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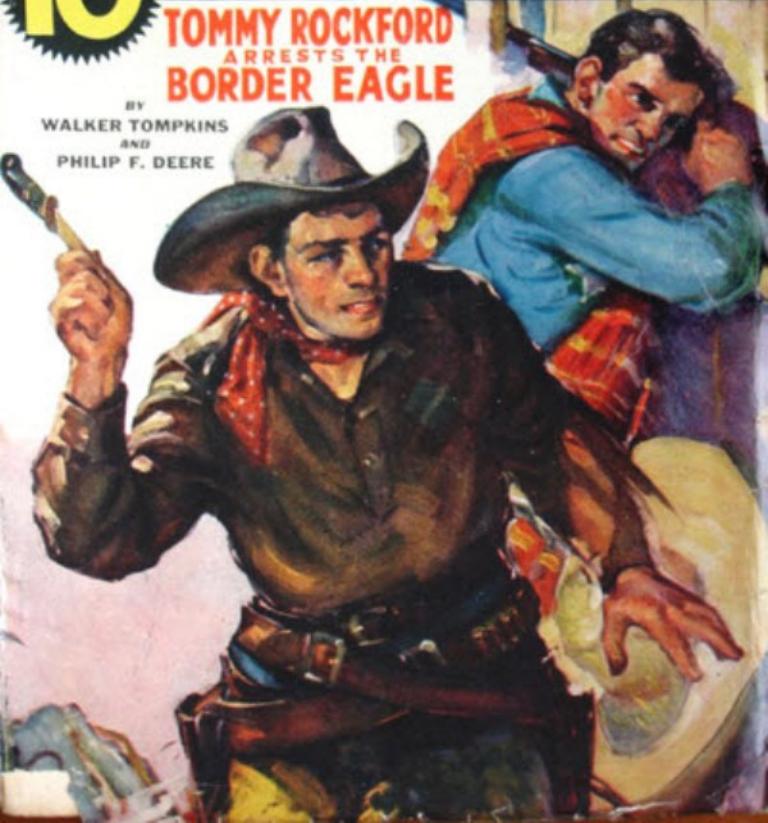
JAN. 22, 1938

10

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

TOMMY ROCKFORD ARRESTS THE BORDER EAGLE

BY
WALKER TOMPKINS
AND
PHILIP F. DEERE



"IT WAS LIGHT IN A WILDERNESS OF DARKNESS TO ME"

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Vol. 116, No. 6 CONTENTS FOR JANUARY 22, 1938 Whole No. 1840

Cover Picture—Scene from "Tommy
Rockford Arrests The Border Eagle" Painted by A. L. Ross

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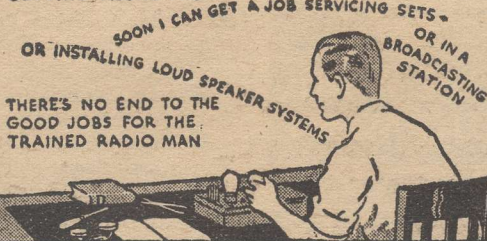


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PARDNERS

By ARTHUR L. RAFTER

"Shoshone Charley" was rough an' hard,
An' seemed to be allus mad,
But he gentled down for "Chip," his pard,
Yuh could see that he loved the lad.
They've been ridin' the stage for about a week,
An' Charley does nothin' but blow
That he's the bird who busted the beak
Of the bandit, "Greaser Joe."

So we has to listen to Charley rage,
As we're breathin' the heat an' sand,
For he's busy hopin' that this here stage
Will be stopped by the Greaser's band.
As we're crossin' the shelf at Painted Rock,
We hear a shot an' a shout;
The stage stops quick, with a sudden shock,
An' the hull of us tumbles out.

The Greaser hisself is waitin' there,
An' he lines us along the trail,
An' our hands is pointin' up in the air,
As two robbers git the mail.
Then the Greaser stares at Charley hard,
With a smile that is kind o' froze,
An' he hisses: "I recognize yuh, pard.
Yo're the skunk that broke my nose."

Then Charley turns a sickish white,
As he stares at the killer's gun,
An' he shivers an' shakes, in mortal fright,
For he knows that his race is run.
Chip digs for his Colt, behind his back,
But before he kin git to shoot,
The Greaser hits Chip's head a crack,
An' drops the game galoot.

Then Shoshone Charley goes plumb wild.
He grabs the Greaser hisself,
An' swingin' him just like he was a child,
Knocks the holdup men from the shelf.
Then he gives the Greaser a final flip,
Clear over the canyon rim,
Then Charley says, as he points at Chip,
"He shouldn't 'a' picked on him."





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Tommy Rockford Arrests The Border Eagle



By Walker Tompkins
and Philip F. Deere

CHAPTER I.

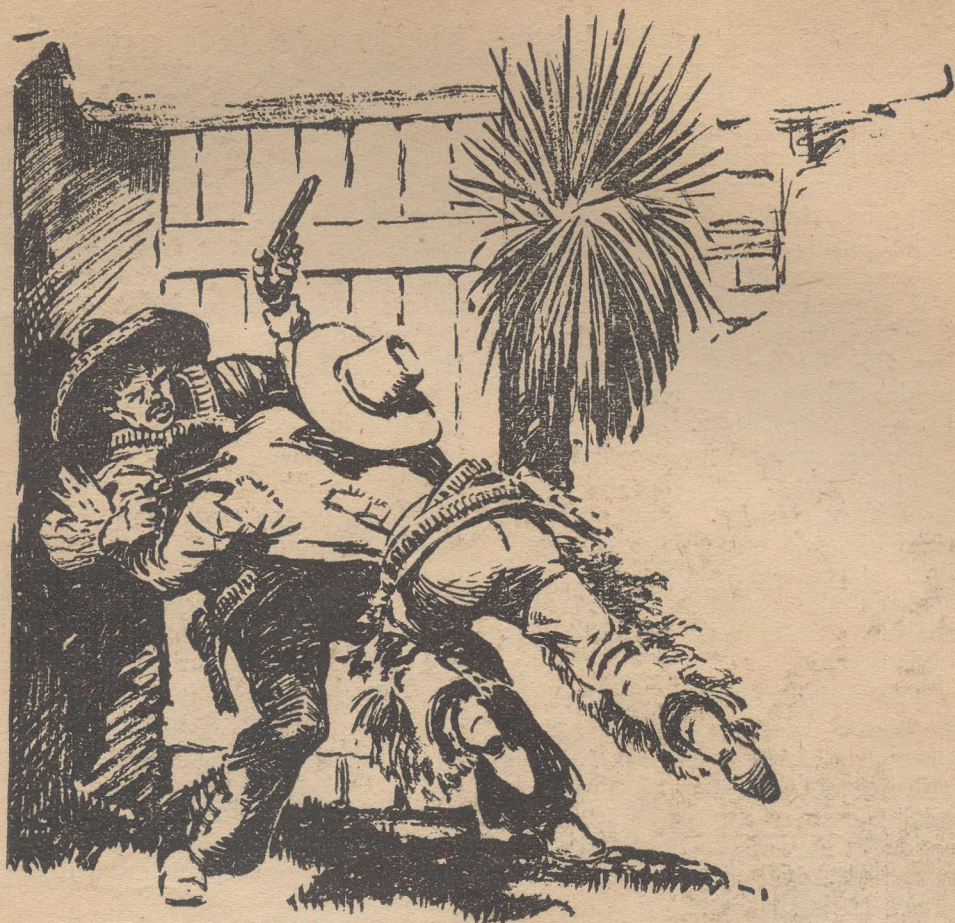
ONE MINUTE LATE.

ABOVE the lash of rain on the shingle roof of the Blue Spider Saloon sounded a sharp clatter of hoofbeats on the rocky street outside. The sound made "Scarribs" Crocker freeze in the act of downing a stiff jolt of whisky from

the bottle he had just ordered at the bar.

"Yuh hear them broncs, Dirkin?" gasped the hairy-faced outlaw, dropping the bottle to whirl and place his back against the mahogany bar. "It's Sheriff Nick Petticorn an' that sidewindin' young railroad dick, Tommy Rockford! They figured I'd light a shuck fer Mineralville tuh-night, I reckon!"

Crocker's two .45s were in his hands as he finished speaking, his beady eyes trained on the water-



streaming panes of "Bleary" Dirkin's front window.

The pot-bellied hombre behind the Blue Spider bar wiped his hands on a gunny-sack apron and waddled toward the door.

"Put up them smoke poles, Crocker!" ordered the saloon keeper gruffly, crossing the sawdust floor. "Ain't it bad enough, you robbin' that train an' murderin' a U. S. marshal in yore git-away, without leadin' the law tuh my place? I ain't allowin' no shootin' hyar tuh-night, savvy?"

Scar-ribs Crocker cursed low in his throat, as he heard the horses halt outside. For two days, the outlaw had been flogging his worn-

out bronc across the Utah bad lands, making for Arizona and the hide-out saloon run by Bleary Dirkin on the boundary between the two States.

Not a half day's ride behind him had come the relentless lawmen who had taken Dirkin's trail not an hour after Crocker had derailed the Rainbow Flyer out of Salt Lake, killing a mail guard and a United States marshal and escaped in a hail of lead without a penny of loot.

Sheriff Nick Petticorn was the least of Crocker's worries; it was the two-legged bloodhound named Tommy Rockford who had so relentlessly ferreted out Crocker's get-away trail. Rockford, one of the

West's most famous railroad detectives, hounding him across half a State, rode a Kentucky thoroughbred that seemed tireless.

Several times in the past few days of bad-lands travel, Crocker had glimpsed Rockford and the Salt Lake sheriff, but as yet the lawmen had not seen their quarry.

A howling rainstorm had covered Crocker's tracks, and he had headed for the shelter of Dirkin's Blue Spider Saloon in the remote mining town of Mineralville.

He had relaxed for the first time in three days, preparing to forget himself in whisky. But now the thud of hoofs out on the rain-puddled street sent pangs of terror through the outlaw's body. Had the law already trailed him to Dirkin's place?

"Yo're right, Crocker!" snarled the bartender hoarsely, as he peered through a knot hole near the big slab door of the saloon. "Two gun-hung hombres are dismountin' at the hitch bar, an' I wouldn't be surprised if they had tin stars pinned under their slickers."

With a squawk of fear, the train bandit trailed his spurs across the sodden, mud-tracked sawdust which covered the floor and squinted through the knot hole.

Crocker's ugly face twisted with panic as he recognized the broad backs of the two slicker-clad riders who were busy looping bridle reins over the hitch bar, their movements dimly visible in the faint yellow lamplight from the Blue Spider's lone window.

"It's Tommy Rockford an' the sheriff, all right!" groaned the crook, cocking his six-guns frantically. "I'll kill——"

Bam! A short, stunning jab to Crocker's temple stung the barkeep's

knuckles and made the crook's trigger fingers go lax on deadly steel.

"No, yuh don't, Crocker!" rasped the Blue Spider boss, jerking the Colts from the outlaw's grasp and then hauling the trembling bandit over to the bar. "The law's jest lookin' fer a chance tuh close my place up, an' you ain't bushwhackin' them two John Laws here!"

Crocker's face went yellow with terror. "I'll pay yuh anything, Bleary," he babbled desperately, "if yuh'll hide me. They'll hang me if yuh don't——"

"Shut up!" Dirkin barked the words, as he whipped a pad of paper from his apron belt, a small tablet used to figure up bills for patrons in his restaurant adjoining. "I'll write yuh a note of interduction tuh my pard Pancho Simion, down on the Mex line. The best thing you kin do is high-tail it south. I'll do what I kin tuh stall off them lawmen."

Scribbling hastily on the tablet, Dirkin shoved the note and the two guns into Crocker's trembling hands.

"Yuh kin borrow one o' my hosses out in the stable," clipped the bartender, as he gave the train robber a shove toward a rear door. "Ride fast while yuh got this rainstorm tuh wipe out yore sign, amigo, or yore chances are——"

But Scar-ribs Crocker was gone, a draft of air from the rear door making the flames jump on the bar-room lamp wicks. A fraction of a second after the fugitive had vanished into the blackness of the night by the rear door, a clumping of boots sounded on the blue Spider porch.

Moving swiftly for a beefy hombre, Bleary Dirkin got behind his counter and was busy polishing a beer glass when the slab door swung

open to admit a pair of six-foot men clad in rain-shiny slickers, on the outside of which were buckled cartridge belts and holstered six-guns.

"Evenin', gents! Belly up tuh the bar!" greeted Dirkin uneasily, his eyes widening like moons as he observed the glint of lamplight on the gold-plated .45s reposing in the holsters of the younger of the two men. "Bad night out, huh?"

Tommy Rockford—the ruddy-faced, gray-eyed hombre who owned the golden Peacemakers—shot his glance about the room. The lanky sheriff at his side did likewise, hands on gun butts.

"Never mind the weather, Dirkin!" snapped the young railway dick. "We been trailin' a murderin' skunk named Scar-rib Crocker, an' his cayuse is hitched outside yore joint. Whar yuh hidin' him?"

Dirkin paled and licked his flabby lips nervously. "Never—never heard o' Crocker, let alone seen him inside o' my place!" panted the bartender, as the two lawmen advanced grimly to the bar. "Jest 'cause he hitched his hoss——"

Sheriff Nick Petticorn's eyes flashed dangerously. "We know you offer refuge tuh owl-hooters, Bleary," he growled, "an' it won't do yuh no good tuh bluff us. Crocker is hidin' in hyar somewhere an'——"

A low cry from Tommy Rockford caused Petticorn to glance swiftly about. He was in time to see the young railway dick slide a coal-oil lamp down the bar, blow it out, and then wipe a forefinger inside the sooty chimney.

"What's the idea, Tommy?" questioned Petticorn, as he saw Rockford slide a pad of tablet paper over to the edge of the bar and start rubbing his sooty finger over the sheet.

"I got a hunch we're about one

minute too late tuh grab Scar-ribs Crocker," commented Tommy Rockford. "The way the light was shinin' on this tablet o' paper, I seen whar our friend Dirkin had scribbled a note on it plumb recent. I got a hunch he give that note tuh Crocker!"

