, he knew his chances of being discovered were enhanced.

Lane had never seen Sterling, and there were no photographs in circulation of the young cowboy. And judging from Lane's remarks at the table, it was not likely that he knew about Sterling's coal-black mustang, Skeeter.

Just the same, the Lone Star Buckaroo knew that Tom Lane was a keen-witted lawman—a "cagy customer," as Agnew had dubbed him the night before.

"The quicker I git out of his company, the better," Sterling thought, as he paid his bill and headed for the stable.

A few minutes later, he led forth Skeeter, gleaming coal black in the early-morning sun rays, and fitted with a rope-scuffed Texas stock saddle.

While inside the barn, Buckaroo noted that Pecos Klint's fagged-out cayuse was still in its stall, proving that the saddle bum had not dared

come back to Sixprong Lodge that night.

"Yuh say yo're headin' fer the Rio, son?" came the cheery voice of Sheriff Tom Lane, as he bow-legged his way out from the Sixprong Lodge with a toothpick wagging in his teeth.

The cowboy, masking his confusion behind Skeeter's broad barrel, swung into the saddle and adjusted his Stetson.

"That's right."

Lane surveyed the black mustang appreciatively, running his big hand over the horse's glossy mane.

"Right *bueno* pony yuh got here, cowboy. Say, I'm goin' down the Rio trail myself. Yuh mind waitin' fer a saddle pard?"

Numbing dread seized the cowboy's heart. Was Tom Lane suspicious of him? The dyed hair would be a slim disguise in case the lawman chose to examine his Stetson, where telltale red strands were sure to be clinging to the band.

There was nothing else to do, however, but accept Lane's company. To refuse would bring out-and-out suspicion, if it were not there already.

"You bet, sheriff!" he said genially. "Glad tuh have company!"

## CHAPTER V.

### AMBUSH BULLETS.

BONY AGNEW was out in front of the Sixprong Lodge to see his two guests on their way by the time Sheriff Tom Lane had saddled up his paint horse and ridden out from the barn.

"I notice yuh got a right scrawny-lookin' cayuse out in yore stall, Agnew!" commented the observant sheriff, as he stooped in the saddle to shake hands with the old trader. "Belong tuh you?"



Agnew gulped hard, then nodded.

"Waal, my opinion o' you has drapped considerable, Agnew!" snapped the grizzled tin-star frankly. "That bronc's flanks is raw an' fly-blown from too heavy rowelin', an' it ain't been fed decent lately."

Agnew shuffled his boots in embarrassment. To confess that the horse belonged to a scurvy range bum named Pecos Klint would be to tear down his story of the night before, concerning his beating at the hands of Webb Sterling.

"Howsomever, I got a hunch yo're lyin' about the ownership o' that crowbait," went on Tom Lane sternly. "If it's yore hoss, how come its ribs are showin' like slats on a saloon door? Its manger box was full o' prime oats, an' it'd had plenty o' hay."

The old trader licked his lips uncertainly, shooting a dismayed glance at the Lone Star Buckaroo, who sat his black mustang near by.

"I—I picked up the nag runnin' loose down in Lily Basin meadow tother day, sheriff!" lied the old man desperately.

Lane grunted skeptically, and gathered up his reins.

"Mebbeso, Agnew, an' if so I apologize fer callin' yuh a liar. But if I finds out that bronc belonged tuh Webb Sterlin', the outlaw, an' that you sold him a fresh hoss last night, it'll go plenty tough with yuh, Agnew."

With which parting sally, the sheriff of Ocotillo County rowed his pinto gently and trotted off down the south trail.

"I kin never thank yuh enough fer what yuh done last night, Agnew, ol' pard!" breathed the Lone Star Buckaroo, as he leaned down to shake hands with the owner of the Sixprong Lodge. "If Tom Lane

don't git wise tuh who I am afore this trail's over, I'll be back some day tuh explain tuh yuh why I was forced tuh take tuh the owl-hoot life, Agnew."

Reining swiftly out into the trail, Skeeter reared on his hind legs while his master waved a sombrero to the sober-faced old trader.

A moment later, the black mustang was cantering off through the pine-hung trail in the direction of the Rio Grande, overtaking the stolid-faced sheriff on the spotted cayuse.

For a mile the two rode in silence, neither man caring to lift himself from his own thoughts.

Then an uncomfortable chill coasted down Buckaroo's spine, as he became aware that he was being given a stern once-over by the case-hardened old guardian of frontier law who rode by his left stirrup.

"Strikes me danged funny that Webb Sterlin's sign ain't visible this mornin', Buckaroo!" snapped the tin-badger icily. "His hoss tracks was plain on the muddy trail yes-tiddy. I saw 'em turn in at Sixprong Lodge, by the lamplight."

Sterling, busy fashioning a cigarette out of wheat-straw paper, did not answer.

"Furthermore, young feller," went on the sheriff, suddenly reining his pinto across the trail so that Skeeter was forced to halt or be crowded off into the underbrush, "that trail I was follerin' matches the shoes on yore pony."

Knots of muscle grated in the corners of Sterling's jaws, and angry pin points of light blazed in his blue eyes as he returned Sheriff Tom Lane's hostile, level glare.

"Listen hyar, sheriff," snarled the cowboy, "you been proddin' me ever since we met. What if the tracks yuh was follerin' do match Skeeter's



hoofprints? After all, I rid up that trail from Lava Spring a couple hours ahead o' you yesterday evenin'. It's nacheral yuh spotted my tracks, ain't it?"

Tom Lane's mouth twitched. His brittle gray eyes were surveying the cowboy's saddle, blanket roll, scabbarded Winchester and Skeeter's martingale and bridle.

"The hombre in Indianola who claimed he identified Webb Sterlin' was the same hombre who p'inted out Sterlin's trail tuh me!" grated the lawman. "I ain't been follerin' skunk sign fer over twenty year, tuh git trails mixed up. The Indianola tracks was yores."

The cowboy's heart was racing like a rabbit's. He knew that the cagy old lawman was following a definite hunch, and it would not take Lane's brain long to reach the next obvious conclusion—that if Buckaroo was Webb Sterling, then he had dyed his red hair to its present raven shade.

"I'll have tuh haul out my shootin' irons an' tie Tom Lane to a tree, I guess!" thought the waddy, as he let his right hand drop to his chapped thigh, near the outhanging butt of one Colt. "If I let him capture me, it'll be hangman's twine once I face a jury o' Stand-pat Prolo's friends back in Lonesome town."

The sheriff was scratching his head in perplexity.

"Only one thing bothers me," he muttered. "Somebody must 'a' bashed ol' Agnew's noggin' fer 'im, unless he got that bruise in some sort o' accident. An' Agnew claimed it was a red-headed geezer who conked him an' robbed his till last night."

The sheriff's pinto shied at a black horsefly, so that momentarily the lawman was busy with his reins, his

eyes jerked away from their resting place on the Lone Star Buckaroo's face.

In that moment, the cowboy slid a Colt .45 from leather, resting the long blue barrel against his pommel as he leveled it on the sheriff.

Much as he hated to throw down on an officer of the law, the cowboy knew that he would have to get the upper hand while the getting was good.

"Sheriff," snarled the waddy, "throw up yore——"

*Brang!* The forest resounded to the ear-shattering explosion of a gunshot, fired near at hand.

The echoes crowded back the final syllable of Webb Sterling's ringing command.

"What in——"

For a fleeting instant, the Lone Star Buckaroo stared down at the bright, shiny brass of his saddle horn, exposed where a bullet had grooved through the leather binding.

Then the waddy's eyes swiveled to the right, where gun smoke was pluming from a manzanita thicket a dozen yards up the hillside flanking the trail.

He caught a glimpse of a red-checked shirt and a rage-twisted, whiskery face, as the bushwhacker leaped through the brush to bring up short behind a jagged boulder.

Again the gray-whiskered gunman rested his .45 on the rock, triggered a hot volley at the figure of Sheriff Tom Lane, busy astride a bucking pinto.

His own mustang rearing violently in the narrow trail as the mountainside resounded to the crash of shots, Buckaroo knew that both he and the sheriff presented a good target for the killer on the slope above.

"Pecos Klint, figgerin' on cuttin' us down an' gittin' a hoss fer his



git-away!" rasped the cowboy, as he dived from the saddle to a clump of buckberry brush. "The danged skunk's been lurkin' around the hotel all night."

Burrowing out of sight in the brush, Webb spun about with gun upraised in alarm as a heavy figure plunged through the foliage after him.

But it was Sheriff Tom Lane, who had kicked free of his own stirrups and had leaped wisely for cover, following the cowboy's example.

*Brrrang! Bang-bang-bang!* Zip-ping lead clipped the brush over their heads, as Pecos Klint crouched in his boulder nest on the slope above them, peppering the chaparral with slugs.

Then came silence, as the whiskery villain behind the rocks was forced to reload his guns.

Tense as a bear trap, the Lone Star Buckaroo scuttled deeper in the brush, thumb ready on gun hammer.

The sheriff of Ocotillo County was behind him, his own .45 out of leather.

On hands and knees beside each other, the two men exchanged glances before squinting up the slope where Pecos Klint was hidden.

"The skunk decided tuh hole up an' gun me out o' the saddle!" panted the grizzled sheriff. "Lucky my paint hoss shied at a fly, or I'd been another victim o' Webb Sterling, I reckon!"

## CHAPTER VI.

### TRAILING A SKUNK.

**T**HE Lone Star Buckaroo grinned mysteriously, but the sheriff had no way of knowing the reason for his grim humor.

"So the sheriff thinks Pecos Klint

is me, huh?" mused the waddy, as he punched a shell into the empty cylinder chamber he habitually carried under the hammer when traveling. "Well, no use me tippin' my cards now. Might as well let Tom Lane think he's gunnin' fer Webb Sterling, I reckon."

"We got yuh two tuh one, Sterling!" yelled Tom Lane, his voice ringing through the timber. "Yuh better pitch out yore guns an' come out o' hidin', or we'll bullet-burn yuh out o' thar!"

Buckaroo waited tensely for Klint to answer. But instead of denying his identity, the outlaw laughed harshly from behind his rocky ambush.

"Come an' git me, tin-star!" jeered the saddle tramp. "If my aim hadn't 'a' been haywire jest now, yuh'd both be sprawled in the brush with lead in yore briskits, I reckon!"

Sheriff Tom Lane crawled over to where Webb Sterling lay crouched behind a pine trunk, blue eyes shuttling up through the underbrush in an effort at locating Klint's red-checked shirt.

"Listen, amigo," panted the lawman, "yuh was sayin' somethin' this mornin' about wantin' the reward on Webb Sterling's scalp. Waal, if yuh'll help me capture that busky up thar, yuh kin keep the dinero. All I want's my prisoner, dead or alive!"

Sterling grunted behind clenched teeth. After what had happened at the Sixprong Lodge last night, he had no cause to inform the sheriff that Pecos Klint was not the man he wanted.

Indeed, from his brief association with Klint, Buckaroo knew that the saddle bum was better off with a bullet in his heart.

"O. K., sheriff—only that crack I



made about bein' a reward hunter wasn't the real goods," answered the cowboy. "But I'll help yuh corner that bushwhacker up the hill."

Tom Lane grinned, and shot out a hand. They shook, and then the lawman became the grim old bloodhound of a moment before.

"*Bueno*. Buckaroo, I hyarby deputize yuh, savvy? If possible, we'll take that varmint alive, tuh stand trial fer murder over in Big Bend County. But if yo're forced to, gun him down."

Buckaroo nodded. There was a certain grim humor in the situation—trailing himself!

Lane jerked a horny thumb to the left.

"You scrooch down an' belly acrost the trail wherever yuh think it's safe, son," instructed the sheriff. "I'll go this way, an' we'll go up the slope until we're level with the skunk's ambush. He'll probably git skittery an' bust intuh the open—an' we'll have him."