Dirkin made a gagging sound in his throat, as he saw Tommy Rockford carefully blacking the surface of the sheet of paper that had been under the note he had written for Scar-ribs Crocker a moment before.

His clumsy fingers had pushed the dull stub of pencil too hard on the paper, leaving an impressed duplicate on the sheet beneath which now stood out distinctly in white across the area of paper that Rockford had smudged with lamp soot.

The two lawmen bent sombreroed heads together and read:

PANCHO SIMION: This will interdooce my good friend Scar-ribs Crocker, who is in a tight mess. It will be a favor to me if you hide him out in yor joint for a few weeks. Crocker will pay you well. He's desprit. Yur password used to be "whisky straight" but if you hev changed the password since don't hold it agin Scar-ribs because he's dependin' on this note to git into yor place.

Yore amigo,
BLEARY DIRKIN

Mineralville, Ariz.

Sheriff Petticorn looked up, eyes gleaming with admiration.

"Tommy, yo're a top-notch detective if ever I seen one!" he exclaimed. He grinned, but then his face sobered, and flushed red with anger as he glared across the bar at the shivering Dirkin. "But with both our hosses footsore an' us not knowin' what trail Crocker took out o' Mineralville, it means we've lost the skunk!"

Tommy Rockford made his way to a rear door for a glance out into

the storm-whipped night. He shook his head regretfully.

"Crocker has made his git-away tuh-night," answered the railway dick, "but I happen tuh know whar that Mexican crook, Pancho Simion, has his hide-out. With thet pass-word tuh work with, I reckon I'll ride down tuh the Mex border an' snag Crocker, sheriff!"

Petticorn did not answer. He was busy jabbing a .45 into Bleary Dirkin's paunch, arresting the bartender for helping a vicious criminal to escape.

CHAPTER II.

THE BORDER EAGLE.

A SOMBREROED and chap-clad rider drew rein alongside a weather-beaten mail box which bore the words:

TNT Ranch
Trigger Trenton, Owner.

Leaning from the saddle and reaching inside, the handsome young cowboy drew forth a single envelope marked "Urgent."

"Waal, Fleetfoot, wonder who kin be writin' me from Salt Lake City," mused "Trigger" Trenton, as he ripped open the envelope. "It's addressed tuh me under my nickname o' the 'Border Eagle.' So it must have somethin' tuh do with lawin'."

The "Border Eagle" was the best known United States marshal in Arizona, despite the fact that he had retired from active duty to pursue his chosen work, that of cattle ranching.

Just turned twenty-three, the Eagle was a husky specimen of Western manhood, from the peak of his coffee-brown Stetson to his spike-heeled boots. He wore a green shirt, spotted calfskin vest, brown bull-hide chaps, and belted six-guns with white ivory stocks—.45s which the

Border Eagle had made famous during his career as a marshal.

Opening the letter from Salt Lake, Trig Trenton's brow furrowed with interest as he read a scrawled message under the letterhead of Sheriff N. F. Petticorn, Mormon County, Utah:

DEAR MR. TRENTON: I have heard lately that you have retired from law work since you corralled that Mexican bandit, the Scarlet Snake, and broke up his gang.

However, as one lawman to another, I thought it my duty to let you know that one of the West's most "wanted" skunks is heading toward your neck of the woods, an' you might be able to do the State of Utah a big favor by keeping yore eyes peeled for him.

His moniker is Scar-ribs Crocker, and he was the man who held up the Rainbow Flyer recently and killed one of your fellow U. S. marshals, making his get-away. He lit a shuck for Arizona.

Thanks to the good detective work of my young pard, Tommy Rockford, who owns the gold-plated handcuffs and six-guns you've heard so much about, we learned that Crocker aims to hide out in a saloon in Mexico owned by the bandit, Pancho Simion.

Crocker carries a letter of introduction, a copy of which I'm inclosing.

To reach Simion's place Crocker will probably ride through your country. He will be showing up about the time this letter reaches you.

If you capture him notify me immediately or hold him for Tommy Rockford, who is trailing Crocker south.

Much obliged, and best regards,

NICK PETTICORN, Sheriff.

Trenton's agate-brown eyes narrowed reflectively as he read the copy of the note which Bleary Dirkin had scribbled off for Crocker, a week before.

"So 'whisky straight' is the pass-word tuh git into Pancho's place with, huh?" grunted the Eagle, as he slowly folded Petticorn's letter. "An' here I've figgered tuh quit law-in'!"

With the successful completion of

his man hunt against the "Scarlet Snake," Trenton had felt justified in resigning his job.

At present, the only crook who was harassing the Mexican rurales and the Arizona lawmen was the smuggler and cattle rustler, Pancho Simion. Simion had thus far escaped arrest because he holed up in the almost unreachable mountain town of Alta Cañada.

"Hm-m-m," mused the Border Eagle, rubbing his jaw reflectively. "I shore wouldn't mind pinnin' my marshal's star back on my shirt, if I thought it would help dab a loop on Pancho Simion. I been plenty riled ever since I heard about Pancho boastin' that I cain't arrest him."

His brow wrinkled with thought, Trig Trenton gathered up his reins.

Two miles across Rainbow Valley to the westward, the TNT ranch houses gleamed in the sunlight, whitewashed adobe walls and red tile roofs set off to advantage by the cottonwoods and salt cedars which lined the Rio Torcido.

But instead of riding toward his home ranch, Trigger Trenton impulsively reined his bronc down the east fork of the trail, a road which led to the cow town of Black Rock, at the foot of the Sunblaze Mountains.

"Fleetfoot, I got an idea," muttered the young ex-marshal to his bronc. "Fer years, I been tryin' tuh figger out how I could git up intuh Alta Cañada, the burg that Pancho Simion ramrods. I believe this Crocker business will work right intuh my hands. An' if I play my cards right, I kin drag Pancho Simion intuh Arizona tuh stand trial fer murder!"

As the daring plan took shape in his head, Trig Trenton grinned widely and spurred Fleetfoot into a

long, ground-covering lope. An hour later, he was drawing rein in front of a big, false-fronted general store in Black Rock.

Going inside, Trenton sought out the proprietor, an hombre almost identical to the Border Eagle in build.

"Max," said the young lawman, after a handshake, "I got a peculiar proposition tuh make tuh you. I cain't explain why, jest now, but I want tuh rent some o' yore clothes—the oldest, batterdest Stetson yuh own; them ol' Angora wool chaps yuh discarded years ago, some rusty spurs, an' any second-hand gun harness yuh got knockin' around."

"Anything you say, Trig," grunted the puzzled storekeeper. "Yo're welcome tuh anything I got. Since you corralled the Scarlet Snake I ain't had no fears o' gittin' my place robbed, an' I been able tuh sleep nights as a result."

Twenty minutes later, the Border Eagle was no longer the neat-appearing young owner of the TNT outfit. Instead, his face was shaded by a flop-brimmed old sombrero of a smoke-gray shade, banded with dusty sweat stains. His chest was covered with a patched and faded hickory shirt, while his legs were covered with yellow Angora chaps, the wool of which was full of burs, cactus thorns, and other débris of the open range.

The only items of his apparel that were original were his ivory-buffed Colts, now resting in battered old basket-woven holsters, and his kangaroo leather boots on which were buckled a pair of rusty gooseneck spurs.

His fine, tooled-leather stock saddle was replaced by a worn Texas hull which Max had loaned him. On the under side of Trenton's faded hickory shirt was pinned his United

States marshal's badge, the emblem of authority in the untamed desert.

Riding his shabbily geared Fleetfoot up to the office of the local sheriff, Trenton dismounted and went inside, grinning when he saw that Mike Fredericks, the deputy serving as a jailer, did not recognize him in his battered attire.

"What in blazes?" gasped Fredericks, when he caught sight of Trenton's sun-tanned face and flashing smile. "Yuh goin' tuh a danged masquerade party, Trig?"

The Border Eagle laughed and sat down on the edge of the deputy's spur-scuffed desk.

"I want you tuh go over tuh my ranch an' let 'em know that I'm takin' a *pasear* over tuh Alta Cañada this week, Mike!" said the lawman, rolling a brown-paper quiry. "A business trip, savvy?"

Fredericks eyed his friend quizzically.

"Fer years yuh been honin' tuh lock horns with Pancho Simion, Trig," accused the deputy, "but you ain't aimin' tuh try tuh crash the gates o' that outlaw town alone, are yuh? All yuh got tuh do is say the word, an' the sheriff an' me will be glad tuh——"

The Eagle shook his head. "It's a lone-wolf job, Mike, but I think the set-up's right," he said earnestly. "Yuh see, I'm goin' tuh Simion's place pretendin' tuh be the train bandit, Scar-ribs Crocker. By the time I reach Alta Cañada, I'll have a growth o' whiskers, an' Simion or none of his men won't recognize me in this git-up."

Briefly, he explained to the deputy sheriff how Sheriff Nick Petticorn had informed him of the train robber's intention to hole up at Pancho Simion's saloon down in old Mexico, and how Crocker would be armed with a letter of introduction

from the crooked saloon keeper up north, Bleary Dirkin.

"My idea is that Tommy Rockford will ketch up with Crocker somewhar in the middle o' Arizona," went on the Border Eagle. "I ain't ever met that Rockford hombre, but I've heard enough about him tuh know there's no stoppin' him when he gits after a crook. Once he slaps those gold-plated handcuffs o' his on said crook's wrists, that's all there is."

Fredericks nodded his head in agreement.

"Rockford will prob'ly capture Crocker afore he gits this fer, all right," he admitted. "But it's still plain suicide fer yuh tuh try tuh nab Pancho Simion in his own den, Trenton, even if yuh do have the password tuh Alta Cañada."

Trigger Trenton shrugged and made his way back out to his waiting horse, with the deputy at his side.

"No use arguin' with me, pard," chuckled the disguised Border Eagle as he swung into the saddle. "I'm perty danged shore I kin make this stunt work—an' it's worth a little risk tuh git inside o' Alta Cañada an' toss my loop around Pancho's neck. He's a slippery cuss, an' I been honin' fer a chance like this fer years."

Fleetfoot reared and snorted to be off, and a moment later the Border Eagle was galloping out of town, headed across the desert toward the south. He was skirting the Sun-blaze Mountains across the border into old Mexico.

"Trenton captured the Scarlet Snake, so mebbe he kin make this danged-fool disguise work," grunted Deputy Sheriff Mike Fredericks as he turned on his heel to reënter his office. "But I'd be willin' tuh stake

my last blue chip that Trigger Tren-ton won't git back tuh Rainbow Valley alive."

CHAPTER III.

PANCHO SIMION'S HIDE-OUT.

ALTA CANADA baked and sweltered in its own sweat. Huddled like a mud-dauber's nest at the remote end of a canyon that bit into the Sierra Caliente range as if a gigantic ax blade had struck the earth, the town was inhabited only by Mexican bandits and their squalid families.

Entry to Alta Cañada was through a twenty-foot adobe wall in which a Spanish-arched gateway had been constructed. The interior of the thick wall consisted of rooms in which resided Pancho Simion, a leader in border outlawry and boss of Alta Cañada.

Under an awning atop the north end of the wall where it joined the sheer granite cliffs of the canyon, Pancho was sprawled in a cushioned hammock, his sombrero pulled low over his leathery face as he snoozed peacefully in his afternoon siesta.

Even in sleep, Pancho wore massive cartridge bandoliers across his chest. Colt six-guns with notched back straps reposed in big basketwoven holsters. The crook's saddle-colored hands, deadly gun wielders, were interlocked across his big paunch.

Pacing ceaselessly across the parapet above the arched gate was a sombreroed peon, across whose serape-draped shoulder was a Mexican army rifle. The sentinel's bare feet padding along the stone walkway made the only sound to break the afternoon quiet.

Suddenly the armed sentry snapped out of his torpor and slid

the rifle off his shoulder into ready position. His coal-black eyes were focused down the sun-dancing expanse of the canyon to where a lone horseman was working his way up the bake-oven pathway toward the town.

"*Caramba!*" muttered the guard under his breath, as he knelt behind the parapet and pulled back the rifle bolt. "Who would be riding to Alta Cañada in the middle of the day? Only a rural, or a *bandido* with the law close behind, that's sure!"

The sentinel shot a glance at his sleeping chief, over in the hammock under the awning. Compressing his lips grimly, the bandit rifleman drew a bead on the oncoming horseman.

As the rider drew nearer the walled city, the guard made out a pair of Angora-chapped legs straddling a powerful roan mustang of obvious thoroughbred strain. Peering down the rifle sights, the guard made out a whiskery face, with eyes made gaunt and cheeks sunken in from the fatigue of a long trail.

Twenty yards from the towering wall, the rider drew rein, agate-brown eyes sweeping from cliff to cliff as if in search of a human face in one of the many loopholes piercing Pancho Simion's stronghold.

"*Hola!*" shouted the guard, cudgling the walnut rifle stock firmly against one cheek. "*¿Quién es?*" (Who is it?)

The rider started, glanced up, then lifted arms sleeved in patched and faded hickory cloth. A tired grin crossed the stranger's lips as he answered the sentry posted high above:

"Tell Señor Pancho that the famous gringo bandit, Señor Scar-ribs Crocker, is on his way to Alta Cañada!"

The guard stiffened. Although the stranger spoke in the Mexican

jargon of the border, his voice was that of a gringo.

"Give the password of Alta Cañada, señor, or I weel keel you pronto!" challenged the guard.

A startled grunt and a creaking of hammock ropes announced the awakening of Pancho Simion himself. The big bandit came lurching sleepily across the parapet, bell-bottomed trousers swishing as he drew his six-guns and stared down at the American on the road below.

"What's thees?" demanded Simion grouchily, his beady eyes narrowing dangerously as he glanced sidewise at his guard.

"The gringo calls himself Scar-ribs Crocker, señor. I have told him to give the password."

Even as Pancho Simion glanced back at the stranger, the rider called up in a clear, ringing voice:

"Whisky straight!"

Simion started, then lowered his six-guns slightly. He barked a challenge at the newcomer below:

"Whar deed you geet the Alta Cañada password, señor? An' for why are you here?"

The Angora-chapped rider grinned.

"The password came from your amigo up north, Bleary Dirkin. He said you would give a friend of his a hiding place."