With a nod, the Lone Star Buckaroo started crawling off through the heavy brush, making for the trail.

He knew that Pecos Klint was lying in his rocky hide-out, up the hill within easy six-gun range.

Klint, wanting horses desperately for his own get-away, had planned to kill both riders from ambush. The fact that he now found himself against two-to-one odds would make him a dangerous opponent to stalk.

Reaching the open trail, the cowboy saw that both of their horses had raced on back in the direction of Sixprong Lodge, where they would doubtlessly be caught by Bony Agnew and held pending their owners' return.

Taking a long chance on a six-gun slug's cutting him down, the waddy leaped into the open and vanished

immediately into the heavy undergrowth and ferns, on the uphill side of the trail.

From where he lay, he could see the manzanita tree growing over the mossy rocks where Pecos Klint had stationed himself. There was no trace of the ambusher.

"I'm jest wonderin' what'll happen if the sheriff kills Pecos Klint," thought the cowboy, as he lay with stomach close to the pine-needle carpet of the forest. "He'll see that the hombre he's takin' for Webb Sterling is gray-headed an' middle-aged. An' then we'll be right back whar we were a minute ago, when I was startin' tuh throw down on Lane."

He could hear the sheriff burrowing through the ferns and rock maple, a hundred feet up the trail. Tom Lane was crawling fearlessly up the mountainside, jockeying into a position where he could shoot Pecos Klint.

"You gents better git back!" yelled the bayed outlaw, from behind the broken jumble of rocks. "I'll spot yuh first, an' I'll be foggin' my hoglaigs!"

Neither Buckaroo nor the sheriff answered the outlaw's challenge. They knew it was Klint's way of getting them to reveal their own position.

Slithering from tree to tree, Webb Sterling gained another dozen feet. His skin tingled with suspense, for he knew that if he exposed so much as an ear, the sharpshooter in the rocks would start gunning.

Unseen by either Sterling or the stalking lawman, Pecos Klint was making a desperate move.

Realizing that his dry-gulch move had failed, and that he was facing two-to-one odds, the gray-whiskered crook crawled up the mountain a



dozen yards until he came to a craggy old mountain cedar.

Masked behind heavy undergrowth, Klint holstered his six-guns and started climbing.

Ten feet above the ground, he had a clear view of the downhill slope, through a rift in the trees.

And in plain sight, just above the trail, he saw Sheriff Tom Lane crouched behind a low outcrop of broken quartz!

With a snag-toothed grin, Pecos Klint drew a .45 and leveled it on the crotch of a cedar limb.

Drawing a sure bead on the sheriff's body, Klint pulled trigger, then withdrew behind pluming gun smoke.

A mountain breeze whisked the veil of smoke aside. Peering around the cedar bole, Pecos Klint stifled a gasp of joy.

The sheriff was writhing in agony behind the quartz outcrop, crimson spreading to stain the shoulder of his hickory shirt!

Lifting his gun for another shot, Klint paused.

"Blazes! That's Sheriff Tom Lane!" gasped the outlaw, as he caught sight of the lawman's contorted face for the first time since the two horsemen had appeared on the trail. "I reckon I got a score tuh settle with that snake!"

Bushes quivered over to the right, indicating the position of the Lone Star Buckaroo.

Swiveling his six-gun, Pecos Klint emptied the weapon, firing rapidly to spray the brush with deadly slugs.

When the smoke cleared away, the brush had quit moving.

"Mebbe I drilled that Buckaroo jigger, an' mebbe I didn't!" muttered the outlaw, as he slid down the cedar to the ground. "I dassn't

let him pull a trick on me an' come out intuh the open."

Making a wide circle in the direction opposite that of the Lone Star Buckaroo, Pecos Klint cut downhill until he came to the trail. Then he worked back until he came to Sheriff Tom Lane's tracks.

Guns ready, Pecos Klint carefully followed the sheriff's sign until he caught sight of Lane's body, sprawled out under the quartz outcrop.

"I hope my shot didn't kill the snake!" growled Klint, parting brush with a gun barrel while he crawled closer, using his elbows and knees to propel his body through the thickets. "If Lane's alive, I kin sure use him—afore I croak 'im!"

A moment later, Pecos Klint was beside the sheriff, turning him over.

A pleased grin parted Klint's bearded lips as he saw that his bullet had merely creased Lane's neck, stunning the lawman and plastering his shirt with crimson.

Rummaging in the lawman's pockets, Klint brought out a pair of rusty old handcuffs. It was the work of only a moment to clasp the manacles about Lane's wrists, drawn together behind his back.

That done, the powerful outlaw hoisted Lane on his shoulder in a jackknifed position and worked his way back through the brush, the quartz formation hiding him from the position where the Lone Star Buckaroo had been hidden.

"Mebbe that red-headed young rannihan is dead, but I ain't takin' no chances!" whispered Klint, as he reached the trail and started carrying his burden in the direction of Agnew's trading post. "Anyhow, I don't hear no noise from him."

A hundred yards around a bend in the trail, Pecos Klint caught sight



of the two runaway horses, placidly cropping grass.

Neither horse shied as the whiskery crook approached them.

Another moment, and the burly outlaw had the sheriff's insensible form astride his pinto's saddle. By means of the lariat coiled on the pommel, Klint tied the sheriff in riding position.

"By gosh, here I laid in wait all night fer that Buckaroo feller tuh ride out on this black o' his," gloated the crook, as he caught Skeeter's trailing bridle reins, "an' hyar I not only glom ontuh Buckaroo's hoss, but I capture my worst enemy tuh boot!"

Mounting Buckaroo's horse, and holding the sheriff's reins in one hairy hand, Pecos Klint set off in the direction of Sixprong Lodge.

A half mile south of the trading post, however, Pecos reined off down the ravine, to where the San Jacinto River bumbled its way through the rocks.

The sheriff was slowly regaining his senses, his body jouncing astride the pinto like a scarecrow propped in the saddle. Ahead of him, Pecos Klint was threading down the ravine toward the creek, a grim murder plot brewing in his brain.

## CHAPTER VII.

### JAIL BREAKER.

**I**CE water being doused on his head brought Sheriff Tom Lane back to his senses. Opening his eyes, the grizzled lawman peered about him in bewilderment.

He was propped against the rough trunk of a hemlock, on a grassy shelf which topped a twenty-foot cut bank. Below the bank eddied the waters of the San Jacinto, the dark depths of the pool thick with trout.

Swiveling his head about, the sheriff focused his eyes upon the leering face of the hombre who was dousing a hatful of creek water on his head to revive him. The icy liquid stung the bullet crease on his neck as if it were acid.

"Pecos Klint!" gasped the old lawman, his muscles going tense. "How in——"

Lane's jaw dropped in dismay as he realized for the first time that his arms were handcuffed behind his back, around the tree.

As his dizziness subsided, and he got a closer look at the outlaw ahead of him, the sheriff recognized Pecos Klint without a shadow of a doubt.

Klint was the most desperate outlaw in Ocotillo County, a killer who had robbed banks, held up stage-coaches, and slain a dozen men in saloon brawls.

"Yeah, I'm Pecos Klint!" sneered the killer, clapping his wet sombrero on his block-shaped skull. "The same hombre you clapped in jail, two months ago, tuh await hangin'."

The lawman's bulging eyes ranged down over the outlaw's red-checkered shirt, patched Levis, and mud-caked boots.

"So this is whar you been hidin' out since yuh busted my jail!" snarled Lane, vividly recalling how Klint, by means of a saw smuggled into his cell by crooked friends, had disgraced Ocotillo County's jail by sawing out his cell bars and escaping. "But—but how come I'm hyar?"

Pecos Klint chuckled low in his throat, like a timber wolf about to make a kill.

"I was the hombre who tried tuh dry-gulch you an' Buckaroo on the trail up thar. I clumb a tree an' seen you sneakin' up on me."

Thoughts struggled to adjust themselves in the sheriff's brain. He



had been under the illusion that it was Webb Sterling, the outlaw from Lonesome, who had fired the shot that morning. Instead, it was Pecos Klint, a killer whom the sheriff had despaired of ever seeing again.

"Then—then it was you I was trailin' yestiddy, instead o' Webb Sterling," panted the befuddled lawman, shaking his head dazedly.

"Who's Webb Sterling?" demanded Pecos Klint.

Tom Lane shrugged. "You been hidin' out in the malpais too long tuh've heard o' Sterling, I reckon," answered the lawman. "Well, what you aimin' tuh do with me, Pecos?"

The outlaw grinned and shifted his squatted weight. Behind him, the San Jacinto trilled a melodious song as it washed over its rocky bed at the base of the cut bank.

"So yuh want tuh know why I didn't put a slug intuh yore briskit, eh?" chuckled the crook. "Waal, sheriff, as you know—when you captured me robbin' that bank, yuh also captured two o' my *compadres*."

Tom Lane nodded bitterly. "Slug Jones an' Tex Mullen. They're still in jail over in Mexitex town—an' a week from ter-morrow, they'll hang fer the murders you three committed in that bank robbery, Klint."

The outlaw leaned forward, his foul breath hot on the sheriff's face. He shook his head slowly from side to side.

"No, they won't hang, sheriff. Because yo're goin' tuh let Slug an' Tex out o' that jail."

The sheriff stiffened. What was Pecos Klint driving at?

"That's why I've took yuh prisoner an' brung yuh here fer a parley, sheriff," went on the outlaw, a wicked light kindling in his bleary gray eyes. "I searched yore pockets an' discovered yuh ain't got yore

jail keys on yuh, or I'd 'a' killed yuh an' rid tuh Mexitex myself an' let my pards loose."

Sheriff Lane's upper lip curled in a sneer of defiance. "No use threatenin' me, Pecos. I ain't goin' tuh turn them two varmints loose, even if yuh torture me."

A torrent of profanity knifed from Klint's lips. He jerked out a six-gun and jabbed the sheriff cruelly in the ribs.

"Yo're ridin' tuh Mexitex with me, sheriff!" snarled the outlaw. "At night, when nobody's around the jail. Yo're goin' tuh git yore keys from the jailer an' unlock them cells tuh release my pards."

Lane, helpless with his arms handcuffed about the bole of the tree, summoned the courage to grin his contempt.

"Guess ag'in, Pecos. Yuh kin kill me first, yuh dirty rat!"

The outlaw got to his feet, and struck the lawman a cruel smash across the temple with his six-gun barrel. Tom Lane swallowed a groan, though the agony that shot through his skull made him want to scream.

"Yo're goin' tuh let my pards out o' that *calabozo*, or I'll skin the hide off yore bones!" screeched the outlaw, a blast of fury robbing him of reason. "Yore life won't be worth a plugged nickel if yuh don't!"

Lane's harsh, jarring laughter goaded the crook to fresh anger. He lashed a hard kick to the lawman's short ribs, making Lane cough to catch his breath.

"Yuh better hurry an' finish me off, Pecos," advised the white-faced tin-star, when he could wheeze out the words. "My depity, Buckaroo, will hear yuh caterwaulin' an'——"

Pecos Klint laughed harshly and cocked his six-gun.

"Buckaroo's a depity sheriff, huh?"



Waal, he ain't arrestin' nobody. I killed him up thar from my ambush, savvy? I killed Buckaroo afore I shagged down hyar with you. See, I rid Buckaroo's mustang down hyar!"

Sheriff Lane, swiveling his head to stare at the two horses tied to a near-by sapling, felt despair claw at his heart.

He was a helpless victim of the worst outlaw in Ocotillo County, and he knew that Klint had lashed himself into a murderous rage.

"I'm givin' yuh one more chance tuh say yuh'll string along with me, sheriff!" snarled Klint, stooping once more beside his prisoner. "Refuse this time, an' I'll blow yore brains out!"

Sheriff Tom Lane saw death staring at him out of the round black bore of Klint's unwavering six-gun. But Lane was of the fighting breed of Texas lawmen who know no such thing as fear.

"Go ahead, yuh stinkin' rat!" defied Lane. "Shoot!"

With an insane screech, Pecos Klint shoved his Colt against the sheriff's forehead and jerked the hammer back to full cock for the shot that would split Lane's skull wide open.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### INTO THE SAN JACINTO.

WEBB STERLING lay pressed against the earth for several minutes following the terrific hail of bullets with which Pecos Klint had sprayed the brush through which he was crawling.

Slugs had kicked sand in his eyes, so close had they come. The angle from which they had struck told the Lone Star Buckaroo that Klint was firing from an elevation, not from the lava boulders where he and the

sheriff believed the outlaw to be hiding.

"Whew! That's the closest call I ever had!" gasped the cowboy, when the shooting ceased, and he heard Pecos Klint reloading his guns.

Wriggling backward down the hill to retrace his tracks, the cowboy made a wide circle aimed to bring him on the uphill side of Klint's ambush.

This took a quarter of an hour. By the time he had reached the rim rock of a low band of cliffs overlooking the lava boulders, Sterling saw for a certainty that Klint had vanished.

From where he lay on the rim rock, the cowboy had a view of a patch of the mountain trail extending in the direction of Sixprong Lodge. Even as he looked, Buckaroo saw something which nearly toppled him over the ledge in astonishment.

Trotting out of sight around a bend in the trail was Pecos Klint, calmly riding Skeeter! And trailing the black mustang was the sheriff's paint horse, with Tom Lane's big figure astride the saddle!

The cowboy leaped to his feet as he realized things had gone amiss. Somehow or other, Flint had got the upper hand of the sheriff!

Blank astonishment filled the waddy's head as he slid down the steep cliffs and made his way past the lava rocks, where exploded .45 shells gave proof of the spot where Pecos Klint had been ambushed.

"Why in blazes should that crook kidnap Lane, I wonder?" muttered the waddy, as he scrambled on down the slope until he came to the trail. "He must 'a' wounded the sheriff with that last burst o' shots I heard him fire, because Lane's too salty tuh submit tuh any skunk o' Klint's stripe. Mebbe——"



Buckaroo's eyes widened in alarm as he saw a tiny puddle of crimson attracting flies in the middle of the path.

"Sheriff's been wounded, or I'm loco!" gasped the cowboy. "I reckon Lane needs help—an' here I'm afoot!"

Breaking into a run—a gait which cowboys find clumsy in high-heeled boots—the Lone Star Buckaroo made his way down the trail, until he came to the spot where boot and hoof tracks showed where Klint and the sheriff had mounted the stray brones.

Spatters of crimson continued, proving that one of Klint's slugs had undoubtedly wounded the lawman.

"This is good—me trailin' a sheriff!" panted the cowboy, as he ran onward. "And trailin' the very sheriff who's out tuh lasso me an' drag me tuh the gallows!"

A half mile down the trail, the waddy saw where Klint and the sheriff had cut down the ravine, making in the direction of the San Jacinto.

Pausing to rest and take a kink out of his aching side, the waddy's ears suddenly caught the sound of Pecos Klint's high-pitched, bellowing voice:

"Yo're ridin' tuh Mexitex with me, sheriff! At night, when nobody's around the jail. Yo're goin' tuh git yore keys from the jailer an' unlock them cells tuh release my pards."

Jumping to his feet and drawing six-guns from holsters, the cowboy tore recklessly down the slope, following the gouged-out marks left by steel-shod hoofs.

"Lane's got hisself in a mess, right enough!" gasped the waddy, as he caught sight of the trickling ripples of the San Jacinto, far below through the light stand of timber. "I'll be lucky if I git thar in time."

Skidding to a halt behind a manzanita scrub, the cowboy caught sight of two riderless horses, down on a cliff brink overlooking a deep pool of the San Jacinto.

The horses were Skeeter and the sheriff's paint.

"Got tuh take it easy from now on!" decided the cowboy, stalking cautiously from tree to tree. "Pecos Klint's loaded for bear an'——"

Even as he said the words, the cowboy caught sight of the two men he was trailing.

Sheriff Lane, bareheaded and seated on the ground, was handcuffed to the bole of a young hemlock. Squatting before him, battered hat shoved back on his head, was Pecos Klint, a cocked six-gun in one hand.

The barrel of the weapon was shoved against Tom Lane's brow.

"Yo're dyin' now an' pronto, sheriff!" screamed the outlaw. "I'll ride tuh Mexitex an' save my pards myself!"

Whipping up a blue-barreled .45, Buckaroo fired in the direction of the murderous Klint.

He saw the slug whip off the outlaw's hat, saw Klint bounce to his feet and wheel about, six-gun weaving to cover the forest.

It was fifty yards' range, with intervening trees. But the Lone Star Buckaroo's hand had been forced, for in another instant Tom Lane would have been blown to eternity.

*Brrrang! Bram-bram!* His twin six-guns blazing a death song, Webb Sterling raced madly through the forest, his bullets whistling past Klint's ears, gouging bark from trees, glancing off rocks.

With a yell, Klint made for the horses. And then Buckaroo burst into the open, and the outlaw saw that he would never be able to gain Skeeter's stirrups in time.



Triggering his six-guns in panic, Klint halted Buckaroo's onrushing charge.

Facing each other through plumbing gun smoke, Buckaroo and Klint stood wide-legged in the grass, set for a show-down.

*Click! Click!* Pecos Klint's gun hammers landed on fired shells, and with a bawl of horror the outlaw realized that he was trapped without hope of reloading before Webb Sterling could fill him with hot bullets.

"Throw up yore hands, Klint!" rasped the cowboy, his eyes blazing as he stalked forward behind jutting gun barrels. "I ain't the stripe tuh murder an unheeled man, but——"

With a hoarse oath, Pecos Klint turned in his tracks and raced for the rim of the cut bank. Below was the deep San Jacinto, and the opposite bank offered refuge in its tangled coulees and brush-choked slopes.

Before he could cock his guns again, Webb Sterling saw the running outlaw hit the rim of the grassy ledge and vanish from sight in a running dive.

Tossing his own guns aside and charging for the rim of the cut bank, Webb Sterling was in time to see Pecos Klint's form cleave the water twenty feet below and vanish into the deep pool with a geyser of white spray rising behind him.

Flinging a glance at the sheriff who strained at his fetters on the hemlock tree, Webb Sterling leaped out into space, his body flashing downward in a graceful dive.

*Splash!* Knifing the icy waters, Sterling's body shot through crystal-clear depths.

Trout darted out of the way of the two monsters who had plunged into their domain. Water grass swayed on the rocky bottom, as Pe-

cos Klint and Webb Sterling planted their feet on river bed.

Straining forward, making for the opposite bank in grotesque slow-motion, the outlaw surged ahead.

Six feet behind him came the Lone Star Buckaroo, arms flailing like a slow-motion nightmare of a man trying to escape a dragon.

And then Pecos Klint was starting for the surface, and the shelter of the west bank of the San Jacinto.

Like an attacking shark, Buckaroo glided up behind him, wrapped mighty arms about the outlaw's body.

Bubbles broke from the straining lips of the two men as Pecos Klint twisted snakelike in Buckaroo's grasp, and the two rolled slowly to the bottom in a death grapple.

The soggy mattress of Klint's beard was like a dirty saloon mop rubbing against Buckaroo's face. Flailing fists landed with the cushioned effect of cream puffs on each other's jaws.

Then a great, churning bubble broke from Klint's mouth and tugged its way to the surface where water skippers glided. Sunlight streaming through the trees revealed the Lone Star Buckaroo disentangling himself from the drowning outlaw's grasp.

The waddy came slowly to the surface, tugging himself on tree roots to overcome the weight of his gun harness and water-filled boots.

He broke surface in a smother of foam, and sucked live-giving air into his tortured lungs.

Making his way to the shallows at the upstream edge of the trout pool, the Lone Star Buckaroo peered down into the clear depths.

Stirring on the rocky bottom was Pecos Klint's massive figure, water-filtered sunlight refracting off the brass cartridges in his belts.



The worst outlaw of Ocotillo County was fish bait, now. The chains of bubbles were slowly breaking free from the dead crook's beard, Klint's final breath fighting its way up through ten feet of water to reach the surface.

Scrambling his way back up to the bank, the Lone Star Buckaroo made his way toward the manacled sheriff.

"Klint's drowned like a rat in a tub, sheriff!" panted the waddy, water streaming from his glistening chaps and black shirt. "Reckon he deserved it, though."

The sheriff's eyes were bulging in their sockets, as the cowboy approached. For Buckaroo's face was dripping with a strange inklike fluid which made his handsome countenance grotesque.

And crowning his six-foot stature was a shock of flaming red hair, through which streaks of water-softened dye were leaking black rivulets down across the cowboy's face!

"Yuh—yuh'll find the keys tuh these bracelets in my chap's pockets, Buckaroo!" said the lawman, when he could find his voice. "I reckon yuh done the State o' Texas a service this afternoon—tuh say nothin' o' savin' my worthless carcass."

A moment later, Tom Lane was

released and was pocketing his rusty handcuffs. The two men strolled over to the grassy bank and stared down to where fish were darting over Pecos Klint's soggy corpse.

Reaching up to comb widespread fingers through his wet hair, Webb Sterling went pale as he caught sight of the hair dye staining his palm.

His eyes came up, to find Sheriff Tom Lane of Ocotillo County regarding him with a friendly grin.

"Relax, Webb Sterlin!" said the lawman softly. "I rid intuh the mountain country trailin' Pecos Klint, who busted my jail a month back. I'll take Klint's guns back tuh Mexitex tuh prove I got my man."

As a grin dawned on the Lone Star Buckaroo's lips, Tom Lane pointed a gnarled finger toward the grazing horses.

"Reckon our trails part hyar, Buckaroo!" said the sheriff. "I got tuh be traipsin' home, an' yore bronc's honin' tuh git tuh the Rio Grande. Good luck, cowboy!"

Tom Lane is shore one *white* lawman—an' one more friend to testify fer Webb Sterling, if the Buckaroo ever comes tuh trial fer thet killin'. But Buckaroo's danger trail ain't over, an' there'll be another story about him in next week's issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