Simion relaxed, and the horse-tail mustaches which straggled over his cruel, drooping mouth began to twitch in a grin of welcome.

"So you come from my amigo, Señor Dirkin!" boomed the boss outlaw, sliding his notched Colts into their holsters. "One minute, Señor Crocker—I myself weel come down to open the gates of Alta Cañada for you!"

The sentinel uncocked his rifle, got to his feet, and resumed his patrol of the wall top. On the street

below, the rider from Arizona lowered his hands from the brim of his smoke-gray Stetson and calmly started to roll a quirly.

Big-roweled spurs chiming on the steps leading down the inner face of the wall, big Pancho Simion made his way to the ground, swung massive wooden gates ajar, and strode out to extend a welcoming hand to the hombre he believed to be none other than Scar-ribs Crocker, a desperate American outlaw and killer.

"Any pard of Bleary Dirkin's ees an amigo who weel find a welcome here!" boomed Simion, as the rider dismounted and extended a brown hand. "Theengs got too hot across the border an' you come here to rest, si?"

An electric thrill coursed through the Border Eagle's veins as he accepted the hand of the outlaw chief whom he had come to Alta Cañada to arrest and take back to the Arizona border.

"You will pardon me if I don't talk about myself, señor!" returned Trigger Trenton curtly, as he returned Simion's level gaze. "In my business, it ain't safe tuh talk—even tuh amigos."

If Pancho Simion saw anything suspicious in the exhausted face of the rider before him, it did not reveal itself as the Mexican threw an arm over Trenton's shoulder and guffawed hoarsely.

"A real *malo hombre!*" roared the Mexican. "Come eenside, señor, an' rest. Eet ees siesta time een my town, but to-night you weel have dancing an' señoritas an' wheesky."

The Border Eagle rubbed sweat from a jaw that was shaggy with a week's crop of brown beard, and led Fleetfoot under the arched gateway of the bandit town.

He was playing a desperate game, but the time was not yet ripe to

jab a Peacemaker into Pancho Simion's ribs and take him north. First, Trenton must rest himself and his horse and trust to luck that he could get Pancho alone and away from the grim rifle muzzle of the sentry on the wall.

"Eef Señor Dirkin geev you my password, then you are *muuy bueno*," boomed Simion, as he led Trigger into the bandit town. "Make yourself at home, as the greengo would say."

The boss bandit's voice trailed out of hearing of the weary-faced sentinel whose job it was to patrol the gateway throughout the hot afternoon. Not often did strangers arrive to give excitement to his dreary job—especially American strangers, who knew the gringo password, "whisky straight."

Twenty minutes elapsed, during which the sentry paced his monotonous way along the parapet. Simion was a stern leader, one who would not consent to a lookout sitting down on duty. Men who watch from a comfortable chair are prone to fall asleep.

The guard suddenly jelled with surprise, as he caught sight of another rider heading at an easy trot up the canyon trail! Once more, the sentry's rifle snapped to his shoulder.

"Another gringo!" gasped the guard, as he made out details of blue shirt, brown batwing chaps, and gray Stetson. "A gringo with guns that gleam in the sun—and a thoroughbred mustang!"

Glittering sunlight on rifle steel made the second stranger draw rein, almost in the hoof tracks of the other gringo's mount. The guard saw a sun-browned young rider whose six-guns were plated in daz-

zling gold, and whose roan bronc was a thoroughbred.

"Afore yuh yank that trigger, Mex," drawled the rider, as he lifted his red bandanna to swab trail dust and sweat from his face, "yuh might let me give the password tuh show yuh I belong in Alta Cañada!"

The sentry nodded, sultry eyes lined behind rifle sights.

"It's 'whisky straight,' an' what my name is doesn't matter."

Again the sentry nodded, this time lowering his rifle.

"The password ees *bueno*, señor. The gates are open."

Patting his gold-plated six-guns with steady fingers, Tommy Rockford spurred his Kentucky horse gently—and rode inside the outlaw city he had ridden across Arizona to reach.

CHAPTER IV.

DEAD MARSHAL'S BADGE.

NERVES tingled under Tommy Rockford's scalp as he dismounted inside the Alta Cañada gate and tied Kentucky to a near-by hitch rail.

"Most dangerous spot I was ever in in my life—an' the quietest," commented the cowboy dick as he hitched his gun belts and adjusted his Stetson. "Looks like I got tuh Alta Cañada smack in the middle o' their siesta hour, jest like I figgered on doin'."

Rockford knew that to arrive in the bandit hide-out during a busy time of day would increase his danger, for it was hard telling how many outlaws inside the town might have crossed his own trail during years past.

For that reason, he had been careful to take advantage of what he knew about Mexican customs. Everywhere south of the Rio, life's activities halted for a mid-afternoon

siesta every day—a holdover from ancient Spain.

"This'll give me time tuh scout around a bit afore I has tuh lock horns with this Scar-ribs Crocker hombre," muttered Tommy Rockford to himself. "I reckon he's had time tuh arrive hyar ahead of me, judgin' from the sign I follered up the canyon trail."

Aside from the lone lookout on the wall above, Rockford saw no signs of life in Alta Cañada. Even the mongrel dogs were too lifeless to yap a challenge at the rider. They were sprawled in patches of shade alongside adobe-bricked shacks up and down the narrow canyon street.

From inside grilled windows came the sound of raucous snoring, as young caballeros took their siestas. Even the scraggly-looking pullets in a near-by chicken pen were sleeping in the shade.

"Sleepy-lookin' place, but so's a rattler's nest," mused Rockford. "Hyar's hopin' that this password business will work as well with Pancho Simion as it did with thet——"

A clinking of liquor glasses sounded from a doorway in the wall at Rockford's back, and with it a raucous burst of laughter and a throaty bellow of drunken mirth:

"Tell me, Señor Crocker—how deed you leave my amigo, Bleary Dirkin? Once we rode the owl-hoot trail together, when I was the rustler of greengo cows in New Mexico."

The heart stopped pumping in Rockford's chest. Señor Crocker! Then the crook who had held up the Rainbow Flyer in Utah two weeks before had indeed arrived in Alta Cañada!

"This seems too good tuh be true!" gasped Rockford to himself, as he strode swiftly toward the door-

way from which he had heard the noisy voice. "I've never clapped eyes on that Scar-rib Crocker skunk in my life, an' I was wonderin' how I'd locate him out o' the passell o' desperadoes that live hyar."

Reaching the threshold, Rockford squinted his eyes and looked inside. He saw a saloon barroom, with his own image reflected in a back-bar mirror.

At first glance, the dimly lighted interior seemed completely deserted, as is true with all Mexican *cantinas* during the siesta period. Then he made out the two hombres seated at a table to the left of the doorway.

"One o' them jiggers will be Crocker," rasped the cowboy detective, as he loosened both gold-plated Colts in their holsters. "An' now'll be jest as good a time as any tuh make my arrest!"

Grim of lip, the young cowboy detective stepped inside the gloomy barroom, his eyes glued on the pot-bellied Mexican who was in the act of pouring a glass of mescal for the stubble-jawed American opposite him.

"*Manos altos*, bartender!"

Pancho Simion half rose from his chair as he caught sight of the erect young gringo who strode across the room behind two leveled six-guns.

"Who—who are you?" he gasped.

Rockford halted beside the table, his left-hand gun swinging over to cover the surprised gringo whose elbows rested on the table top, well away from holstered six-guns.

"Keep yore shirt on, bartender, an' yuh won't git a dose o' lead pizenin'. It's Scar-ribs Crocker that I'm honin' tuh talk business with—not you!"

With a bestial snarl welling from his throat, Pancho Simion snatched for a notch-butted hogleg.

Thud! Even as the Mexican bandit king got his fingers coiled about gun stocks, one gold-plated Colt barrel crashed hard against Simion's temple.

A stupid look crossed the Mexican's face, and then he fell face forward across the table, his forehead upsetting the brown bottle of pulque liquor.

"Get tuh yore feet, Crocker!" snapped Tommy Rockford in a voice like a rattlesnake's warning. "I've trailed yuh a long way, an' now that I've got yuh, I ain't aimin' tuh let yuh slip out o' my mitts. Make a false move or try tuh yell fer help, an' I'll drill yuh dead center!"

The young American glanced dazedly at the unconscious Mexican on the table, then at the glittering, gold-plated Colt which Tommy Rockford was shoving into his left-hand holster. Before the American could open his mouth to speak, the railway dick had reached in his chaps pocket and drawn forth a pair of handcuffs which glittered like jewelry in the gloom of the saloon.

Snap! Before the startled gringo knew what was happening, Tommy Rockford's celebrated gold-plated handcuffs were snapped about his wrists.

"You—you're Tommy Rockford!" gasped the prisoner, as he felt the railway dick seize first one and then the other of his white-stocked Colts and hurl them behind the table. "You——"

Rockford's gun prodded his prisoner into a standing position.

"Yo're danged tootin' I'm Rockford, Crocker!" whispered the cowboy dick acidly. "Yuh got away from me slick that night at Mineralville, but now we're headin' out o' Alta Cañada double quick, afore this town wakes up from its siesta.

Yore owl-hootin' days are over, Scar-ribs Crocker!"

A look of half desperation, half amusement appeared in the American's brown eyes as he felt Rockford hauling him away from the table where Pancho Simion's wilted body lay. Crimson seeped from a welt on his forehead where Rockford's Colt had struck home.

"Wait—wait, Rockford!" gasped the prisoner. "I ain't Scar-ribs Crocker. I'm—I'm a United States marshal! My name——"

"Rattle yore hocks an' keep yore trap close-buttoned, Crocker. I heard this bartender call yuh by name, jest afore I come in, so I know I got the right man!"

Defying a bullet from Rockford's gun, the gringo prisoner leaped back, fumbling with handcuffed arms at his ragged shirt.

"I tell yuh, I ain't Crocker. I'm Trig Trenton, more commonly known as the Border Eagle. Yuh've heard o' the Border Eagle, ain't yuh, Rockford?"

Anger dyed the cowboy dick's face a dark crimson. "Shore I've heard o' the Border Eagle. But I'll never find him in a Mex saloon, swillin' down tequila, dressed in a saddle bum's duds, an' associatin' with killers. Git goin', Crocker, afore I——"

Rockford broke off in surprise as he saw Trig Trenton's manacled hands come away from his shirt. In the dim light he caught sight of a United States marshal's badge, which his prisoner had unpinned from under his shirt.

"This'll prove I'm Trigger Trenton, Rockford!" pleaded the gringo desperately. "This is my badge. I'm here in Alta Cañada in disguise, figgerin' on——"

Rockford's gun muzzle prodded Trenton hard in the ribs. With a

steel-muscled arm, the railway dick propelled his prisoner across the bar-room toward the door.

"Yuh mean that's the badge yuh took offn that U. S. marshal yuh kilt after holdin' up the Rainbow Flyer, Crocker!" snarled Rockford in a low tone. "If yo're aimin' tuh stall around in hopes Pancho Simion or some o' his skunk pards drift in, yo're loco. You an' me're gittin' out o' this town pronto!"

Desperation made Trigger Trenton go numb, as he saw how his disguise had proved a boomerang to rob him of victory, just when he had Pancho Simion in his grasp.

"I—I don't blame yuh fer not believin' I'm the Border Eagle, Rockford!" groaned the prisoner, as they reached the hot sunshine of the doorway, "but fer Pete's sake, don't force me tuh leave Alta Cañada without draggin' Pancho Simion with me. He's the Mex yuh coaked at the table thar—he ain't no common bartender!"

In the act of forcing his prisoner to head for the Kentucky horse out at the hitch post, Tommy Rockford paused. Something about his prisoner's frantic voice seemed to ring true. But it was absurd to think that this unkempt waddy could be the famous Border Eagle of whom he had heard so much in recent years.

"Yuh say this greaser is Pancho Simion in person, Crocker?" muttered Rockford, halting in the doorway. "Jumpin' bullfrawgs, if I could lasso both you an' Pancho with the same rope, this little trip tuh Alta Cañada would be——"

Rockford half turned, intending to peer closer at the Mexican he had knocked out.

And then, as if the very cliffs had tumbled about his head, a stab of blinding pain crashed through

Tommy Rockford's skull, and he dropped in a heap on the threshold, blackness swirling about him and stamping out all consciousness.

CHAPTER V.

THE THIRD RIDER.

AS Trigger Trenton heard the shot ring out and saw Tommy Rockford collapse in his tracks in the door of Pancho's barroom, for a moment he was unable to comprehend what had happened.

Then, back in the dark recesses of the saloon, the handcuffed Border Eagle saw Pancho Simion struggling to get out of his chair.

In one pudgy hand was a smoking six-gun which the bandit had managed to haul from leather. Pancho's other hand was groping gingerly across his gun-battered temple.

"*Caramba*, eet was lucky for both of us that I wake up een time, eh, Señor Crocker?" gasped Simion, as he lurched drunkenly to the doorway where Tommy Rockford's body lay jackknifed on the threshold. "I wake up to see thees hombre taking you to hees *caballo*, *si*! Thees hombre ees Tommy Rockford, the railway dick, Señor Crocker. I recognize those gold-plated seex-guns, *si*!"

For a moment, the Border Eagle felt nausea clawing at his stomach. Rockford, believing that the Mexican was knocked cold, had not bothered to disarm Pancho Simion.

And now, the railway detective lay dead at their feet.

But suddenly——

"He—he's still alive!" gasped out Trenton, unable to hide the joy in his voice as he saw Rockford stir slightly. "Yore slug creased his scalp. See whar the hole went through his Stetson?"

It was true. Even as Pancho Si-

mion stooped dizzily and brushed aside the cowboy lawman's hat, it was evident that Tommy Rockford's scalp had merely been grazed by the slug which Simion had fired.

"*'Sta buenol'*" rasped the Mexican, shaking his head to drive the cobwebs of pain from his eyes. "When Rockford comes to, I weel make heem very sorry I deed not keel heem weeth my first shot, *es verdad*. I weel put my second one through hees belly, Señor Crocker, an' we weel watch heem squirm een agony before he die!"

The big Mexican's drooping lips curled in a grin as he caught sight of the gold-plated handcuffs on Trenton's wrists.