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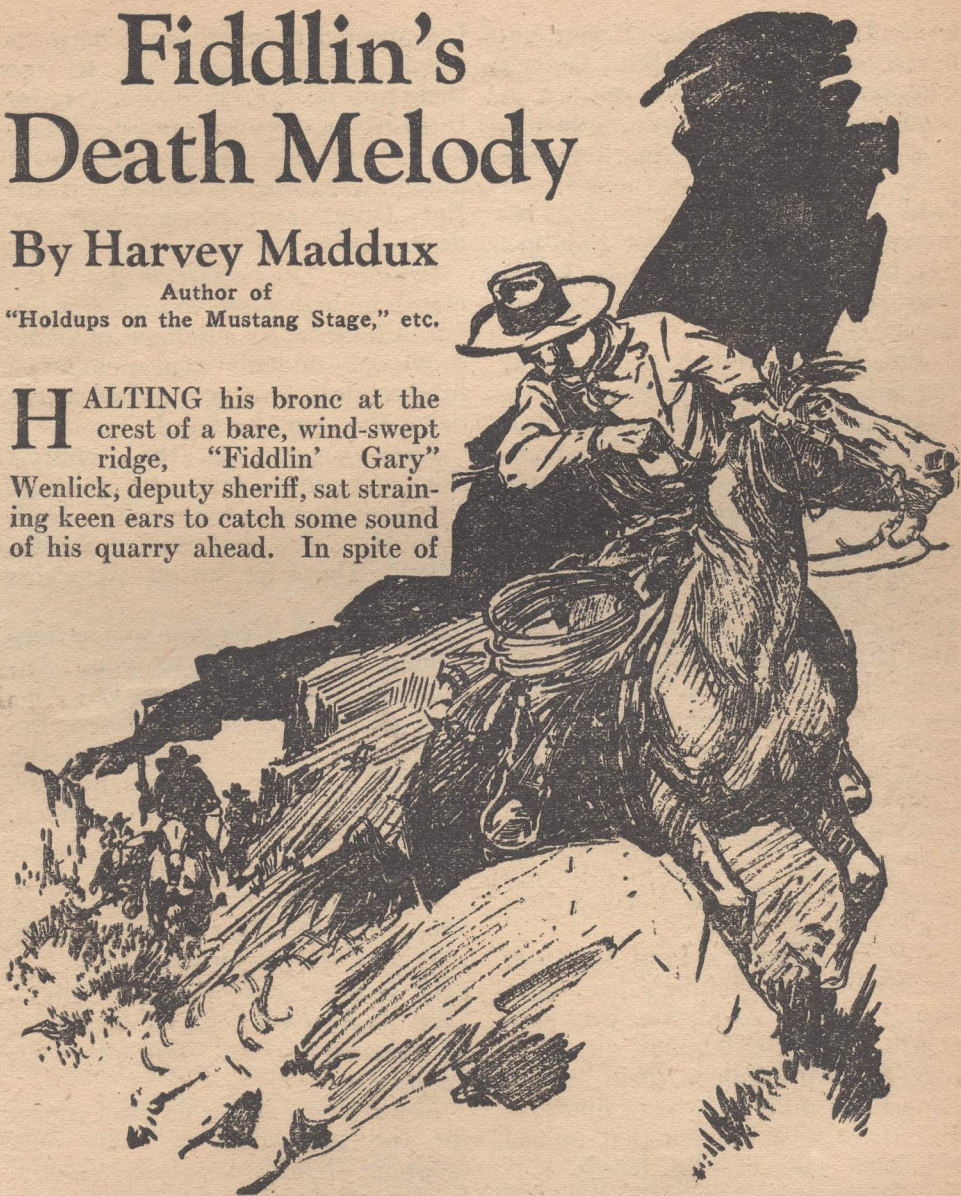
# Fiddlin's Death Melody

By Harvey Maddux

Author of

"Holdups on the Mustang Stage," etc.

**H**ALTING his bronc at the crest of a bare, wind-swept ridge, "Fiddlin' Gary" Wenlick, deputy sheriff, sat straining keen ears to catch some sound of his quarry ahead. In spite of



the full moon that had just risen, darkness blanketed the steep-walled canyon below him in deep, gloomy mystery.

Yet Fiddlin' felt quite sure that somewhere down there, he would find the four men that he followed.

"After shaggin' them hombres this far, we must be gettin' close to Bat Dufer's hide-away, ol' hoss,"

the lanky, lean-faced deputy said to Baldy, his wiry mustang. "If they ain't leadin' us to that outlaw, an' this is some trick, Sheriff Purdy's shore going to have the last laugh! An' me—I'm going to have some tall explainin' to do!"

Trailing the four prisoners who had escaped jail at Buxton was plenty risky. Mel Hoff, "Hub" Nor-



ris, and "Spud" Davis—all were believed to be a part of "Bat" Dufer's wild bunch who were holed up in some unknown mountain hide-out.

Plugging a deputy sheriff in the back wouldn't cause those three hard hombres any noticeable remorse. The thought sent Fiddlin's left hand creeping down to hover near the .45 Colt thonged against his left thigh.

Jim Dillion, fourth occupant of the jail, wasn't in with those three, although he had broken jail and fled with them. Dillion was only a reckless waddy who, when sober, rode for the Bar Y spread near Buxton.

Fiddlin' was grimly amused when he thought of what Buxton gossips would probably have to say about Dillion throwing in with men like Mel Hoff and Hub Norris. He was even more amused as he pondered over what those same gossips would think, if they knew that the jail break had been deliberately planned—by the law. Fiddlin' himself had planted the supposedly mislaid key that had done the trick, although much against Sheriff Purdy's protests.

For an instant, a faint tightness flickered across Fiddlin's lean face, then was gone. As his blue eyes cautiously probed unfamiliar surroundings, the expression in them seemed almost too mild for a man hunter's. But there wasn't much that missed the keen gaze of that lanky, left-handed deputy.

The coolness with which he drew out the makin's and fashioned himself a cigarette might have suggested that he was on a pleasure jaunt, instead of on the trail of hardened killers. His gentle voice that seemed to grow even more gentle when he faced a bad hombre's guns, was unceasing, however.

"Been nigh two hours, since we

last spotted them jiggers," he muttered. "Shore would hate to lose their trail now, after follerin' 'em fer three whole days!" Cigarette drooping between his lips, he fished for a match, mumbling: "Gotta find this Bat Dufer outlaw, somehow an' do it——"

*Crash!* The cigarette and the match he had raised to light it with, fell unnoticed, as a tongue of flame drove out suddenly from a clump of junipers less than a hundred yards down the slope he faced.

Lead tugging at the deputy's shirt, galvanized him into action.

A hoarse voice, that of Mel Hoff, shouted: "It's that fiddlin' depity, fellers! Don't let 'im git away this time!"

The roar of a six-gun sent echoes boiling down into the canyon. Another Colt took up the chant. Fingers of powder flame pierced the night, and whining death filled the air with the hum of angry hornets. Hoarse yells of "Git him!" sounded.

But Fiddlin' wasn't so easily "got."

"Thought fer a minute we'd lost 'em, ol' bronc," he grunted, dropping low on his mount's neck, Indian fashion, and using the spurs. "But we *ain't* lost 'em, an' we're just as welcome as ever! Git fer cover, hoss!"

More shots came, as they raced for the protection of some outcropping boulders. But Fiddlin' fired no shots in answer—for a very definite reason. Out of reach of six-gun lead, he reined to a halt, grinning.

"They ain't so scared o' one lone deputy," he said softly, "like they would be of a posse. An' I'm still willing to bet my boots that they're making a bee line fer Bat Dufer's hide-out!"

The shooting ceased, and he could



hear them cursing and threshing about in a thicket some distance away. There seemed no immediate danger of their finding his hiding place. Abruptly, all was silent.

Then Mel Hoff's derisive yell: "Goin' tuh play us a serenade ag'in to-night, depity? We're gittin' awful lonesome! Haw-haw!"

Silence fell. Fiddlin' waited, nursing a place along his ribs where lead had creased a welt, while he listened for sounds of pursuit. But none came, and presently he could hear the four riding on again, down into the canyon.

And once more the gun-wise deputy grinned. This was all part of the game, this hide-and-seek. For three days and nights, he had done nothing more than hang to the trail of the fleeing men and make a nuisance of himself. And for three days and nights, they had paid him no more attention than an occasional attempted bushwhacking, such as he had just avoided.

But all the while, they were leading him closer and closer to Bat Dufer's hide-out, which was just what Fiddlin' wanted. Things were working swell—if one of those ruckuses didn't land him an outlaw bullet.

Fiddlin' rolled himself another smoke, and this time got it lighted without interruption.

"I got a hunch they don't care much if I *do* reach Dufer's hide-out," he muttered presently, and a brittle note crept into his voice. "Figger they can finish me off any time they please, anyhow! Well, if things work out right, I might have a trump of my own to play!"

He waited a few minutes, until the sound of their riding was diminished. Then he rode cautiously from behind his shelter, urged his

bronc over to where the bushwhackers had been hidden.

In Fiddlin's blue eyes now was the look of a man who is searching for some definite object. He found it shortly, after going over the ground foot by foot—a small something wrapped in light-colored cloth. He unwrapped the article and examined its contents briefly by the light of a match.

His face was quite sober, as he remounted Baldy and followed the down-slope route taken by the outlaws.

He located the blaze of their small camp fire, half an hour later. Grouped around it were four dark, bobbing figures whose movements indicated that they were throwing together a hasty meal of canned beans and bacon, stolen before leaving Buxton.

He could make out the stocky figures of Mel Hoff and Spud Davis. Also the small, wiry figure of Hub Norris, and the tall, gaunt frame of Jim Dillion. Muted sounds of their conversation even drifted indistinctly to the deputy. He could have killed two, maybe three of them, before they could have got away, if he had wanted.

But Fiddlin' didn't want to. Hoff and Norris and Davis were of minor importance. Bat Dufer was the main spoke in the wheel that Fiddlin' wanted. And Dufer, big and bony, bat-eared and a killer, was the man Fiddlin' meant to have.

But he would have to go mighty careful.

Swinging down from the saddle, he trailed Baldy's reins until within a hundred and fifty yards of the outlaws' camp. Here he watched the moving men for several silent moments.

Then he unrolled from the pair of



blankets, thonged with rawhide to the cantle of his saddle, the battered shape of a fiddle case. Out of this case, he lifted with careful hands, the ancient old fiddle that had earned him his nickname.

He glanced down at the outlaw camp again, twanged a string softly. Then he lifted the instrument to his chin and began to play.

Fiddlin' could play, and he grinned as he watched the outlaws' heads jerk erect; first in startled surprise, then in amused relief. He could see their heads turn as they spoke to one another, heard them laugh as they proceeded with the business of their meal.

To-night made the fourth night that the deputy had played his strange serenade, and it presented an odd spectacle. Four fleeing men grouped around a scanty fire, eating while they listened to a deputy sheriff play them an assortment of melodies.

But there was a sane purpose behind Fiddlin's seeming madness.

The sound of music would carry far in those hills at night. It was darned good music, too; of the sort that any range-bred man could appreciate. Apparently, here was a dumb deputy who hoped to harass the men he trailed until they surrendered.

But there was a vastly different motive to the left-handed deputy's fiddling.

## II.

While the four outlaws wolfed food hungrily beside their camp fire, the full moon climbed higher and higher above the rugged rim of cliffs which they had been nearing all that day. As they finished eating, the lingering notes from Fiddlin's violin drifted down to them, then died away.

The deputy's last tune had been "Home on the Range."

Gulping a half-chewed hunk of bacon and washing it down with strong, black coffee, Mel Hoff glanced across the fire at his three companions.

"That danged fool depity sure kin fiddle, all right," Hoff growled. "But yuh'd think he'd have better sense'n to stick his nose inter Bat Dufer's affairs! It's plumb suicide!"

Spud Davis cleared his throat, shifted his feet and glanced uneasily about.

"Left-handed gun fighters are bad medicine!" he snarled thickly. "That mess o' tunes sounded nigh like a death melody tuh me! Yuh know, Hoff, I'm fer finishin' that hombre off, 'fore we reach the hide-out. Fer more reasons than one. If he follers us clear in, Bat'll shore raise Cain, an' yuh know it!"

Hoff snorted and rose to his feet from where he had been squatting on a good-sized boulder. There was a distasteful swagger about him, and his pudgy face was blustering. His wicked little eyes were as poisonous as a rattler's.

He stood staring at Spud, who was of similar build, except a trifle fatter.

"Yuh make me sick, belly-achin'!" Hoff growled. "Superstitious as an ol' hen, yuh are! Ain't we tried, time an' ag'in, tuh bushwhack 'im? An' ain't he, time an' ag'in, out-smarted us?"

"Oh, shore, shore!" Spud agreed in subdued tones. But his eyes rolled fearfully from beneath his floppy-brimmed hat and lanced nervously up and down the canyon. "Still, it don't make sense, him fiddlin' that way."

"Cut out that stuff, or yuh'll have us all jittery!" Hoff barked. "That dumb depity thinks he's throwin' a



scare inter us ter make us surrender—which same he's liable tuh do, if yuh don't quit hollerin'! He ain't got nerve enough tuh foller us clear ter the hide-out. An' if he does, how could he git past the guard?" Hoff snorted. "A hull lot o' damage one lone depity kin do!"

Spud's red-lidded eyes blinked like a toad's. He subsided, but not without a few muttered curses. Wiry little Hub Norris maintained his bleak silence off to one side of the others. Although his squinty eyes missed nothing, he seldom had much to say.

Jim Dillion straightened his tall, gaunt frame and approached the fire. Moonlight carved hard shadows along his angular, lantern-jawed face. His dark eyes were bleak and unreadable, as he kicked loose gravel over the camp fire to smother it.

He looked over at Hoff, then at Davis, then to Norris. His eyes were narrowed to thin slits to avoid the rush of smoke that arose from the smothered fire.

"Like Hoff says, I can't see whar one depity kin do us any harm," he growled thoughtfully. "If yore hide-out's like yuh say, yuh could stand off two dozen depities. So why worry 'bout one? Why not let yore boss decide what tuh do?"

"Shore now, that's good sense, cowboy!" Hoff exclaimed, elated at having his argument supported by some one. "We'll let the chief decide. Meantime, let's git our nags tuh moseyin', so's we kin reach the hide-out 'fore too late."

Everybody seemed to accept that decision as final, and began straddling their broncs.

For a time they rode in silence, save for the sound of their horses' feet. Then abruptly, there came to their ears again, the high-pitched wail of Gary Wenlick's fiddle.

The outlaws glanced at one another. The music wasn't very far behind them, yet it seemed to get no nearer, nor yet no farther away.

"Fer four nights he's done that," Spud Davis mumbled half to himself. He darted a fearful glance, first over one shoulder, then over the other. "Listen! He's playin' a death melody, I tell yuh! Blast that depity!"

Davis's voice ended in a half snarl, half shriek. Whirling his bronc suddenly, he emptied his six-gun back into the moonlit trail.

"Lay off that shootin', yuh fool!" roared Hoff. "Want ter advertise the fact that that depity's gettin' yore goat? A couple more hours, an' we'll be tuh the hide-out! So keep cool, or I'll slap yer ears down—see?"

Spud shot an angry, challenging glance at Hoff from beneath his battered hat brim. But he made no retort. In glum silence, he began jabbin' fresh shells into his empty six-gun. Hoff, Norris, and Dillion exchanged looks. But whatever was on their minds, each kept it to himself.

There was a period of silence without music, after the shooting. The full moon rose higher above them, glinting occasionally on the silver trimmings of their saddles, as they wound around the canyon trail. The route twisted up the canyon floor like a snake, deeper and deeper into the wilderness. Rocky-fingered cliffs began to rear their shapes high into the air on both sides.

Not more than twenty minutes passed, before that eerie music reached their ears again. It was still behind them, but surprisingly close. Hoff raised a silencing hand, reining in his bronc. Almost immediately, the music ceased. Hoff swore softly, the muscles of his jaws



bunching. Then he seemed to get a grip on himself.

"Tain't an awful lot further," he muttered.

They continued on their way again, riding at a noticeably increased pace. Three different times after that, the deputy's music haunted their back trail. Then the cliff formation just ahead was suddenly broken by a rift that barely permitted the passage of horsemen single file.

A sharp challenge rang out from a shelf just above them, and Mel Hoff barked an answer.

Then they rode on through the rift and into a small, rock-walled inclosure perhaps a hundred yards square. The basin here was quite level, the center of it occupied by a good-sized log cabin.

A corral off to one side held a dozen restless broncs, the only sign of habitation. But almost immediately, three shadowy figures emerged from the cabin and strode to meet the arriving outlaws.

One of the men was tall and gangling. The other two were big hombres, bony and stoop-shouldered. Jim Dillion had no trouble picking out Bat Dufer and his right-hand man, Kit Snell. Both outlaws were famous.

Dufer was a little in the lead, and he came to a sudden halt at sight of a stranger, staring belligerently.

"Who yuh got here?" the outlaw snarled, and there was no mistaking the cold menace in his tone. His bat ears seemed to quiver and his short, thick neck hunkered closer to his big body. A slanting forehead gave a savage appearance that didn't in the least belie the cruelty of the inner man. "Who yuh got here, Hoff?" he barked again. "Ain't I told yuh not tuh bring strangers in hyar?"

"But, boss, this un's dif'rent!" protested Hoff. There was an edge of fear in his voice as he hurried on; "He broke jail with us, yuh see? He's a plumb gun-wise jigger that's sick o' punchin' cows, an' being in bad with the law now himself, he sort o' figgered he might be o' some use tuh yuh. Ain't that O. K., Bat?"

Dufer made low growls deep in his throat like a mad beast, as he surveyed Dillion. His hard face untroubled, the waddy sat unmoving in his saddle. But one hand rested close to his holstered six-gun. He gave Bat Dufer stare for stare.

"Feller," Dufer growled finally, "I want *tough* hombres in my crowd! Hombres that's been born with a gat in their hand—an' the urge tuh use 'em! Yuh don't look so——"

"How's this strike yuh?"

Dillion hardly appeared to move, yet a gun muzzle was gaping down at Dufer in the wink of an eye. The other outlaws, including Kit Snell, blinked and stared. But, hands on hips, Bat Dufer merely glared, making funny noises in his throat.

Then Dillion grinned stiffly and holstered his gun.

"Huh!" grunted Dufer disgustedly. "Yuh shuck a pretty nifty six, hombre," he growled. "Yeah—'most as fast as my best gunny here, Kit Snell. But I could 'a' killed yuh twict, while yuh was snakin' out that hogleg, feller!"

Dillion felt something like a cold draft run along his spine. Dufer's icy calm didn't leave much doubt in the waddy's mind but that the outlaw could do just what he had said he could.

Dufer's black eyes narrowed suddenly and he barked: "Yo're 'bout the first jigger that's had nerve tuh draw his shootin' iron on me—an' live, hombre! Mebbe I *could*



use a good gun thrower, if yuh've got nerve enough tuh kill, an' I believe yuh have!" The outlaw squinted at Dillion a moment, then grunted: "Yo're hired! Hunnerd a month, an' a split. Take it or leave it! Wouldn't even be int'r'sted, only three o' my other fellows got lead poisonin' recently an' died!"

Seeming to consider the deal closed, he whirled on Mel Hoff, Hub Norris, and Spud Davis.

"Yuh fellers come near ruinin' things, gettin' yerselves ketched on that last raid near Buxton! Lucky yuh *did* break jail! I'd never come after yuh, 'cause lawmen all over the State are hot on our trail right now! Give yore brons tuh Slim an' roll in fer some rest. Got another big raid comin' up that'll take plenty o' killin'!"

Whirling on his heel, Dufer returned to the cabin, Kit Snell following. Slim, the tall, gangly outlaw, came forward to take the horses, but Dillion gave him a hard stare.

"Cow-punchers take care o' their *own* brons, hombre!" he said flatly. "Look after the rest, if yuh like. But not mine, yuh don't!"

Startled, Slim halted. He seemed tempted to argue, then seemed to change his mind, no doubt remembering the speed of a certain hombre's draw of a few minutes before. Half grins on their faces, Hoff, Norris, and Davis turned their mounts over to him.

Then suddenly, from some place not far outside the outlaw fortress, there sounded the wailing notes of a fiddle!

Dillion dropped his reins to whirl face about. Almost as he turned, there was an angry bellow inside the cabin, and Bat Dufer came charging outside.

"What's that?" roared the outlaw

chief. Lips pulled back over uneven teeth, he glared at Mel Hoff. "Who's doin' that fiddlin'?"

"A feller that's agoin' tuh be the death o' us all!" moaned Spud Davis. "I told yuh——"

"Shut up!" snarled Hoff.

Without a backward glance, he turned and ran up a steep, steplike incline of rock which led to the sentinel's roost. Jim Dillion leaped after him without hesitancy.

On top they found a little, fat-faced hombre peering down in puzzled wonder, from the brink of a natural-rock parapet. A Winchester was in his hands, and as Hoff and Dillion ran up, the guard pressed the rifle against his cheek and fired.

Stepping to the brink, Dillion's hand whipped down, and the waddy's six-gun blended with the guard's rifle report. There wasn't a thing to be seen to shoot at, yet the two stood and sent several shots crashing down into the canyon.

Suddenly the music ended in a sharp squeak, and a pained yell lifted and echoed up the canyon. A moment later, there drifted back to the listening outlaws, the unmistakable sound of a riderless horse scampering wildly down the canyon. Then deep, moonlit silence.

Dillion turned to find that Dufer had just reached the parapet. Glancing at his boss, Mel Hoff looked like a man who has just had a hangman's noose cut from around his neck. His voice sounded hoarse, unnatural, as he spoke:

"Reckon that ends our fiddlin' pest!"

### III.

Sheriff Lem Purdy of Buxton was as hard-headed as a mule. But he also had his good points. One of them was that, if he started out to do a thing, he'd try hard to go



through with it, even if he felt he was wrong. Just now, deep in the fastness of a rock-walled canyon, his grizzled, hard-bitten face was lined with worry.

He had felt all along that Fiddlin', his deputy, had had the wrong idea about letting their four prisoners break jail in an attempt to trail them back to Bat Dufer's hide-out. But the past few miles had changed the lawman's views considerably. He knew now that Fiddlin' had been right. The trouble was, he and his posse were lost—hopelessly lost!

Somehow, in that maze of canyons back there, they had taken the wrong trail, had been following it almost an hour.

Keeping at a safe distance behind his deputy, Sheriff Purdy and his grim-faced posse of a dozen men had been fairly able to follow Fiddlin' by the far-carrying sound of his fiddle—and the occasional crack of guns that tried to ambush him.

Fiddlin' had welcomed every bit of gunfire that he could draw from those outlaws. The deputy's reckless exposure to ambush, and his fiddling, had served to keep the outlaws' minds off the possibility of a second party trailing them.

And by prearranged code—by playing certain tunes—he had relayed to the sheriff every important move taken by the outlaws—even to that last meal eaten beside the camp fire.

A few minutes earlier, there had drifted to the posse's ears, the far, faint echoes of shooting from across the steep-pinnacled ridge they were facing.

"Lost, by thunderation!" snarled Sheriff Purdy. "An' that's the third time to-night they've tried tuh dry-gulch that fool depity! If that ornery, no-count star-toter gits himself shot up by outlaws——"

The lawman didn't finish his sentence, but sat with his barrel-chested body leaning far forward in the saddle, mumbling.

A lone snicker sounded somewhere in the crowd, but went unnoticed. Not a man among them but who knew that, although Purdy lost no opportunity to run down his lanky deputy, he could get plenty concerned about him at times.

The Buxton lawman snapped suddenly erect. "Blast it, fellers, we can't let that depity down now! We just *got* to find that trail where we lost it, somehow!"

Slowly, they retraced their steps down the canyon. But it was slow, hard going, and nearly two hours had slipped by, before they found a route they believed to be the right one.

In that two hours, Purdy had plenty of time to give voice to his opinion of the rough country; not to mention things concerning the ancestry of a certain few outlaws. And also one wild and reckless deputy sheriff.

"That cussed Fiddlin' kin git himself inter more danged tight spots!" the lawman told no one in particular. "Shore hope we git thar in time!"

Suddenly, there came trotting nimbly down the canyon toward them, a riderless horse—Baldy! But there wasn't any sign of Fiddlin'.

Jim Dillion returned to the cabin after caring for his bronc, just as Bat Dufer and Kit Snell were kicking off their boots to roll into hard wall bunks. Most of the others had already turned in. But now and then some word was passed concerning happenings of the day. All talk ceased, as Dillion stepped into the cabin and stood for a moment, let-



ting his glance flicker around the dingy room.

A smoky oil lamp guttered on a crude table in the center of the room. Several chairs, badly in need of repair, were scattered about. A double-decked row of wall bunks to accommodate a dozen men, lined one side and an end of the cabin.

Dufer motioned a hand toward an empty bunk right across from his own.

"Feller died o' blood pizenin' from a gunshot wound that had that bunk," the outlaw said callously. "It's yores now, hombre."

Without the tiniest flicker of emotion on his gaunt face, Dillion nodded and strode over to the designated bunk. A moment later, his high-heeled boots thudded to the floor. Sitting on the edge of his bed, he fished brown paper and tobacco from a shirt pocket to make a cigarette. He smoked calmly, deliberately, his eyes studying a knot on the rough board floor.