"So Señor Rockford come here to arrest you, Señor Crocker?" chuckled Simion. "Wait until our amigo, Bleary Dirkin, hears of to-day's happenings. He weel laugh, *no es verdad?*"

Trenton laughed nervously to cover up his own feeling of relief. Ever since Simion's gun had blazed behind Tommy Rockford, the United States marshal had wondered how much the Mexican had overheard.

"Reckon Pancho come to a mite late tuh hear me tryin' tuh convince Rockford that I was the Border Eagle," thought Trenton, as he stooped beside Rockford's inert form and began fumbling in the cowboy dick's chaps pocket. "Otherwise, my goose would 'a' been cooked too."

Lifting a ring of keys from Rockford's pocket, the Eagle glanced up at the Mexican who was leaning against the door jamb for support, his stubby fingers still rubbing the crimson-smeared welt on his temple.

"Would yuh mind unlockin' these gold-plated bracelets, amigo?" asked Trenton. "It makes an hombre feel

skitterish, when Tommy Rockford puts yuh under arrest. I shore got you tuh thank fer savin' my ornery hide, believe me, an' I'm——"

The Border Eagle broke off in alarm as a sound of shouts and running boots reached his ears. Cranking his head about, Trenton saw the bandit town come to life like an exploding bomb.

Gun-hung men swarmed out of adobe shacks, roused from siesta by the sharp blast of Simion's gun only a few moments before. Hurrying down the steps of the great wall came the moon-eyed sentry, rifle ready in his grasp.

"I'll explain what happened," gruffed Pancho Simion in Spanish, as he took Rockford's keys and proceeded to unlock the Eagle's handcuffs. "If you savvy Spanish, listen."

Within two minutes, the courtyard before the arched gateway of Alta Cañada was milling with the lawless citizens of the town.

Swarthy-faced gunmen with eyes still sticky with interrupted sleep had boiled from surrounding huts to determine the cause of the shot which had sent echoes scurrying off down the cliffs.

As the crowd pressed about the entrance of the saloon built into the town's great wall, Pancho Simion emerged from the doorway, his senses recovered and bolstered up by a stiff swig from one of his liquor bottles inside the bar.

Alongside the door stood the armed sentry and the Border Eagle, the latter idly swinging Rockford's key ring in his hand. Safely stowed inside the pocket of the Angora chaps was the United States marshal's badge which Trenton had removed in a frantic attempt at convincing Rockford of his true identity.

Underfoot lay the railway dick, just beginning to groan his way back to his senses.

A hush fell over the brutal-faced crowd as Simion lifted his arms for attention. The boss outlaw's face was a devil's mask under the broad brim of his sombrero as he peered out over the assemblage.

"You've all come here to find out why you heard a shot inside the walls of Alta Cañada," boomed Pancho's bullish voice, speaking in Spanish. "Before I explain who this gringo is at my feet, let me introduce a newcomer who will be your friend—the famous Utah train robber, Señor Scar-ribs Crocker!"

Trenton, busy trying to pretend that he did not understand the Spanish tongue as befitted a bad man from the Utah area, started as he heard his impostor name mentioned. He nodded and shuffled in embarrassment as he became the focal point of about sixty bandit eyes.

"Señor Crocker was pursued to our town by an hombre even more famous!" went on Simion, stooping to haul Tommy Rockford's trembling form erect. "Señores, this is the gringo railroad detective, Tommy Rockford!"

The assembled crooks stared aghast at the limp form in Pancho Simion's mighty embrace. Rockford's eyelids were fluttering, but Trenton could see that the young cowboy dick was still out on his feet as a result of Simion's bullet putting a furrow across his scalp.

"Kill the skunk, boss!" screamed a straw-haired American killer who had sought refuge in Alta Cañada. "Rockford's a slippery booger! Yuh better kill him while yuh got him woozy!"

Rockford sagged back against the door jamb opposite the Border

Eagle, his head lolling on his shoulders as he struggled for strength to stand on his own feet.

"*Si, señores!*" called out Pancho Simion, his voice trembling with hatred. "As I told Señor Crocker, a minute ago—thees time I weel shoot Señor Rockford een the belly, so that we can all see heem grovel on the ground een agony before he dies!"

A harsh-voiced thunder of approval swept the crowd as they saw Pancho Simion whip out a long-barreled Colt .45 and ram it against Tommy Rockford's stomach.

Horror flooded the cowboy dick's eyes as he struggled for possession of his senses. But Rockford's holsters were empty, the sentry having seized the famous gold-plated six-guns before the arrival of the Alta Cañada mob.

"That's right, boss—belly-shoot the John Law!"

Trigger Trenton's face broke out in a waxy sweat of terror as he saw Simion's horny thumb draw his six-gun hammer back to full cock. When that hammer fell, it would rip Tommy Rockford's stomach wide open, send him to a death of unspeakable agony, torture that might last an hour before merciful death came.

"Wait!" The Border Eagle screamed the word in the tense hush that awaited Pancho's muffled shot.

Even as he spoke, Trenton swept out an arm and jerked the Mexican bandit's gun arm back.

With a wolfish snarl, Pancho Simion spun to glare at the American he thought to be Scar-ribs Crocker, one of the worst killers north of the border.

"You tell Pancho to wait?" belowered the Mexican incredulously. "You would spare the life of thees dog who arrest you, señor?"

Trenton licked his lips and sucked his lungs full. His eyes darted over to Tommy Rockford, and found strength and gratitude in the piercing look which the railway dick shot him.

The look seemed to say, "So you're really the Border Eagle, after all!"

"It's—it's this way, Pancho!" gasped the Border Eagle, stalling desperately for time. "I figgered—mebbe—yuh see, if yuh don't kill off Rockford now, like yo're plannin', mebbe yuh kin hold him fer ransom. The State of Arizona an'—an' the railroads Rockford works fer would pay plenty o' dinero if they figgered they could git him back!"

A bellow of protest came from the bloodthirsty mob, eager to see a bullet rip Rockford's innards asunder and drop him, a screaming human wreck, to the ground.

But Pancho Simion's yellow fangs were exposed in a wide grin as he pondered the Eagle's panted proposition.

"*Caramba!*" grated the boss of Alta Cañada. "Señor Crocker ees right. Eef we could get *oro* for ransom, then there would be time to keel Señor——"

And then a sudden shout from the rear of the crowd caused the heads of Pancho and Trig Trenton to crank sharply about.

They were in time to see the mob surging back to surround a dusty rider whose horse had halted immediately under the arched gateway of the bandit town.

Simion's lionlike roar stilled the clamoring of the mob gathered about the bewildered horseman who had just arrived. The newcomer was staring down into the yawning bores of a dozen-odd Colts.

"What's this?" shouted Pancho angrily. "Who is thees hombre?"

The rider's fear-shaken voice reached the ears of Trig Trenton and Tommy Rockford and caused the two American lawmen to freeze with horror:

"My name's Scar-ribs Crocker, amigos, an' I got a letter of interduction hyar from an old pard o' Pancho Simion's—a letter from Bleary Dirkin!"

CHAPTER VI.

GOLD-PLATED HANDCUFFS.

SHOW-DOWN time had come, and the two young lawmen standing on either side of Pancho Simion knew that they were probably doomed.

The Border Eagle, risking his life to pose as the notorious Crocker long enough to effect an entry into Alta Cañada, had proceeded into Mexico on the theory that he could arrest Pancho Simion and return to Arizona with his prisoner before the real Scar-ribs Crocker arrived upon the scene.

For that matter, the Eagle had been confident that the real Crocker would be captured before he crossed Arizona, when he was being pursued by a lawman as relentless as Tommy Rockford.

Even as Pancho Simion strode down off the saloon steps to get a closer view of the horseman who had just ridden into Alta Cañada, the Border Eagle caught the low voice of Tommy Rockford behind him:

"Tough luck, Trenton. I see yore game now, an' I'm sorry I sp'iled it fer yuh. I figgered Crocker would beat me here."

Before Trenton could clip a reply, he felt Pancho Simion's glare upon him.

"Something ees wrong somewhere!" growled the bandit king, his voice as sinister as an adder's hiss

in the taut silence that had descended over the bandit mob. "You claim you are Scar-reebs Crocker, an' you know my secret password, señor. Yet thees hombre claims *he* ees Señor Crocker."

Simion's hands dropped to his gun butts.

"Breeng the stranger over here, Baptista!" he yelled at the stocky Mexican killer who had seized Crocker's bridle. "Eef he has a letter of eentroduction from Bleary Dirkin, let heem show eet to me!"

Scar-ribs Crocker, his face ashen-white with alarm, felt himself being hauled roughly from the saddle. His boots had hardly struck the ground before snatching hands had removed his six-guns from their holsters and frisked him for hidden knives or derringers.

An aisle cleared in the welter of Mexicans assembled about the saloon doorway, and Scar-ribs Crocker was shoved roughly forward, like a slave being hurled in front of a pagan king for his death sentence.

"I—I tell yuh I'm carryin' a letter from yore pard, Dirkin!" groaned Crocker, fumbling in a pocket of his shirt and drawing out a folded sheet of paper. "Yuh don't think I'd come ridin' tuh Alta Cañada without no identification, do yuh?"

Trig Trenton glanced frantically back into the saloon, to where his ivory-butt six-guns lay in the corner where Tommy Rockford had thrown them. Before the impulse to leap inside could be put into execution, the Border Eagle found his path blocked by the grim-faced sentry with the rifle.

"You wait here, señor!" grated the sentry coldly. "We soon tell eef you are Señor Crocker or no."

Time seemed to stand still as Pancho Simion extended a brown

hand and took Bleary Dirkin's note from the trembling fingers of Scar-ribs Crocker.

The Mexican's lips mumbled and his black, snakish eyes shuttled in their sockets as he read with difficulty the note of introduction which the Mineralville bartender had scribbled off, two weeks before.

"*Sta bien!*" rumbled the big outlaw chief, tossing the paper aside. "Many times I have received letters from my amigo Bleary Dirkin. Thees note ees from heem, *si*."

Scar-ribs Crocker straightened perceptibly, and a sigh of relief ballooned his cheeks as he felt himself released by the Mexicans who had dragged him up to Pancho's doorway.

"Gosh, Pancho, I'm glad that's over!" wheezed the Utah train robber, hitching his cartridge belts. "What's—"

Dirkin broke off with a gasp of horror as his roving eyes caught sight of Tommy Rockford for the first time. The train bandit recoiled, his eyes jutting from their sockets as he stared at the tall young cowboy detective with the crimson-matted hair.

"Tommy Rockford!" cried the train robber, staring frantically at Pancho. "Then he—he got here ahead of me, and you captured him!"

Tommy Rockford's lips bent in a bitter grin. He realized, now, that he had, somehow, overtaken and passed his quarry on the trail to Alta Cañada, doubtless out in the desert where he had, by mistake, picked up the new trail made by the Border Eagle, who was likewise bound for the bandit town.

"That's right, Crocker," he said quietly. "I chased you all the way from Utah, an' got hyar ahead of

yuh. Looks like the joke's on me, all around!"

Pancho Simion turned about, to spike the Border Eagle with a penetrating stare. Trig Trenton, standing shoulder to shoulder with Tommy Rockford, and with the sentry's army rifle prodded sight-deep between two ribs, returned Pancho's glare without flinching.

"Thees hombre pretended to be you, Señor Crocker!" snapped the Mexican, glancing at the train robber. "Yuh got any idea who he could be?"

Crocker's brows arched with surprise as he stared at the lawman who had been impersonating him. And then, as he studied the Border Eagle's haggard and whisker-stubbed face, a slow light of recognition dawned in Scar-ribs Crocker's eyes.

"Why—why, Pancho, I know that jasper!" gasped the outlaw. "It's Trig Trenton, the U. S. marshal they call the 'Border Eagle.' I was at the murder trial when the Scarlet Snake was sentenced tuh hang. It was this jasper hyar that arrested the Snake. Yes, sir, this hombre is the Border Eagle!"

It was Pancho Simion's turn to pale with surprise and bewilderment. His eyes roved from Trenton's face to Rockford's, and as he did so a grin replaced the gaping expression of his mouth.

"So! Two John Laws try to trap Pancho een hees own *casa*, no?" jeered the Mexican crook, clenching his fists ominously. "Señor Trenton pretends to be a train robber, an' he fools me—only to be arrested by the railway deeck, Tommy Rockford. Eet ees all *may loco*—and very, very funny!"

A roar of raucous laughter swept through the crowd of outlaws as the realization of how matters really

stood began to filter through their heads.

Stooping, Pancho picked up Tommy Rockford's celebrated gold-plated handcuffs, glittering manacles which had never lost a prisoner during the railway dick's adventurous career.

"A few minutes ago," said Pancho in guttural Spanish, "the Border Eagle suggested that we hold Tommy Rockford for ransom. He was doing that, of course, to save a fellow lawman's life. But now, we will hold them *both* for ransom, señores!"

So saying, Pancho reached out and snapped one of the gilded bracelets about Trig Trenton's left wrist. Before Tommy Rockford could draw back, he felt his right arm jerked forward and the other notched manacle snapped in position, fettering him wrist to wrist with the Border Eagle.

"Felipe, take these two so famous lawmen upstairs to our *calabozo* cell!" snarled Pancho Simion to his serape-clad lookout. "We will keep them in jail a while, but when we deliver them across the border, they will both be dead men!"

CHAPTER VII.

IMPRISONED.

FELIPE marched the two gringos inside the barroom and up a dark stairway to a brick-walled cubicle which served as Alta Cañada's jail. Locking a massive door, Felipe departed, leaving the young lawmen alone together.

Through a foot-square window heavily barred with steel, Trigger Trenton and Tommy Rockford could peer down the sun-drenched expanse of the canyon which led to Arizona.

Soon, they knew, Pancho would

be sending a messenger north of the border, to demand ransom for their return. The messenger would probably take along their horses as identification.

"Waal, I been honin' tuh meet you fer a long time, Border Eagle!" chuckled the railway dick. "But I didn't suppose we'd be bunk mates in a death house when that time came!"

Trig Trenton's mouth twisted in a wry smile as he glanced down at their golden handcuffs, a single gilded link connecting their two hands together.

"After all I been hearin' about you an' these handcuffs an' yore gold-plated guns, I shore been honin' tuh shake hands with you, too, Rockford!" returned the Border Eagle. "I reckon it was my fool stunt that got us in this mess."

Briefly, for the railway dick's benefit, Trenton explained how he had seen a chance to get into Alta Cañada and arrest Pancho Simion. When he had finished his apologetic recital, he looked up to see Rockford regarding him with frank admiration in his gray eyes.

"It took nerve tuh do that, Eagle, an' it is typical o' the things I've heard about you," said the railway dick. "Waal, I reckon Pancho will collect quite a bit o' ransom money, all right. They'll use our two hosses, an' yore badge, an' my gold-plated six-guns as proof that we're really captured."

The two lawmen stared out of the window to where Scar-ribs Crocker was busy unpacking a pair of saddlebags, in the open court outside the Alta Cañada wall.

Side by side at a hitch bar outside the wall stood the two horses owned by the imprisoned lawmen—Kentucky, the roan owned by Tommy

Rockford, and Fleetfoot, prize mustang of the Border Eagle.

"I'm shore sorry some ringy Mex didn't kill Scar-ribs Crocker durin' the excitement," regretted Tommy Rockford as he saw the Utah train bandit glance up at their jail window and leer fiendishly. "He's the most wanted criminal on my list, an' it's a shame he'll live tuh see us croaked."

Rockford glanced about the walls of their cell. It was boxlike in proportions, with perfectly smooth adobe walls which they knew were three feet or more in thickness.

The massive door was padlocked on the outside, and was made of oak, six inches thick.

"Thar goes Pancho out tuh talk with Crocker," announced the Eagle. "Reckon they're goin' tuh send one o' the gang acrost the border with our brones, tuh try an' collect some ransom."

Faces crowded in the narrow window of their cell, Tommy Rockford and the Border Eagle listened intently as they saw the Mexican bandit stride out to where Scar-ribs Crocker was packing the gold-plated six-guns into a bag on Kentucky's saddle.

"I'm figgerin' that it would be a good idea tuh frisk that Eagle skunk an' see if he's got his marshal's badge on him, Pancho!" came Crocker's low-pitched voice at the foot of the wall. "An' furthermore, since yuh got them skunks in jail, anyhow, why not git them gold-plated handcuffs o' Rockford's?"

"Why?" demanded Pancho.

Crocker finished buckling Rockford's saddlebag.

"Because when yore man shows up with these two hosses, it might not convince any sheriff that we actually got Rockford an' Trenton hyar, Pancho. But if we could show

'em the Eagle's badge an' the handcuffs that is as famous as Rockford hisself—well, it would be definite proof we was holdin' them polecats fer ransom, wouldn't it?"

Pancho's sombrero nodded in agreement, and the two prisoners in the jail saw the Mexican reach in a pocket of his bell-bottomed gaucho pants and take out a ring of keys.

"I'll have my sentry breeng down the prisoners, Señor Crocker!" came Pancho's gruff voice. "Now ees as good a time as any to keel the Eagle an' Rockford, no?"

Peering up the wall, Pancho shouted to the pacing sentinel:

"Felipe, take these keys and bring down the two prisoners!"

A muffled "*Si, si, señor!*" came from the armed guard above, and Pancho Simion threw up the glittering ring of keys for the guard to use in unlocking the lawman's prison cell.

"Reckon we're playin' out our strings perty pronto now, Trenton!" clipped Tommy Rockford, as they heard Felipe's bare feet padding down a stairway which led from a trapdoor on the parapet above.

A strange light glowed in the Border Eagle's eyes as he heard Felipe approaching outside. Reaching in a pocket of his Angora chaps, the United States marshal drew forth a tiny golden key.

"At least I had the presence o' mind tuh remove this key from yore ring afore Pancho took yore keys away from me, down thar!" hissed Trenton.

Rockford stifled a glad cry as he seized the key from Trig Trenton's fingers and deftly unlocked the Eagle's handcuff.

"Good work, Trig!" panted the railway dick. "This makes it possible fer us tuh die fightin' anyhow!"

Outside their door, Felipe the guard was unlocking their cell.

"Outside, señores! Pancho Simion weeshes to see you!"

Felipe kicked the heavy cell door open and covered the two American lawmen with his rifle, the bolt pulled back to full cock position.

A shaft of sunlight filtering through the barred window of the cell glinted off the gold-plated handcuffs which held the prisoners' arms together, and Felipe grinned confidently as he saw Trenton and Rockford step out.

CHAPTER VIII.

DESPERATE RUSE.

THAT way—the lower stairs, hombres!" ordered Felipe, stepping back to allow the two lawmen to pass him.

"O. K., Mex!" said Tommy Rockford, grinning.

Whiz! Out shot the railway dick's right arm, the gilded handcuff springing away from the Eagle's wrist as if the notched jaws had melted away.

Swift as a striking snake, Rockford's hand locked about Felipe's rifle barrel and twisted it violently upward.

Felipe's mouth opened to yell, but he was too late.

Even as Rockford's wrenching gesture carried the .30-30 out of dangerous range, Trig Trenton's right fist shot up in an uppercut which knocked teeth from the Mexican's mouth and snapped his head back like a punching bag.

"That got 'im, Trig!" whispered Tommy Rockford, as he caught the guard's sagging body in his arms to cushion the noise of Felipe's floorward crash.

"Worked as well as if we'd rehearsed it, I reckon!" agreed Tren-

ton, as he pulled the .30-30 from the prostrate Mexican's limp grasp. "An' now we got a rifle between us, which was more'n we had a minute ago!"

For a moment the two lawmen stood panting over the inert form of the guard. Dim light filtered down a flight of steps leading to the trapdoor on the roof, revealing the lower stairway leading to the ground. Rockford pocketed his handcuffs.

"We ain't got a moment tuh lose, Tommy!" whispered the Border Eagle tensely. "With Pancho an' thet Scar-ribs Crocker waitin' fer Felipe tuh march us down thar, it won't give us any time fer dilly-dallyin'."

Rockford stared down at the unconscious guard, and his jaw tightened as an idea took form in his brain. He seized Trenton by the arm and spoke swiftly:

"Our only chance is tuh run a bluff on them skunks, Trig. One of us kin put on Felipe's sombrero an' cover our shoulders with that serape o' his, an' the other take the lead with his hands up an' pertendin' tuh be skeered o' the rifle in his back."

The Border Eagle shoved the .30-30 into Rockford's hands.

"You dress up like the Mex, an' I'll be the prisoner, Tommy!" he rasped. "We'll march down them same stairs they herded us up while ago, walk outside an' through the main gate tuh whar our hosses is waitin'!"

For a long moment the two American fugitives mentally rehearsed their desperate game.

Unless their trick was discovered, there was a fighting chance that they could get close enough to Pancho and Crocker for Rockford to get the drop on the two desperadoes.

That done, all that remained was

to mount Fleetfoot and Kentucky, and high-tail it down the canyon.

"O. K.—I'll take Felipe's part!" panted Rockford, dropping to his knees beside the insensible guard. "Them Angora chaps yo're wearin' will look more conspicuous, an' mebbe they won't look too close at me, wearin' Felipe's git-up an' tot-in' his rifle."

Even as Rockford lifted Felipe's weight and stripped off the guard's gaudily striped serape, the hoarse voice of Pancho Simion roared out, audible through the window of the near-by prison cell:

"Andale, Felipe! Hurry and bring down the gringos!"

Working with frantic haste, Tommy Rockford thrust his head through the hole in the poncho-type serape, and draped the brightly striped blanket over his shoulders so as to hide his blue shirt.

"Yeah, shake a laig thar, Felipe!" came Scar-ribs Crocker's leering voice. "We're honin' tuh fill them varmints full o' lead!"

Leaping inside the prison cell, Trig Trenton shouted back, trying to imitate the voice of the unconscious sentry:

"Si, señores. We come! First I breeng down the Eagle, *si!*"

Tommy Rockford was donning Felipe's big chocolate-brown sombrero when Trenton emerged from the jail.

"Bueno, Trig!" complimented the cowboy dick, getting to his feet and hefting the Mexican rifle in his hands. "That'll give 'em the idea yo're totin' the prisoners down one by one, instead o' both tergither."

With hearts slamming their ribs, the two American lawmen hurried down the steps to the barroom.

The Border Eagle was in front, arms raised. Behind him, holding the rifle leveled on Trenton's spine,

came Tommy Rockford, face hidden by Felipe's cone-crowned sombrero, his body disguised by the flowing folds of the sentry's serape.

"My hoglegs is gone!" muttered Trenton regretfully, shooting a glance into the corner where, not long before, Tommy Rockford had gun-whipped Simion and arrested the Border Eagle. "That means the rifle's our only bet until we git out thar face tuh face with Pancho an' Crocker, amigo!"

Out into the blinding sunlight of the courtyard behind the Alta Cañada wall stepped the two lawmen, walking swiftly so as not to attract too much attention from the outlaws who were still crowding the street.

A shout went up as the crowd spotted the Border Eagle walking swiftly along the wall toward the big arched gateway.

Cries of "*Bueno, Felipe!*" made Rockford grin, tight-lipped, as he prodded Trig Trenton along with the barrel of the rifle.

"They ain't seen through my disguise yet," thought Rockford. "Jest so we keep movin', an' they don't git close enough tuh look at my boots an'——"

The Border Eagle halted short, in the act of turning and going out through the big gateway.

Fifty yards beyond the wall they could see their two horses hitched to a pole rack, Scar-ribs Crocker standing by.

But blocking the big gateway, in the act of coming into Alta Cañada, came Pancho Simion!

"Why do you only bring one of the prisoners?" yelled the bandit boss angrily. "Who gave you the order to unlock the golden handcuffs? We wanted both the Eagle and Señor Rock——"

As he was speaking, Pancho Si-

mion was striding to one side so as to get a full view of Rockford, who had moved back to put Trenton's bulk between him and the big Mexican.

And then Simion halted, his snakelike eyes rounding into horrified moons as he caught a glimpse of the taut lips and cold, brittle eyes of Tommy Rockford, beneath Felipe's sombrero.

"*Caramba!*" gasped the bandit chief, falling back. "Señor——"

Moving swiftly forward to stand beside the Border Eagle, Tommy Rockford swung his rifle in a short arc to cover the Mexican. The railway dick's body covered the action from the sight of the bandits back in the street; while Pancho's massive bulk hid the rifle's direction from Crocker's view.

"Elevate, Pancho!" snarled Rockford, finger strained on trigger steel. "Back up an' keep movin' fast, or I'll put daylight through yore mangy carcass hyar an' now!"

With a squall of blind panic, Pancho went for his guns.

The Border Eagle leaped to one side as he saw Rockford bracing his arm for the recoil of the .30-30 caliber weapon.

At point-blank range, the railway dick pulled trigger.

Click! There was a sickening noise inside the rifle breech as the firing pin struck the rim of a defective Mexican cartridge.

The single-shot gun was useless, and Pancho Simion's blurring fingers were already getting six-guns from leather.

Death was coming in a split clock-tick, but Trigger Trenton had already started his attack before Rockford could swing the gun around to use as a club.

Flinging his body between Pan-

cho and the railway dick, the Border Eagle leaped into the very face of Pancho's flaming .45s.

CHAPTER IX.

FLEETFOOT AND KENTUCKY.

SCORCHING lead tore through the thick Angora wool of the Eagle's chaps, spinning him completely around before his wild charge carried him heavily against Pancho Simion's braced form.

Brrang! A second shot from the Mexican's flaming Colts burned through the flesh of Trig Trenton's left forearm as he went into a clinch with the outlaw he had ridden to Mexico to arrest.

Tommy Rockford, his jaw hanging agape as he saw Pancho Simion knocked staggering backward through the gateway before the fury of the Eagle's charge, spun on his heels as his ears caught the roar of the Alta Cañada mob behind them.

Less than a quarter of a minute had elapsed from the time they had made their appearance through the barroom door, but already the bandit town was heading in their direction, guns flaming, knives glittering in the sunlight.

Down on the ground just outside the arched gateway, the Border Eagle and Pancho Simion were rolling over and over in the dirt, locked in a death battle as the Mexican fought to bring one smoking Colt against Trenton's body for the death shot.

Whinning! Brrram! Bullets buzzed like bees past Tommy Rockford's ears, as the foremost of the bandit gang in the street began pouring lead in his direction.

"Got tuh close that gate—keep them polecats back!"

Yowling the words, Tommy

Rockford sprang forward to slam one section of the big-timbered door on its hinges. The other half was already closed, and as the huge door swung shut the young cowboy dick sprang through to the outer side.

Bullets thudded against the gateway as Rockford reached up to bar the door with the useless single-shot .30-30 he had taken from Felipe the sentinel.

With the door momentarily protecting them from the danger of the roused mob inside, Tommy Rockford whirled to give assistance to the Border Eagle.

But it was not necessary.

Even as he looked, Rockford saw the two fighters jerk to their feet and tear apart, the Border Eagle's mighty right arm tearing a long-bladed *cuchillo* from the sheath on Pancho's belt.

Screaming like a wounded bull, the bandit swept up his six-guns, thumbs jerking back triggers which would riddle Trenton with lead.

But the hammers never fell. Throwing his arm forward with every ounce of his strength, the Border Eagle sent the bowie knife hurtling through space like a thunderbolt.

With only three feet separating them, Trenton's knife throw could not miss.

Thud! Like an ax sinking into soft pine, the knife plunged to the haft in the very center of Pancho Simion's throat.

With a gurgling moan, the big Mexican dropped his six-guns clawed at the knife handle. Then, with knees suddenly turning to rubber, Pancho Simion lurched, twisted sidewise, and fell quivering into the adobe clods at Trigger Trenton's feet.

The Border Eagle lifted a hand to squeeze a shirt sleeve that was

drenched with crimson from the bullet which had plowed through his arm muscle at the outset of the brief combat.

"Git—his guns—Tommy!" gritted the United States marshal faintly. "Crocker—guardin'—our—"

But Tommy Rockford was already snatching the Mexican's .45s from the dust. From the corner of his eye he had caught sight of Scar-ribs Crocker lunging forward toward the closed gateway, sunlight sparkling on gun steel.