Hub Norris, always aloof from the rest, began snoring softly in his bunk. Davis and Hoff, with bunks next to each other, carried on a low, erratic conversation, that presently ceased. Dufer and his right-hand man, Kit Snell, remained surly and noncommittal.

Slim came in shortly, muttering something about contrary broncs. He gave Dillion a queer look, then blew out the oil lamp and rolled into bed. Several cigarettes glowed in the semidark room; one of them belonged to Jim Dillion.

The waddy had put off rolling into bed as long as he could. The blankets actually reeked of body odor and vermin.

Dufer's voice through the darkness, grunted: "Slim, yo're on guard duty at daybreak, don't fer-

git. Some one else go dump that depity's carcass out o' sight in a crevice somewhere!"

It seemed a signal for silence, and Dillion rolled into his dirty bunk. His deep, even breathing sounded almost immediately. There was a small, mud-caked window right above where he lay, and a pale shaft of moonlight slanted across one end of his bunk.

The waddy might, or might not, have been surprised to know that Dufer had given him that bunk there in the moonlight for a purpose.

An hour passed, and not a move came from Dillion's humped-up shape under the covers. The moon almost bathed his bunk now, but the cowboy's breathing remained deep and regular.

Then suddenly there was a faint sound, hardly noticeable, outside the cabin. A faint groan sounded. Bat Dufer's bunk creaked, as the outlaw chief rose warily on one elbow. His eyes glowed in the darkness, and light glinted dully from the gun in his right hand.

Cautiously, he swiveled his big body around and set his sock feet out onto the floor. Snell reared up suddenly, but Dufer gave him a warning hiss.

As silent as a ghost, the outlaw chief edged across the floor, while Snell followed suit and also climbed from his bunk. Snell stopped in the middle of the room, waiting, as Dufer moved noiselessly toward Dillion's bunk.

A gun hammer clicked as it was thumbed back. A man's length from Dillion's bunk, Dufer halted.

"Now, yuh blasted spy, yo're gonna git what's comin' tuh yuh!" the outlaw croaked hoarsely. "I'll



fill yuh so full o' lead, yuh'll sink even in salt water! I'll——"

Some one broke off snoring abruptly, but it wasn't Dillion. He hardly stirred in his bunk, yet his voice, coming suddenly cold and brittle, showed that he had been awake all the while.

"Hold it, Dufer!" the cowboy grated softly. "Yuh kin kill me, yeah! But I'll have yuh so riddled, 'fore yuh git through, yuh'll look like a sieve yoreself! Didn't think I'd risk sleepin' among such a mangy bunch o' coyotes, did yuh? Course not! One leetle move out o' yuh, an' this yere six-gun'll talk through these dirty blankets that same instant!"

Dufer somehow knew suddenly that Dillion wasn't bluffing. And the outlaw's surprised, dismayed grunt, showed also that he knew fear.

Lithe as a cat, Jim Dillion tossed aside his blankets and swiveled his gaunt body around, getting slowly to the floor in his sock feet. The dull glint of the gun in his hand that had been hidden in an armpit holster, covered Dillion and Snell with cold deadliness.

Muttered curses from a couple of other sources, proved that the rest of the outlaw crowd had been awakened.

"Now, just what did yuh jaspers want?" inquired Dillion softly. "Wasn't figgerin' on startin' that killin' yuh mentioned sort o' premature, was yuh, Dufer?"

"Yuh blasted spy!" Dufer choked, his gun muzzle wavering. "Yo're in with the law, that's what yuh aire! An' yuh figgered tuh sneak out an' kill our guard after while, so's the rest o' yore badge-totin' friends could git in, didn't yuh? Yuh an' that fiddlin' deputy was workin' to-

gether, that's what! But yuh ain't gonna git away with it!"

"I've killed yore guard already—when I went tuh take care o' my bronc!" Jim Dillion said calmly.

"What?" Dufer's voice rose to a hoarse bellow. "Well, he'll find a dead spy on his hands, that deputy will!"

"An' some damned dead outlaws, too!" said Dillion softly.

*Crash! Crash! Br-rang!* The room suddenly reeled in an inferno of flaming guns, grunted curses, and the patter of bootless feet.

#### IV.

The volley of lead that ended Fiddlin's serenade below the outlaw's fortress did nothing more than clip a twig from a tree above his head. The sudden ending of the music and the pained yell were all put on. And Baldy, being a trick horse, ran off down the canyon, riderless, at a slap and a command from its master.

"An' now," the deputy muttered, "all I got to do is wait fer the comin' of Sheriff Purdy. I hope that bull-headed lawman didn't git himself lost along the way!"

Pulling a heavy timepiece from his pocket, Fiddlin' watched the hands move slowly around. Time after time, he overcame the desire for a cigarette, fearing that the odor or the light might warn some one.

The hour that passed, was to Fiddlin', the slowest he had ever known. Another hour got well under way, but still no sign of the sheriff or his posse. Fiddlin' suddenly put away his watch. Jerking out his .45, he spun the cylinder, slapped it back into its holster.

"Dog-gone it!" he muttered, starting cautiously off on foot toward the outlaw's hide-out. "My time's up,



an' I ain't agoin' to let Jim Dillion down! Reckon the two o' us'll have to shoot it out with Dufer's bunch alone!"

No guard challenged him at the entrance, and Fiddlin' grinned. Jim Dillion was carrying out his part to perfection. His brief notes, wrapped in a small wad of light-colored cloth and dropped in conspicuous places, had been a great help in keeping Fiddlin' posted. Or sometimes it would be merely a pile of signal stones or sticks.

And by playing his fiddle, Fiddlin' had talked with Dillion by the same

method that he had relayed messages to Sheriff Purdy. The stage was all set for the final swoop to clean out the outlaw's nest, lacking only Purdy and his posse.

There was no sign of lights in the cabin when Fiddlin' reached the interior of the hide-out. For a moment, the deputy stood in amazed silence, while he sized up his surroundings. The brightness of the full moon overhead made it easy for him to place objects, but it also made caution doubly necessary.

Crouched in the shadow of a huge boulder just inside the entrance, he

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felt for an instant a chill of apprehension at the deep silence hovering about the place.

Time and again, he had been uneasy about Jim Dillion. For Fiddlin' himself had planned the jail break, as well as the jailing of Dillion on trumped-up charges, all as a part of the trap to snare Dufer's outlaws. And the gaunt young waddy had accepted the rôle readily.

Suddenly, as he crouched in his hiding place, the deputy's blood froze. In the shadow of the cabin and crawling weakly toward the doorway, was what looked to Fiddlin' like a badly wounded man!

Could that figure be Dillion—ambushed by the outlaws?

Throwing caution aside, Fiddlin' leaped erect and ran noiselessly across the open space that separated him from the cabin. But even before he reached the shadows, he saw that the man wasn't Dillion. The hombre was little and fat-faced. Fiddlin' guessed correctly. It was the outlaw guard.

Dillion had balked at murdering a man outright, so he had challenged the guard there on the parapet. There had been a silent death struggle in the moonlight, with long-bladed knives. But Jim had suffered a gash along his ribs during the struggle, and it had been the stains on his shirt that had drawn Slim's curious glance when he came in from tending to the bronses.

Just as Fiddlin' reached the man, that hombre coughed out his last sobbing breath and died. Next instant, the deputy heard voices. Then suddenly, there came from inside the cabin, a shuddering crash that rocked the building on its foundation. Gunfire mingled with snarls of anger and pain.

Fiddlin' didn't have to be told what had happened. The black

outline of a doorway loomed before him as he raced that final few feet. Grabbing the door latch, he yanked the crude panel open and dove through, .45 Colt leaping into his left hand.

Snell staggered before the deputy's line of vision, clawing at his throat as he went down from one of Dillion's bullets. Then Fiddlin's eyes riveted on Spud Davis, scrambling from his bunk and clawing for a six-gun. Fiddlin's lead slapped that hombre in the chest, before the outlaw could even begin to clear leather.

Dillion had started the shooting. His first bullet had caught Dufer's shoulder as the outlaw ducked, spinning the man half around. Dillion's second shot had downed Snell, a bullet through the outlaw's throat. Hub Norris bobbed up in front of him, shooting with cold precision.

Dillion saw Dufer hauling himself erect, heard his mad bellow of rage. The waddy tried to bring his gun barrel up and around. But before he could get balanced for that split-second movement that meant life or death, he felt Dufer's lead sear along his shoulder; felt another bullet smash through the fleshy part of his thigh; still another plow a hot furrow along his throat.

The cowboy felt himself being hammered to the floor. To his blurred vision, it looked like there were two Bat Dufers shooting. Or was it three? Jim Dillion staggered and went down.

But as he fell, his eyes lit suddenly upon another figure that had leaped into the room. A charging figure that wielded a blazing gun in its hand. A lanky, left-handed deputy who had suddenly gone hog wild!

"Fiddlin'!" croaked Dillion, as he fainted.



Fiddlin's even white teeth were bared in a vicious snarl, as he threw two quick shots that cut Hoff and Slim down like chaff before a stiff breeze. Bat Dufer and Hub Norris, the only two outlaws remaining alive in the room within the space of fifteen seconds, whirled to meet this new menace.

Norris stood between his boss and Fiddlin'. The deputy's charge brought him within arm's length of the little outlaw, before Norris could get his hogleg lined up for a shot.

Fiddlin' didn't pull trigger. There were only two bullets left in his six-gun, and he wanted those for Bat Dufer.

The deputy's gun barrel rose and swept downward in a swift, smashing motion. Skull crushed and dead on his feet, Hub Norris toppled toward Fiddlin', a gun dangling from loosening fingers. Too fast for the eye to follow, the young lawman slapped his own nearly empty six-gun into his right hand, using the border shift. His left hand snatched Norris's falling weapon, swung it on Bat Dufer.

Dufer was making queer, growling noises deep in his throat, as he threw lead at Fiddlin'. His shot cut a hot slice along the deputy's ribs, bringing a trickle of warm fluid. Another bullet grazed the lawman's jaw.

Then Fiddlin' opened up on the man he had come to get, both six-guns blazing death.

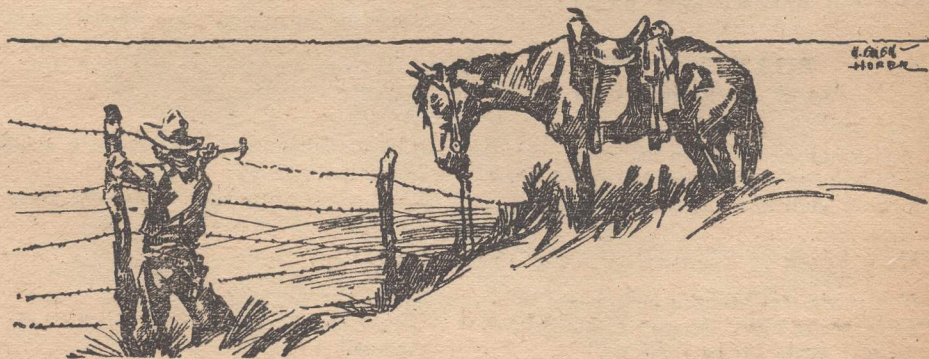
His bullets beat a tattoo against Dufer's broad chest, then hammers clicked on empty shells. Norris's gun had been nearly empty, too! The deputy leaped forward, raising both weapons for use as clubs. But it wasn't necessary.

The big outlaw reeled suddenly. Sprawling backward over a bunk, his cruel mouth began ebbing crimson, a death rattle filled his throat.

Fiddlin' ran across to Dillion and started ripping his shirt into strips. He had Dillion's wounds pretty well bandaged when the lean puncher came to. Jim Dillion shook himself and sat up weakly. Almost at the same instant, an angry shout outside announced that Sheriff Purdy and his posse had arrived—late and cussing furiously.