Leaping back away from Trigger Trenton's tottering form, the cowboy dick swung his guns up to cover the outlaw he had chased across two States and the Mexican border.

"Stop in yore tracks, Crocker!" he yelled. "I'm arrestin' yuh!"

But Scar-ribs Crocker was made brave by desperation. In the short space of twenty seconds, he had seen the Border Eagle save Rockford's life by leaping into the very muzzles of Pancho Simion's six-guns.

Crocker had seen the Mexican and the Eagle grappling on the ground, had seen the flash of flying blade that had stopped Pancho's villainous heart and sent him into eternity.

Worst of all, Crocker had seen Tommy Rockford swing shut and bar the gates to his haven of refuge, Alta Cañada. It was shoot-out now, or leave the canyon a prisoner of the railroad detective who now faced him.

"You better give yoreself up, Rockford!" yelled the train bandit, cocking his six-guns grimly as he strode forward. "Thar's half a hundred hombres behind that wall, an' they got yuh covered through the windows, now!"

Behind him, Tommy Rockford could hear the bedlam of voices as

Mexicans battered on the gate that was held only by a rifle barrel thrust through the lock. Any moment, he knew, some of the Alta Cañada crooks would get inside Pancho's *casa* within the walls, and shoot him in the back.

"Drop them guns, Crocker—or start usin' 'em!"

With an oath, Scar-ribs Crocker whipped up his guns and jerked the triggers. But the hastily aimed slugs spat up geysers of dust at Tommy Rockford's widespread feet. And Tommy Rockford triggered first one, then the other of Pancho's guns with deadly precision.

Through pluming gun smoke, the cowboy dick and the Border Eagle saw Crocker's advance checked by ripping lead.

Spurting crimson from a lung wound and a bullet hole in the center of his forehead, Scar-ribs Crocker plunged backward and lay staring up at the brassy Mexican sky.

Brrram! Bang-bang-bang! Guns roared a death challenge from windows of the great wall behind the two American lawmen, as they sprinted for their horses and jerked the reins from the hitch bar.

Rockford paused a moment to assist the wounded Eagle astride his horse. A second later, he was vaulting into the saddle of Kentucky, and the two broncs were heading down the canyon at a dead run.

Twisting in their saddles for a last glance at the frowning wall of Alta Cañada, the two escaping lawmen saw puffs of smoke bursting from windows and loopholes of Pancho Simion's fortlike house.

But the Mexican outlaw boss lay in a grotesque heap with a knife in his throat outside the gate that he had built. A few feet away, the

corpse of the gringo outlaw Crocker, was stiffening in the sun.

Hoofbeats drumming the afternoon air, Trenton and Rockford saw the raging hail of bullets begin to drop short, as they drew out of range.

Then, rounding a bend in the canyon trail, they shut Alta Cañada out of sight forever.

"Reckon yuh saved my life, thar when the rifle failed tuh blast Pancho down," called Tommy Rockford, busy unstrapping his saddlebag to recover his gold-plated six-guns. "I thought we was goners, shore."

The Border Eagle grinned, and focused his eyes on the blue rim of the Arizona bad lands to the north.

"Fergit it, Tommy!" he chuckled. "This bullet scratch ain't nothin', an' the way it turned out, I reckon you got the skunk you trailed hyar,

an' my trip tuh Alta Cañada was a success, too."

A few miles farther on, Tommy Rockford and the Border Eagle reined their broncs to a halt, to regain their wind.

"Yuh fergivin' me fer arrestin' yuh, Trenton?" chuckled the railway dick, as he watched the Border Eagle pinning his United States marshal's badge on his shirt. "I ain't ever put my gold-plated handcuffs on a John Law afore."

Trigger Trenton leaned from his saddle, extending a hand.

"Shake," he invited, "on what I hope will be a lifelong friendship, Tommy."

And while the two young lawmen clasped hands in a warm pledge of brotherhood, Fleetfoot and Kentucky nuzzled each other as if in approval of their star-toting master's new friendship.

T FLYING

PROSPERITY MADE BAD INJUNS

INDIANS in the Yukon Territory enjoyed unusual prosperity during the past two years, and the result was an increase in "bad Injuns." A shortage of labor made it easy for any Indian who wanted work, to obtain it.

For a long time they received good wages, and many of them bought liquor with the extra money. This put them in warlike mood, and there were many quarrelsome drinking parties.

One murder was committed in the territory. An Indian, Paddy Duncan, shot another Indian, Harton Kane, some sixty miles west of White Horse.

Kane did not die at once, and it was hoped that he was not fatally wounded.

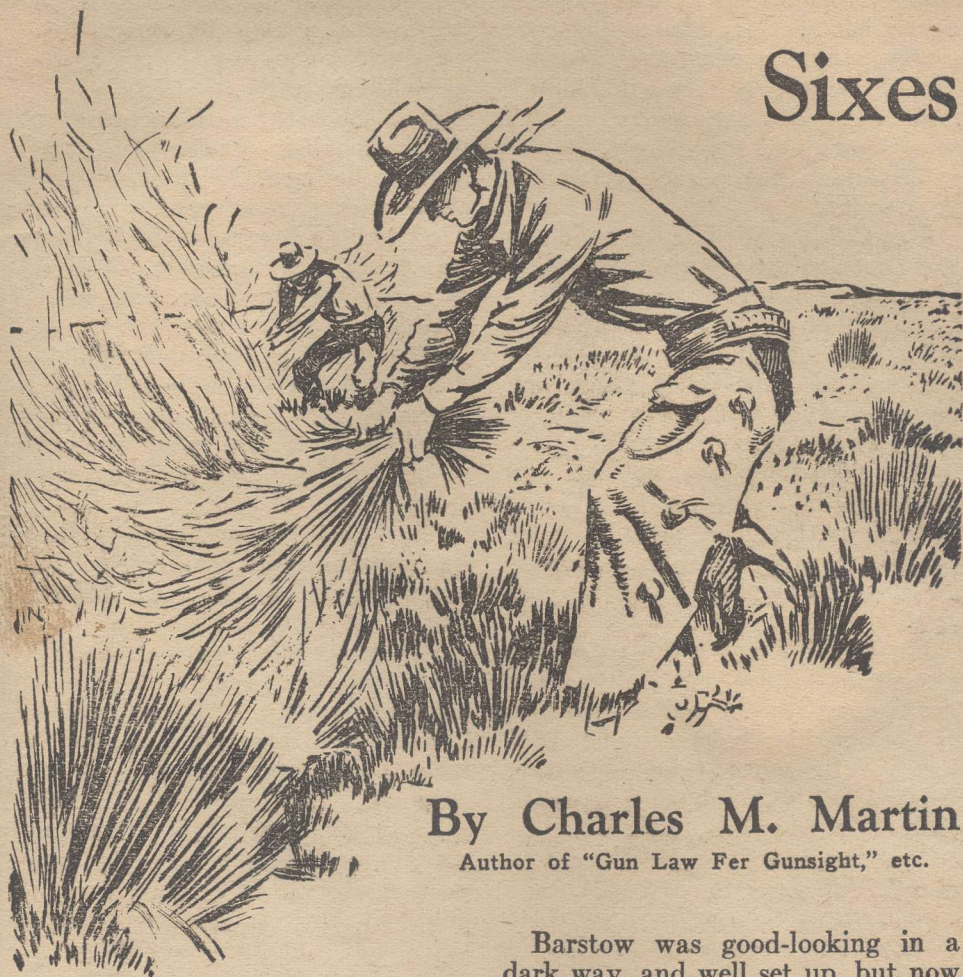
Constable Dunlop, of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, took him over a rough trail to the hospital at White Horse, but the victim died shortly after he was admitted.

The constable had left Duncan in charge of a trading-post manager while he went to the hospital with Kane. But the killer escaped by means of a ruse.

He took a police rifle and thirty-five rounds of ammunition, and made for the Alaskan border.

Soon recaptured, without a shot being fired, he was sentenced to hang. The sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, however, as the killing was done during a quarrel which had followed heavy drinking by all the Indians of the camp.

Ramroddin' The Three Sixes



By Charles M. Martin

Author of "Gun Law Fer Gunsight," etc.

JIM DAKIN was loafing with the rest of the Three Sixes (666) riding crew behind the horse barn when "Fin" Barstow started complaining about "Old Man Hoke" Harlow. There were five of them all told, not counting "Bear-sign" Billings, the rheumatic old cook.

"I'm for rollin' my bed and lightin' a shuck," Barstow announced sullenly. "Three months since last pay day on this spread, and we ain't drawin' fightin' pay, even if we was gettin' our money!"

Barstow was good-looking in a dark way, and well set up, but now his face was twisted in a scowl of mutiny. Young Jim Dakin was blond except for the deep tan from sun and wind. He shoved up on his long legs, the tallest man in the group, with both hands smoothing the gun belt on his lean hips when he squared around to face the trouble maker.

"Dogging it, eh, Barstow?" he asked softly. "Just because the Old Man happens to be short of ready cash?"

The dark cowboy did not look up

as expected. He still squatted on his high heels when he turned his head slightly and stared at Jim Dakin's dusty boots. His black eyes rose slowly, stopping when they reached the tied-down holster on Dakin's right leg. His eyes glittered with something more than anger.

"Meaning that remark personal?" he growled.

Jim Dakin cuffed down suddenly and knocked the swarthy cowboy loose from his heels with a flat-handed blow on the side of the head. His right hand popped holster leather and came up glinting, and his deep voice was harsh when he spoke to Fin Barstow:

"On yore hind legs, polecat, and begin rollin' yore bed. You're through on the Sixes, and I'll dehorn you, if you make another sneak pass for that hide-out gun under yore arm!"

Fin Barstow was sprawled on the ground, and Bear-sign Billings was the first to see the half-drawn gun in the shoulder holster under Barstow's left arm. The old cook growled in his throat when he stood up to side his young boss.

"Let me take the saddle-colored skunk," he begged huskily. "His kind ain't fit to live!"

"Stay out, Bear-sign!" Jim Dakin pushed the old cook away. "I'm still roddin' this Sixes outfit." He walked over and motioned Fin Barstow up with a little jerk of his .45.

"You can write mine out," the scowling cowboy muttered without raising his black eyes, "while I'm gearin' my hoss."

"You done got him geared and ready to go." Jim Dakin jerked a thumb at Barstow's personal horse tied near the bunk house. "Two months and a half at forty a month, makes an even hundred." Jim's left hand dug down in the pocket of his

chaps to come out with a flat roll of old paper money. He took the outside ten-dollar bill from the roll and tossed the rest to Barstow. "Roll yore bed and then roll yore hooks," he rumbled softly.

The other three riders were still polishing their heels with backs against the barn. Poker-faced, every one, waiting to see which way the wind would blow, or if the lightning was going to strike again. Tall Jim Dakin looked them over and nodded with a hard little smile.

"You, Shorty, Red, and Slim," he drawled softly, "I'm boosting yore wages to fighting pay starting now, providin' you can wait for yore money until we deliver that herd of shippers."

"And if they can't wait?" Bear-sign Billings asked hoarsely, and held a gnarled hand above his old six-gun.

"They can take their pay in saddle stock and ride," the young foreman answered evenly. "Them steeldust broncs of ours are worth seventy-five apiece, and each hombre can rope out two."

"Shorty" Frane left his sitting and straightened the hinges in his saddle-warped legs. He hooked both chubby hands in his gun belt to imitate Jim Dakin and pushed his palms down to settle the holster.

"To blaze with the saddle stock!" he snarled. "Me and the boys will side you makin' the drive, and we'll gun-smoke if necessary without extra pay. When we movin' them steers?"

Jim Dakin smiled when "Red" and "Slim" nodded agreement. "Come daylight," he answered quietly. "Fighting pay extra like I told you."

Old Bear-sign relaxed then and slogged his .44 into the holster on his good leg. "Them remarks saved

all three o' you hands a pistol-whuppin'," he rumbled softly. "Now I'm announcin' that we're havin' dessert for supper to-night."

Slim Cale came to his feet with a little whoop of delight. "You mean sugar doughnuts?" he shouted.

"Bear-sign," the old cook corrected. "Round doughnuts with holes in 'em, just in case none of you yearlings ever hunted bears."

He turned swiftly when Fin Barstow came out of the bunk house and threw a bed roll behind his cantle. Bear-sign glared at the swarthy cowboy when Barstow stepped across his saddle, and he was the only one to speak a farewell.

"So long, polecat," he sneered. "And don't let me catch you under my sights again, startin' right now!"

Fin Barstow fanned his tall bay and scratched with both spurs going away. He kept his little black eyes fixed between the ears of his horse when he roared out of the Sixes yard and headed for the Nueces River. When he dipped down in a wallow and topped the far rise, the old cook limped over to a suspended wagon tire and hammered loudly on it.

"Come and git it, cowboys," he bellowed, "'fore I throw it in the fire!"

II.

Bear-sign was driving the chuck wagon out ahead of the beef herd toward a distant camp site. Jim Dakin rode up to the wagon with a frown of worry on his craggy face. He shook his head when he pointed to a wisp of smoke off against the sky line.

"Grass fire yonder, cooky," he complained irritably. "What you reckon?"

Bear-sign wet a finger and held it up to test the wind. "Me and you," he grunted softly, and set his brakes

while he shouted to the boy wrangling the horse herd. "Give me the lend of yore cayuse and mind the wagon!" he barked at the half-grown button. "Tell the boys me and Jim will be back right away. Dig a trench and have the fires goin' when we git back!"

He creaked down from the driver's seat and pulled himself to the saddle when the boy dismounted. Then he rode off across the grassy prairie with the young foreman, and neither spoke until they were climbing out of a dry wash.

"That fire was set, Jim," the old cook declared grimly. "So you and me will set us another one. We better hobble the hosses to keep 'em from spookin' when they smell smoke."

A few minutes later, he was holding a bundle of dry grass between his boots for a windbreak. Three hundred yards away, Jim Dakin waved the go-ahead and lighted his own torch. Then the two walked toward each other dragging fire through the tall grass on the lip of the wash. Bear-sign wiped sweat from his furrowed brow when they joined, after which they made a run for the hobbled horses.