Dillion looked up into his friend's eyes and grinned.

"I'm O. K., pard," he muttered. "Just put me on the shelf a month, mebbe. But I needed a rest, anyway!" His glance raked the room, came back to Fiddlin's grinning face. "Spud Davis was right! Boy, yuh shore played 'em a death melody, feller! But yuh played it with six-guns this time—not fiddle strings!"







# Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is for the purpose of preserving the old cowboy songs and Western range ballads, and their history. Readers can help in this work by sending in any such songs that they know, especially those handed down by word of mouth by parents, grandparents, and other old-time Westerners. The story of the song, how it came to be written, and the facts on which it is based should accompany the words whenever possible.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

**H**OW are yuh, folks? Has the world been treatin' yuh right? I hope so! Anyhow, we're all heah, an' we kin fergit the world while we sing about our fav'rite part o' the country—the West.

Hyar's a pome thet our friend, O. Farrington Cain, of Oklahoma, sent us about the famous young outlaw:

## BILLY THE KID

By O. Farrington Cain

A lad rode into our ranch one day,  
And asked for a job on the range;  
He looked kind o' pale like a kid out of school,  
But the glint in his eyes never changed.

I says, "You're too young, fightin' men's what I need,  
Not youngsters like you with a gun."  
"Mebbe you're right," he says with a grin,  
"And I guess I'll be ridin' on."

I says, "If you'll stay we will ride into town,  
And talk to Sheriff McFall."

He says, "I am looking for a job on the range  
And not for sheriffs at all.

"I am nearly eighteen and not very big,  
My hands may look kind o' small,  
But handling a gun is a trade of my own,  
I care nothing about Sheriff McFall.

"A man up the way said you wanted gunmen,  
I thought I could make you a hand,  
He said you was losing cattle each day  
By some mysterious band."

I laughed as he talked and thought it a joke,  
For a kid no bigger than he  
To talk about catching such fellows as bold  
As "Big Bill" and Ed McCree.

He finished his meal and was ready to go.  
He says, "You don't understand,  
A fellow may be kind o' small for his age  
And still he may be a man."



The sheriff rode in for supper that night,  
He said he's been ridin' all day,  
The man he was hunting came down through  
the gap,  
He said he was ridin' a bay.

His hair was light, his eyes like steel,  
His teeth stood out when he'd smile,  
He says he's a killer and not very old.  
He had followed him many a mile.

He told me of a fight he had back in the hills  
With this man that was ridin' the bay;  
He shot his way out of a very close place  
And escaped at the break of day.

He told of his killing a lawman, an' rustlin'  
A dozen other things that he'd did.  
Imagine my surprise when this sheriff said,  
"That lad was Billy the Kid!"

I reckon yuh'll join me in thankin'  
O. F. Cain fer thet one, eh, folks?

An' now let's have a fine old-timer, a  
song yuh could sing ag'in an' ag'in an'  
never git tired of, since it's chock-full  
o' the spirit of the West:

#### THE RAMBLING COWBOY\*

I am a jolly bold cowboy  
Just from the stormy plains;  
And if ever there was a hell on earth  
It was holding my bridle reins.

\* Published by kind permission of M. E. Henry and the Journal of American Folklore, from his article entitled: "Still More Ballads and Folk Songs from the Southern Highlands," in Volume 45 for January-March, 1932.

My papa always taught me well  
And give me good advice;  
My mind it was on rambling,  
And we could not agree.

As I walked up the street one day,  
Just across from the market square,  
The mail coach, it had just arrived  
To the post office.

They handed me down a letter  
That I might understand,  
The girl I left behind me  
Had married another man.

The city I would lay aside;  
This country I'll resign;  
I'll ramble-ramble from town to town  
And find that girl of mine.

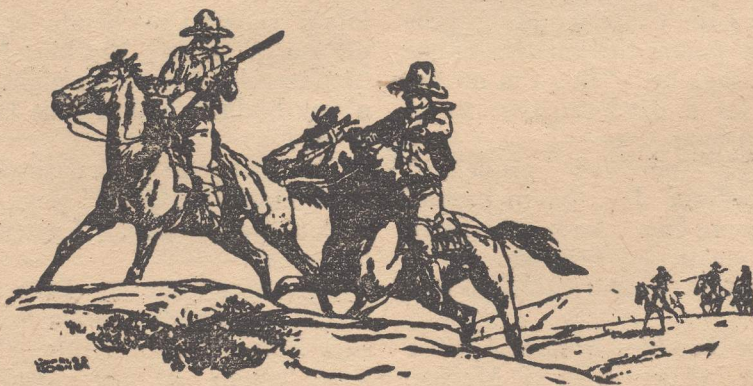
I'm just arrived from buffalo range,  
Corn dodger is my bread;  
The dearest one to me is gone,  
I almost wish I was dead!

My papa always taught me well  
And give me good advice,  
To quit my rough and rowdy ways  
And choose me a loving wife.

There's a girl in Baxter Springs—  
They call her the Rising Sun;  
She has broken the hearts of nine boys,  
And this poor heart is one.

And when they see me coming home,  
They wring their hands with joy,  
And treat me on fresh bottles of wine,  
And call me their old cowboy.

Thar yuh be, folks, an' more power  
to yuh. So long an' good luck.







# The Wranglers Corner

The Range Boss will be glad to consider contributions from beginners and amateur writers and artists.

The contributions will be judged on their merits as amateur contributions. The work of professionals is not desired.

Manuscripts should preferably be typed, on one side of the paper only, and double-spaced. However, full consideration will be given to manuscripts neatly hand-written in ink.

The author's name and address and age should appear on the first page.

Stories should not exceed five hundred words, and verses should not exceed twenty lines. Only Western subjects should be chosen.

Drawings should be in India ink on plain white paper. No pencil or crayon drawings can be used. Only Western subjects should be chosen.

All published material will be paid for at good space rates.

Manuscripts that are not used cannot be returned, but an effort will be made to return drawings, provided it is especially requested, and a stamped, addressed envelope is inclosed for that purpose.

Address all contributions to the WRANGLERS CORNER, c/o Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WE was jest gittin' ready ter start goin' through the mail bag, when in comes the Whistlin' Kid.

"Hope I ain't late fer hearin' the stories an' pomes the amachooors has sent in," says he. "But I'm on the lookout fer a cattle rustler, an' I can't stop long. So——"

"Ef it's me yuh suspicion," groans Sufferin' Joe, "yo're barkin' up the wrong tree. An hombre with my rheumatiz an' lumbago an' a weak heart ain't out rustlin' no cow critters."

"Mebbe Freckles Malone is yore man, Kid," chuckles Risky McKee.

"He might be doin' the rustlin' when he's s'posed ter be ridin' the Pony Mail."

"Yeah, a Pony Mail rider's got lots o' time on his hands fer drivin' off stock," snorts Freckles Malone. "I never'd got yere ter-night ef one o' my buddies hadn't rode the mail fer me."

"Did yuh ever think o' suspicionin' Slim Harkness, Kid?" says Risky, with a straight face. "I bet yuh he's the waddy——"

"Give me time ter l'arn all the ins an' outs o' the cattle business," says Slim. "Then mebbe I'll be a shore 'nough bad longlooper."



"Reckon the Kid ain't worryin' 'bout thet," we speaks up. "But seein's the Kid's in a hurry, let's git arter them stories fust off. Hyar's No. 1."

## SUG SCHWARTZ RIDES AGAIN

By Frederic Knollhoff—Age 16

Hannibal, Missouri.

A short time after the death of "One-shot" Keil, Sug Schwartz was given a surprise visit while he was busy unloading a month's supply from Leyton. "Frosty" Bennet loped up to the ranch house on a leggy, shaggy sorrel horse.

"You the owner of this spread?" growled Frosty.

"Yep," grunted Sug, as he rolled a barrel of flour off the wagon.

"Waal, my boss, Alden Miller, sent me yere to tell you he has important-like business to talk to you about."

Sug knew that Alden Miller was the owner of the bank, the general store and post office as well as the Silver Bell Saloon and gambling house.

"What's he want?" growled Sug, for he knew that every one suspected Miller of being the chief of a band of rustlers, but no one could prove it.

"I dunno," grudgingly answered Frosty.

Saddling up his Black Diamond horse, Sug rode to the town of Leyton to see Alden Miller.

Entering Leyton from the west, Sug and Frosty rode along its one narrow, dusty street. On each side of the street glared unpainted false-fronted buildings. Near the end of the street was a faded sign which read:

ALDEN MILLER

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Walking up the narrow and rickety steps of the Silver Bell, Sug entered the office of Alden Miller. Looking around the well-furnished room, his keen gaze noted everything.

Sug sat down and looked at the paunchy, well-clothed Alden Miller. Draped across his expansive chest hung a huge gold chain, threaded through the middle buttonhole of his vest, and held on one end was an enormous silver watch.

There across the table from Miller sat a young man of about twenty, six feet in height and as brown as an Apache. His faded blue shirt looked as if it would spit open each time he moved the upper part of his body. His red calfskin vest was shiny from the burns of lass ropes. His blue denim pants were stuffed in the tops of

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scuffed black boots which carried a pair of dull-rowel spurs.

Hung low on his left thigh was a bone-handled Colt .45. The butt jutted forward so that a lightning-fast cross-hand draw could be made. A closer observance would have shown that the gun was triggerless.

Clearing his throat, Miller gave his business speech to Sug. He plainly told Sug that he wanted Sug's little Crescent O for a place to keep prime steers in shape for shipment.

Sucking in his breath in astonishment, Sug arose from his chair and gave Miller his refusal, for he now knew that Miller was the rustler chief. When he turned to leave the room, he found himself looking down the barrel of a Colt, but Frosty Bennett held the business end.

Glancing down at the floor, Sug saw a brown piece of paper which had fallen from his pocket. Frosty, attracted also, allowed his attention to be drawn from his prisoner. With lightninglike speed, Sug's right foot shot out, catching Frosty's right wrist. In the same lightning speed, his right hand shot to his left thigh, coming forth spitting fire and lead.

Seeing this amazing change of events,

Miller charged through the door and down the steps, for he knew he was next.

"Señor Knollhoff has sold ter the Corner before, ain't he?" asks Freckles Malone.

"He shore has," we replies, "an' mebbe thet'll prove we welcomes writers an' potes an' artists back."

"Speakin' o' po'try," says Risky McKee, "thar seems ter be a lot o' mail askin' fer more of it, Boss."

"An' we aims ter give it ter 'em," we tells him. "But we'll git round ter the po'try later. Hyar's another story."

#### THE FIGHTIN' RANNY

By Charles V. Briguglio—Age 19  
Lanark, West Virginia

It was noon when Tom Clark rode his weary horse down the dusty main street of Twin Falls, a little cow town, on the edge of the desert.

"Gosh, it's hot," muttered Tom, as he

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halted his horse beside several horses tied to the hitch rail in front of the saloon and dismounted.

Tom Clark was a young man in his early twenties. He stood six feet in his boots, and would tip the scale at about one hundred and seventy-five pounds. Around his slim waist he wore a cartridge belt, with a holstered Colt low on his thigh.

He tied his horse to the hitch rail and stepped up on the sidewalk, at the same time loosening the Colt in his holster. He pushed the swinging doors of the saloon open with his left hand and strode inside.

Then the sight that met his eyes caused him to stop in his tracks, and a deadly glint crept into his eyes. The saloon was half full of hombres. All had their backs turned to Tom and seemed to be watching a fight between an old man and a large hombre dressed in the garb of a gambler. The old man, who was dressed in the clothes of a rancher, had his face beaten into a pulp.

"Call me a cheat, eh?" snarled the gambler as his hamlike fist crashed into the old man's face, sending him crashing backward into a table.

The old man lay against the table, shaking his head from one side to the other, trying to clear the fog from his brain.