"You should have drilled him center, Jim," the old cook rasped, "the night he tried a gun-sneak with that hide-out!"

Jim Dakin expressed no surprise, wasted no time asking for explanations. "We ain't sure Fin Barstow set that fire, cooky," he pointed out. "It might have been an accident or the work of rustlers."

"Yeah," Bear-sign grunted. "Rustlers riding for Sim Slades S Bar S outfit. Look at that back fire eatin' grass!"

"Two days feed gone to blazes!" the Sixes foreman answered with a cowman's regret for wasted grazing.

Then he focused his gaze and growled a warning. "Hobble yore holster, cooky. Yonder comes bad news on hossback!"

Bear-sign took a long look at the approaching riders and twitched his gun against hang. He moved away from Jim Dakin and reined his horse until his holster faced his young boss so that both would be in the clear. Then they sat their saddles and waited for the three S Bar S riders to come up. While the grass fire rolled along to burn out against the distant blaze.

The old cook growled like a grizzly when he recognized swarthy Fin Barstow, riding to the left of big "Sim" Slade. A barn-shouldered gunman rubbed stirrups with the S Bar S owner on the right. All three were grim-faced and looking for trouble, with the big man doing the talking.

"You fired that grama grass, Dakin," he roared savagely. "Account of me and old Hoke Harlow racing for the market!"

"We built us a back fire," the Sixes foreman corrected softly. "Too bad if yore S Bar S critters got singed some."

"All three of you jiggers smell like skunk," Bear-sign snarled harshly, and his hand slapped leather when the wide-shouldered rider made a pass for his gun.

Laziness fell away from Jim Dakin like the skin of a shedding snake. His gun was out and eared back to hold Sim Slade and Fin Barstow halfway to their holsters.

Bear-sign was snarling above his smoking .44 when the broad-shouldered gunman opened his clutching fingers and spilled sidewise from the saddle. The old cook held his position until the dead man straightened his legs with boot toes pointing out.

"That there was Smoke Murphy,"

he grunted hoarsely. "Wanted for murder and rustlin'. He was gun-bait for any honest hombre who cut his sign!"

Sim Slade set his lips under the red stubble of his beard while his brown eyes changed color. Thick-legged and heavy of shoulder, he weighed better than two hundred pounds. And he was growling like a killer wolf caught in a trap when he raised his eyes from Murphy and glared at the gun in Bear-sign's steady hand.

"I'll have the law on yuh," he said thickly, and jerked his head toward the burned-out fire. "It's government business when you kindle free grazing!"

Jim Dakin was watchin Fin Barstow. The swarthy cowboy was staring at the gun in Dakin's right hand, keeping his black eyes belt-high, and his thin lips tightly closed. The 666 foreman jerked his gun and spoke sharply:

"Take that corpse and ride on back to yore herd, Slim Slade. You cut my sign one more time, and it will be the last for one of us!"

The big man dismounted and stooped over the dead gun fighter. Lifted the body without effort and laid it across the saddle in front of Fin Barstow. Then he caught Murphy's horse by the trailing reins and mounted his saddle before he spoke with head over his shoulder, and his horse walking slowly.

"One more time," he repeated harshly, and hit his horse with the spurs.

Jim Dakin watched the pair ride away with their dead before he holstered his gun. Then he sighed and headed back toward the Sixes trail herd.

The old cook watched Jim's sober face intently. At last, he holstered his old .44 when he thought he heard

Jim Dakin make a promise under his breath. Something that sounded like: "One more time!"

Jim Dakin swung around the bedded-down herd and told off Shorty Frane to ride the first night watch. Five hundred head of grass-fattened steers made a small bunch, as trail herds measured, and they had been grazed slow to hold good market flesh.

Old Man Hoke Harlow needed the money to pay off notes long past due on the Sixes spread, and the off-season market was open for the first outfit to reach Dodge with prime beef.

The tall foreman frowned when he rode back to the chuck wagon and found Bear-sign Billings leaning against his tail-gate table whittling a notch on the handle of his old gun, turning the old Frontier model carefully in his gnarled fingers while he hummed tunelessly under his breath. Back away the saddle-tired cowboys were seated cross-legged wolfing hot food from tin plates, and sighing over scalding cowboy coffee.

"Since when you take up wood carving?" Dakin asked sharply, and stared at the gun in the old cook's hand.

Bear-sign spat between his front teeth and wiped his rope mustache with the back of his gun hand. "Now you take good coffee," he began slowly in his cracked voice. "Two pounds of Arbuckle in two gallons of water, and cook 'er two hours. After which you pitches an ol' worn-out hoss-shoe on the top grounds and watches careful. If she floats, she's cowboy coffee!"

Slim Cale and Red Johnson snickered and straightened their peeled faces when Jim Dakin turned cold blue eyes on them. The old cook shifted his worn boots to ease his

crippled leg. Squinting down the handle of his gun and finished his nick with the sharp blade, like a sculptor completing a masterpiece.

"You heard me, cooky," the tall ramrod barked grimly. "Since when you start notchin' for yore dead?"

"Since I beat Smoke Murphy to the gun," Bear-sign answered complacently "There's a thousand dollars cash on that jigger's scalp, and I got me a reliable witness so long as you keep yore good health."

He clicked his frogging knife shut and slipped it in his pocket while his right hand holstered the old gun and snugged it to his liking. Then he raised his gray head and squinted out across the prairie where the Arkansas River marked the edge of Dodge City, and the end of the trail.

"Hoss-backer coming, boss," he remarked softly. "More grief for the Sixes, shore as sin, from the way that cowboy is smokin' his hoss's hoofs!"

III.

Jim Dakin set down his plate and straightened his lean frame. His tanned face was thin from the long trail to add ten years to his twenty-five. The Dodge rider came up fast and scattered gravel when he slid his horse to a stop, and he came straight to the Sixes foreman when he swung down and jerked the battered black Stetson from his head. He took a sweat-stained envelope from inside the band and handed it to Jim Dakin.

"I'm Tally Bender," he explained. "Tally man for old John Jenkins, the cattle buyer. This letter came early this morning from Hoke Harlow down Dalhart way. So old John sent me out with it."

Dakin nodded and took the letter. "Sim Slade," he said softly. "Did he

cross the river yet with his S Bar S herd?"

The tally man nodded. "Slade got in last night," he answered slowly. "His critters were gaunted and flesh-pore from shoving them along too fast, and Slade laid it to the grass and water. Said he was putting a charge agin' the feller what burned off the grass back there on free range."

"He mention any names?" Dakin murmured.

Bender shook his head. "Not him, but a shifty eyed jigger siding him made talk about you and yore *cocinero*," and he turned his head to study the old cook.

Bear-sign Billings shoved away from the wagon and high-heeled up to his boss. "That means they will tie up our herd, Jim," he muttered under his breath. "We better ride to-night and get it done!"

"One reason why old John sent me along as out-rider," Bender interrupted. "If there's any trouble over this Sixes herd, he's forced to take them poor critters from Sim Slade, account of a contract he signed when old Hoke Harlow sent word you was coming."

Jim Dakin stared down at his boots, and then remembered the letter in his hand. Tearing the flap slowly while all eyes watched his thin face, he read the scrawled writing in silence until he came to the end of the page. Then he jammed the letter down in his hip pocket and drew his gun to check the loads.

"How far to Dodge?" he barked at the tally man.

Bender glanced back over his shoulder and guessed the distance. "Eleven-twelve miles," he answered with the carelessness a cowhand always uses to cover his excitement. "You riding in?"

"Me and Bear-sign," Dakin

grunted, and waved the old cook toward the remuda in the rope corral. "Gear a good one," he growled softly. "And mind what I told you about hobbling yore holster!"

Bear-sign grinned and brushed the notched handle of his old gun with the tips of his fingers. Gnarled fingers, but shaped to fit the grip of a Frontier .44. Then he pulled his old Stetson down over twinkling gray eyes and reached for the catch rope on his scarred saddle. He snared a leggy roan with his first loop and took his coils hand-over-hand to bring the horse to the rope gate.

"Drop it, button!" he snapped at the kid wrangler. "Me and the rod is ridin' up the trail on business for the Old Man." Then he sided up to Dakin and spoke over his shoulder from the corner of his thin-lipped mouth. "What'd ol' Hoke allow?" he whispered.

Jim Dakin reached out and gripped Bear-sign's skinny right arm and drew him close. "Some jigger bought up that paper on the Sixes," he muttered grimly, and set his white teeth together hard. "Old Hoke stands to lose the spread unless we deliver the herd and collect the money!"

"This here jigger," Bear-sign whispered softly, and tried to keep the screech from his voice. "His first and last handles begin with a snaky letter S?"

"With a bar in between," Jim Dakin answered quietly, but smoky flame growed deep in his narrowed blue eyes. "His brand reads S Bar S. Can you beat a play like that?"

"You're durned right," the old cook sputtered, and jerked his head forward to send a stream of amber hissing between the gap in his front teeth. "Slade buys up old Hoke's paper, and then he tries to burn us out of grass to keep us from deliver-

ing our herd. Now he aims to file charges against you for what he done himself, and she sounds like the kind of a play that shifty eyed Fin Barstow would figger out!"

Jim Dakin turned to Tally Bender and asked a low question. "Did Sim Slade sign that complaint yet?"

"Nuh-uh," Bender grunted. "Account of the deputy marshal being out of town. He's due back about noon to-morrow."

"Might save some time was you to finger yore tally-strings come daylight," the tall foreman suggested quietly. "The boys will line out the herd and pass 'em between you and Shorty, if me and Bear-sign don't get back in time to help. Just in case I fall down and break my neck, you tell old John to make the check out to Hoke Harlow in care of the Cattlemen's Bank at Dalhart."

The tally man nodded and scratched his head. "I'd offer the lend of my cutter, but it looks like she's a private war," he murmured regretfully. "I don't like Sim Slade nor his shifty *segundo* no more than you do."

Jim Dakin shook hands and turned to watch the old cook. Bear-sign was tightening the cinches on his roan, and then he pulled himself up to throw his stiff leg across the horn. He settled his boots deep in the stirrups and snugged the gun down on his lean thigh against a long ride.

"Lead out, boss," he said with a little hum of happiness in his growling voice. "'Tain't like Sixes hands to keep anxious folks a-waiting!"

IV.

The two riders crossed the wide, shallow Arkansas just as yellow lights began to glow across the flats over in Dodge City. Bear-sign

checked his roan on the far bank and drew close to offer information.

"You take it coming into town this away like we're doing," he explained softly. "You hit a big saloon with a sign stretching across the board walk. She's painted on both sides."

"Get the wind off yore belly," Dakin grunted coldly. "Spell it out."

"Reading from this side she's the 'First Chance,'" Bear-sign growled sullenly. "T'other side, coming out of town, she's spelled 'Last Chance.' Figgered you might want to know."

Jim Dakin sat his saddle in the faint moonlight and stared at the scowling face turned away from him. Then he shook his head slowly, tapped the old cook lightly on the arms, and waited until Bear-sign met his glance before he spoke.

"She's clouded, that sign," he admitted honestly. "What you getting at, old-timer?"

"Them two is bound to be bellied up to the bar over yonder," Bear-sign explained patiently. "It's our first and last chance to save the Sixes for Old Man Hoke Harlow back home. Twice hand-running them S Bar S snakes has tried to cut a rusty, and they're waiting up there in that *cantina* to try again!"

Jim Dakin straightened up with understanding reflected in his dark blue eyes. "That's right," he agreed softly, and twitched his gun against leather crimp after the long ride. "Like as not them two will try it one more time."

Jim Dakin knew that word of their arrival had preceeded them across the holding grounds down on the river flats. Brush-jumpered trail hands looked them over carelessly when he and the old cook clanked along the spur-splintered board walk.

Dakin was as tall and straight as

a pine, with Bear-sign barely reaching to his shoulder, and limping like a lame horse. Both walked with that peculiar stiff-legged stride a gunman uses when he's meeting trouble half-way.

They crossed the end of the street and climbed the curb just under the glaring "First Chance" sign. Neither stopped nor hesitated when they split apart, with Jim Dakin stalking up the boarded side of the long saloon.

Bear-sign shortened his step and went on alone under the yellow lights. He shouldered through the batwing doors and side-stepped with his back to the wall while his frosty eyes squinted some to shed the light.

He could almost feel the silence when the long line of drinkers stopped talking and moved back from the bar as one man. He jerked his head up when he saw two men standing halfway down the bar facing the front door. Their hands wore on their guns, and metal glinted half out of holster leather. Thick-legged Sim Slade, with Fin Barstow just behind and a little to one side to avoid fouling each other on the draw.

"Start reaching, cooky," Fin Barstow barked suddenly, with a twangy edge in his voice. "You crowded yore luck one time too many!"

The little cook shot his head forward and spat a stream of yellow juice to ring a brass spittoon at the near end of the bar. Then he shook his head slowly and jerked it sideways to call attention to the alley door. After which the runty warrior slapped for his gun when Fin Barstow did the unexpected.

Most men would have turned their heads for a look behind them just as big Slim Slade did. Fin Barstow was not like other men, and he

jerked his half-drawn gun loose with thumb earing back the hammer on the draw. He pressed trigger just as Bear-sign cleared leather with his lean body turned sidewise to offer less target, and both guns roared with a single voice.

Fin Barstow jerked back, buckled at the knees, and went down to the sawdust with the smoking gun spilling from his hand. Bear-sign chewed vigorously and caught his balance for a second shot. His middle finger rubbed the notch he had whittled for Smoke Murphy while a little smile crinkled his squinting eyes.

The experience of many years had given him an even break. With a filed trigger on his old gun, he had slipped the hammer while Barstow was thumbing back to full cock.

The old cook swayed a little when he jerked his eyes up to watch Sim Slade. Then he slid his gun down in leather when he saw the big man turned toward the alley door watching Jim Dakin.

The S Bar S owner paid no attention to the drumming heels rattling in the sawdust beside him. Fin Barstow had taken first shot. It was his hard luck if he couldn't place his shots where he called them. Slade had the law on his side, and he told himself that he was the fastest gunhawk on the long trails.

"Pulled another sneak, eh?" he taunted loudly so that all could hear. "You didn't pack the cold nerve to come in the front door like a man!"