"Sure yo're a cheat," he said in a short gasp, "I caught yuh cheating, yuh skunk?"

No one had seen Tom enter the saloon: The first they knew of his presence was when he brushed a couple of hombres out of his way and laid a hand on the gambler's shoulder and spun him around.

"Yuh ain't perticular on whom yuh pick tuh fight, aire yuh, Mistuh Skunk?" Tom snarled at the surprised gambler.

"Why—why, yuh interfein' skunk," snarled the gambler, "I'll learn yuh tuh —" And at the same time, he swung a hamlike fist at Tom's face.

Tom saw the blow coming and dodged; then he lashed out with his right fist, with all his strength behind it. It caught the gambler in the mouth, knocking him to the floor, red gushing from his lips.

"I'll get yuh fer this," he snarled as he climbed to his feet. Then, like lightning, his hand streaked for his gun.

*B-r-ang! Wham!* Both drew and fired at the same time, but Tom fired a fraction of a second sooner. His bullet caught the gambler in the arm, causing him to drop his gun.

"Don't shoot again!" said the gambler in a shaky voice, as Tom trained his gun on him. "I'll give back the dinero I cheated from Henderson and leave town if yuh let me go."

"All right," snapped Tom. "Pay back the dinero yuh cheated at cards an' shake the dust from this town."

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With his left hand, the gambler reached into his pocket and brought out a handful of bills, which he threw on the table beside the old man, and left without a word.

"Gosh, I don't know how tuh thank yuh, kid," said the old man, as he picked up the bills and approached Tom.

"Yuh needn't try, old-timer," Tom laughed. "Forget it."

"My name's Jake Henderson, owner of the Circle B Ranch, and if there's anything I can do fer yuh—"

"There is something yuh can do fer me," Tom interrupted, "yuh can give me a job on yore ranch."

"Yuh aire on," said Henderson; then in a loud voice, he shouted: "Come on, hombres, belly up to the bar! The drinks are on me. A toast to my new cowboy!"

"Thet's a good un, too," says Slim Harkness. "Got another'n, Boss?"

"Right hyar," we says. "Then thet'll be enough stories fer one night, an' we'll git ter the pomes."

### PHANTOM CATTLE

By Ira Correll

Tacony, Colorado

"D-did you see what I seen, sheriff?" stammered his friend and lifelong partner, Bart Ross, as the two crouched behind a large boulder. "In all my days as a waddy, I've never seen the equal."

"I ain't never seen the equal nor heard tell of it," said Sheriff Sam Todd. "Were we trailin' a bunch of rustled cattle, or was we trailin' ghosts? I know it was dark when we entered this canyon not far behind the cattle, but here we are with plenty of moonlight, and nothing in this dog-gone canyon but a purty waterfall a-gleamin' and a-glitterin'. Reckon I'd ever make a poet, Bart?"

"I don't know about that, but you ain't goin' to make a sheriff this fall if you don't solve this riddle of cows disappearing right under our eyes. Let's get out of here and wait until daylight. I'm gettin' the creeps."

Daybreak found the two men again behind the same boulder, secretly ashamed of their weakness of the night and as secretly determined to see things through to a finish, if it took them a year.

"I'll look for tracks on the right side of the canyon, you on the left," ordered the sheriff. "If I find an opening, I'll swing my Stetson twice. Same sign goes for you."

"If we find nothin'?"

"I'll see you at the waterfall."



Along the bank of the stream, around every bend and curve, the two men searched diligently as the sun rose higher and higher. About ten o'clock, the sheriff impatiently waited for Bart at the waterfall.

"Nary a sign, huh?" as the second arrival shook his head. "Cattle must go somewhere. An' if they go somewhere, they're bound to leave tracks here and there. Unless, of course, they took wings and flew over the top of this here display of nature. Whew, but it's hot in this canyon! I'm about to roast."

"Me for a shower!" shouted Bart. "The trackin' kin wait for a few minutes."

Shedding his clothes, he stepped under the stinging drops of water.

As the sheriff watched Bart dancing under the water, he was startled by the disappearance of his friend for a moment, and even more than startled by his sudden return.

"Give me my pants, quick! There's a tunnel behind there and cow tracks by the hundred dozen. Sheriff, our phantom fears are over!"

Equally excited, the sheriff shoved on one boot, trying to help, and in a moment, the trailers rode under the waterfall, into a half-gloomy tunnel.

"Get yore gun, ready, old-timer," said Sam. Silencing their horses with a quiet touch, they emerged into a glorious little valley whose beauty for the moment was lost to them as they trained their guns on three unsuspecting men.

"Reach!" said the sheriff.

"Sam, there's our phantom cows eatin' away to their hearts' content."

"A perfect layout for rustlers," the sheriff added as he finished snapping handcuffs on his three prisoners.

"Thet un's sort o' spooky," says Sufferin' Joe. "I hopes I never runs inter a herd o' them phantom cow critters. I got miseries enough without takin' on shocks an' horrors."

"It strikes me," says the Whistlin' Kid, "thet the ages o' the amachooors covers a purty wide range. It shows thet they're all enterin' the spirit o' the new Corner an' makin' it a grand game."

"An' we're gittin' some amazin' good work from them amachooors, too," we reminds him. "Don't fergit thet. Ef I don't miss my guess, yuh'll see some o' their names in the main part o' 3W one o' these days. Waal, hyar's the po'try."



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## PIZEN PETE'S MISTAKE

By Merrill Honey

Richford, Vermont

It was in the Yellow Dog Saloon one sultry summer night, Old "Pizen Pete" was on the prod and looking for a fight.

With a .45 in either hand, red whiskers and long hair,

"Twas enough to make a man turn pale to see him standing there.

And then there came into the room, as the swinging doors swung wide,

A young lad of scarce twenty years, with a gun on either side.

He did not look to right or left as he walked up to the bar,

And leaning there he calmly said: "A big drink of Three Star."

He raised the whisky to his lips; Pizen Pete stepped back with a sneer;

His six-gun roared and, as it did, the glass seemed to disappear.

The stranger slowly turned around, and I saw his face turn red;

"Do that again, old-timer, and I'll burn yuh down!" he said.

"Go ahead and draw," said Pete, with a grin; his own gun was in his hand.

"Just make a move for your six-gun, an' I'll kill yuh where yuh stand!"

The youngster quickly jumped aside, and his guns began to roar,

And when the smoke had cleared away, Pizen Pete lay on the floor.

"Say, stranger, what's your name?" I asked. "It seems like I've seen your face."

He didn't turn or answer, but quickly left the place.

He went out and mounted his pony; I heard him as he did.

And then his voice came drifting back: "My name is Billy the Kid."

## OLD PINTO

By Anna Warkentin

Beaver City, Oklahoma

Ol' Pinto dozed 'neath the noonday sun,  
Within the old corral.

His master oiled his ol' six-gun,  
Swore to make each bullet tell.

Ol' Pinto awoke with a snort of fear  
A strange scent he had caught.

His master was old and did not hear  
Sounds the breezes brought.

Ol' Pinto stands in the old corral.

The sun is sinking low,  
His master lies just as he fell,  
Gun untouched by hand aged slow.



# THEY KNOW

By Oney Wright—Age 16  
Axton, Virginia

The stars are up in heaven,  
But they seem to know that I  
Am longing for the prairies  
And the Western sky.

They know that I am longing  
For the mountains and desert sand,  
They know that my heart belongs  
Out there in that blessed land.

Oh, why did I ever leave it!  
Oh, why did I ever roam  
Out here to this Eastern city,  
For I never can call it my home.

They know I'll go back some day  
To the land that I love best,  
They know that unless I get there,  
My heart will see no rest.

They know I can't stay in this city,  
With its noise and cooped-up air.  
I'm going back to the prairies,  
Where the sky is always fair.

I'm going back to my mountains  
And the land that I love best,  
And there I'll stay till the Range Boss  
Calls me to heaven to rest.

# OLD MISERY

By Herman Bee—Age 65

I'm a buckin' bronchobuster,  
But my hair is turnin' gray.  
My limbs are growin' stiffened,  
And I've just about saw my day.

I used to ride with "Misery"  
In the wild and woolly West.  
I loved him as a pardner;  
In a pinch, he proved the best.

He used to drink hot whisky.  
He didn't care for beer.  
And the crack of good old .45s  
Was music to his ear.

He groaned and growled and bellyached,  
But fought for law and order,  
As good a hand as e'er drove steers  
Along the Texas border.

But when old Misery's time had come,  
I 'spect he was laid away  
Somewhere in a Boot Hill grave,  
Till he bellyaches Judgment Day.

"It's way beyond my bedtime,"  
says Sufferin' Joe. "Me fer the blankets!"

"Fer once," we chuckled, "we  
shares yore complaint, Joe. *Buenas  
noches, waddies!*"

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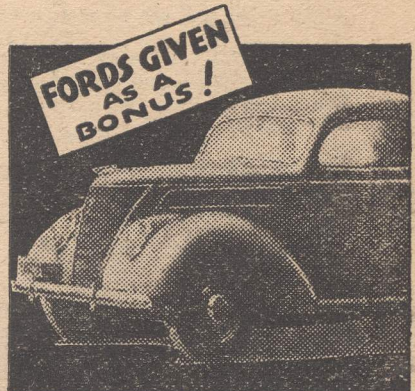
housewives in many localities are waiting right now to be served with these nationally famous products. Wilbur Whitcomb, Ohio, reported \$146.00 clear profits in a week; Hans Coordes, Neb., \$96.40 in a week; Clare C. Wellman, N. J., \$96.00 in a week; Mrs. H. H. Hosick, Neb., \$41.73 her very first week; W. J. Way, Kan., \$19.10 in one day. These exceptional earnings show YOUR possibilities.

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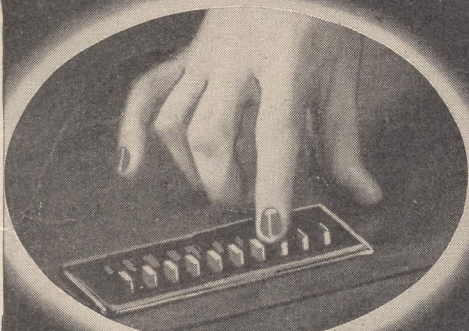
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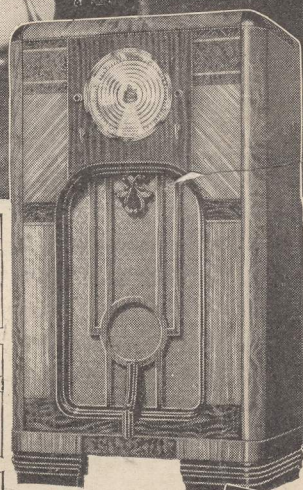
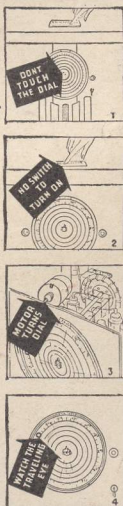
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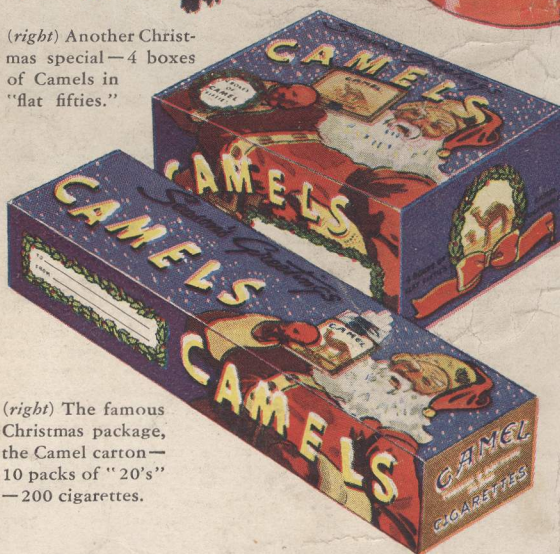


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