"One of us did," Jim Dakin corrected softly. "We knew the both of you would have your guns half drawn, so we aimed to keep you honest for once."

The big man raised his red head and smiled at the last words. "Seems like I heard that before," he chuckled. "Back there where you

burned free prairie grass and killed one of my hands on a gun-sneak!"

He was playing for the pull of the crowd, and Jim Dakin knew it. Grass meant life to the trail herds, and the news of the big fire had spread from the Big Bend to the Arkansas. The Sixes foreman heard the angry muttering of hard-riding trail drivers. From the corner of his eye he could see rope-burned hands shifting down to gun handles.

"You set that fire, Slade," he answered clearly. "You figgered to catch my Sixes beef herd in the blaze, but you didn't figger on the wind changing the way it done. I set a back fire to meet your smoke, and you gaunted yore S Bar S herd pushing them up to where they could find grazing!"

It was plain talk told in range language understood by every man in the room. Bear-sign nodded with satisfaction when he saw faces change just as the grass fire had changed under a sudden shift of the wind. Sim Slade saw it, too, and he growled deep in his corded throat.

"Back there in that dry scrape," he rumbled, "you told it scarey what you'd do if I cut yore sign one more time!"

He chopped the sentence off with a click of yellow teeth and dipped down for his gun like a hawk making a strike. Jim Dakin stiffened when he saw the little V wrinkles lash out at the corners of the narrow glowing eyes. Gun-fighter's telegraph that meant the loss of an eyewink of time if a man could read the sign. Just the difference of a heartbeat.

The Sixes foreman twitched the powerful roping muscles in his right

shoulder with long fingers bringing his gun from smooth leather. He jerked some when the .45 exploded and bucked in his hand, and he thumbed back for a second shot he knew would not be needed.

Sim Slade gave back a step and teethered on his high heels. A circle of crimson widened out on the left of his wool shirt while he tried to clear leather. Paralyzed muscles refused to do the bidding of his brain, and then he fell like an old tree that has faced its last storm.

Jim Dakin crouched forward with boots spread wide for balance while he studied each face in the crowd. Not a man there wanted fight, and the tall Sixes foreman drew a deep breath and holstered his smoke-grimed gun. A stocky man stepped out of the crowd and came toward him with hand raised in the Indian sign of peace.

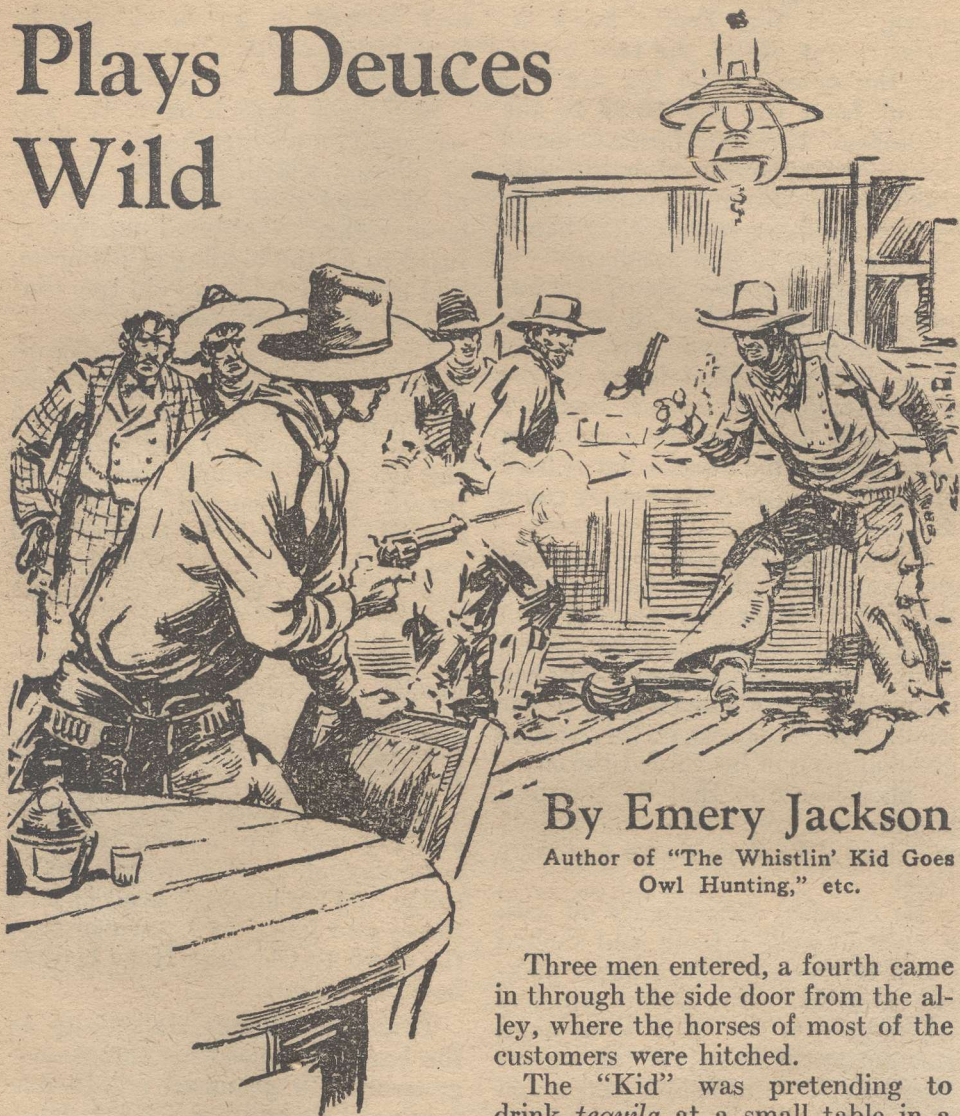
"Howdy, Jim Dakin," he greeted quietly. "I'm John Jenkins, waiting for that Sixes herd of prime beef. You meet up with my man, Tally Bender?"

Jim Dakin nodded soberly. "Bender and my men are making the tally come daylight," he answered just as softly. "Five hundred head of long threes and fours, and you can send the check to Old Man Hoke Harlow back in Dalhart."

Bear-sign Billings stalked up to the bar and cleared his throat suggestively. "I promised not to irrigate until we had finished the drive, boss," he whispered hoarsely, and then his cracked voice took on a pleading note. "You mind if I break that promise—just one more time?"

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The Whistlin' Kid Plays Deuces Wild



By Emery Jackson

Author of "The Whistlin' Kid Goes Owl Hunting," etc.

THE Lone Coyote was in full blast, punchers and dance girls cavorting in the rear, where a big arch led to the dance hall from the bar and gambling layouts.

Musicians, bartenders, dealers, lookouts, and case keepers were all busy as the batwing doors swung inward from the street.

Three men entered, a fourth came in through the side door from the alley, where the horses of most of the customers were hitched.

The "Kid" was pretending to drink *tequila* at a small table in a corner, actually pouring it into an olla filled with dirt, where an artificial palm pretended to grow.

He had seen the first man who entered before, earlier in the day. It was Ray Leighton, sheriff of Rodada County, an old-timer, yet lean, erect, and vigorous for all his years, his white mustache, goatee and hair

in striking contrast to his deeply tanned skin, weathered and wrinkled.

The one who came in through a side door, and another who entered with the sheriff, took their places as if from previous arrangement. One stayed to block exits to the alley; the other went swiftly across the ballroom floor, where the music ceased abruptly, and stood by the door to the kitchen, where a hasty and convenient get-away could be made if necessary.

The Lone Coyote was run for profit, and it got plenty of it, the Kid figured. And its owner, "Tucson" Thompson, did not like any interruptions in his pursuit of wealth, least of all one of this sort.

He came forward, stocky, pock-marked, one eye of glass, the other no more friendly. He was loudly dressed in checkered suit, a gold watch chain of heavy links across his vest of fancy plaid. It was a mask for two derringers snugly tucked in his pockets, where the ends of the chain were fastened. When Tucson Thompson said "Let's see what time it is," wise men scattered out of his line of fire.

He was a power in the county, politically opposed to the sheriff, opposed to all law officers, on principle. But Ray Leighton got elected term after term, no matter what party was in. The cowmen wanted him, and cattlemen paid the big taxes in Rodada County. Governors came and went, but Leighton, like the brook in the poem, seemed destined to go on forever, despite his enemies.

He was the man for the job, and he stayed on it.

The Kid knew these things, had learned them before he came to Regenta, the county seat, where the Lone Coyote was the favorite place

of entertainment, if not the most reputable.

"Just what's the big idea," blustered Tucson, as the sheriff, taking the middle of the floor between the bar and the layouts, held up his hand. Not a chip or a glass moved, save that of the Kid, as he seized the opportunity to get rid of his fourth glass of *tequila*.

Nobody had taken much notice of him. He looked like a young waddy, slightly drunk, intending to get more so before the night was over. They paid small attention to his hawkish features, bronzed as dark as a Comanche, to his eyes, questing and brilliant like the eyes of an eagle, shadowed by the brim of his tilted Stetson.

Some people thought the Kid part Indian, but they were wrong. He was a hundred per cent white American, although not yet old enough to vote.

Lithely relaxed, he sat with his legs stretched out, saying little, seeing all, hearing plenty.

"The idea is," said Leighton in his deep voice, "that rustlers ran off fifty head of Hale's primes ter-night."

He pointed to the man who had come in beside him, a lanky man, who looked like the cattle owner the Kid knew him for, although only by name.

"They killed Sam Benton, one of his night herders. The other, Slim Philips, is breathin' through one lung, the other bein' perforated. It happened round ten o'clock ter-night, before the moon rose. Hale was ridin' back from the Lazy M, thought he'd take a look-see at his steers, found the two of the boys, with the herd missin'. Thet was round eleven, li'le more'n an hour ago."

"Sounds interestin'," said Tucson.

"What's it all got to do with you bustin' in here?"

There were punchers present, the Kid noticed, who seemed to think it mattered. But they were leaving it up to Leighton.

"I'm roundin' up the town," snapped the sheriff. "If there's some here who can't prove a good alibi fer their actions round ten, I aim to question 'em."

"Why pick on this place?" Tucson asked with a sneer.

"Because I think it's a likely one," the sheriff came back sternly. "Murder's been done, Tucson. You might take it lightly. I don't. I'm doin' my duty."

"Go right ahead," replied Tucson. "The sooner you git through, the better it suits me. This crowd has been here since the tables started an' the dance began. Round nine. You can take my word fer it."

"I might," said Leighton dryly, "but I ain't. Don't none of you make a move to leave. I'm inspectin' guns. I mentioned the word 'murder.' I don't need no warrant."

The crowd was still and silent. The gamblers attached to the place looked on stony-eyed. The girls were awed and thrilled.

Leighton looked them over. His glance rested on the Kid, marked him for a stranger, passed on, fixed itself on a man the Kid had noticed playing heavy stakes at the faro layout. He had risen from his seat, and stood with his thumbs hooked into his belt. Three punchers had eased through the crowd and now stood close to him—siding him, the Kid thought.

They were hard-looking hombres, their faces expressionless, their cold eyes watchful.

"You set an example, Hardin," said the sheriff, his voice sounding

like a file rasping steel. "You're an owner. You an' your three riders."

Hardin gave a laugh that was short and jeering.

He, like Tucson, was loudly dressed, but it was the clothing of the range, not the saloon. His chaps had silver conchas; the butts of his two six-guns, worn low and tied down to the conchas, were silver. He wore no vest, but a shirt of crimson silk. His bandana was also silk, zigzagged in a Mexican pattern, held in a three-way ring of gold, with a ruby set deeply in it.

He had a swaggering way about him, confident and masterful. His face might have been handsome, save for a scar that ran from his left temple to the corner of his rather thin-lipped mouth. His eyes were pale, small, a little too close together. Their lids narrowed as the sheriff spoke.

"Why pick on me, sheriff? I've been here, me an' my boys, since eight thirty. Haven't I, Pepita? I had the first dance with you."

He turned to a girl who stood near him at the bar, having come in from the dance hall with her partner. She was young, at least part Mexican, the Kid figured, beautiful despite more than a trace of worry upon her face.

She looked at Hardin evenly.

"I don't remember seeing you," she said. "I don't care if I never see you again."

The Kid read defiance, smoldering anger, in her reply.

Hardin gazed at her close-lidded, the gaze of a venomous snake.

"You've got a poor memory," he said. "You want to sharpen it up, sister." There was more than a covert threat in his tone. The girl faced him, and Hardin turned away, to the bar.

"Pete here fixed us all a pisco punch when we first come in," he said. "You'll remember that, Pete? The crowd was jest beginnin' to arrive. Round eight thirty."

The Kid saw the aproned Pete lick his lips rapidly, glance at Tucson, who seemed to give a slight nod.

"Sure," he said swiftly, "sure, five or ten minutes, one way or the other."

"Then you won't mind me lookin' at your six-gun," said the sheriff evenly. "Yours an' your boys'. Jest the barrels, not the cylinders."

The Kid saw the four men tense, Hardin and his siding waddies. The girl was tense, too, watching Hardin. She had lost her job, he told himself, from the way Tucson looked at her. And he wondered why she had risked it. Pete had not risked his.

"You'll find no evidence you kin put over with a jury, cooked or not, Leighton," said Hardin. "I know you'd like to pin a job on me to save your own. But it won't work."

"Show me your gun," said Leighton calmly.

The Kid shifted his legs ever so slightly. He slid his holster between them.

"There's jest one way I'll show you my gun, sheriff."

Hardin's pale eyes were like Mexican opals, with low red and green flames in them. His men shifted on their feet, watching the two deputies. They were like snakes, slowly coiling, ready to strike.

"Show me your gun," said the sheriff.

His hand was moving slowly, outstretched, toward the butt of his own hogleg. Too slowly, the Kid thought. Leighton was depending too much upon the authority of the gold star of his office.

Hardin's thin lips drew back, showing his teeth in a snarl.

The Kid made a mental bet with himself that the cylinder and those of the riders might be full, but that their gun barrels were none too clean. Men got that way, the Kid knew, when they were cocksure of their power and their luck, when they were the kind who took risks, gambled, drank, and felt themselves on top of the world.

"You asked fer it," said Hardin.

The crowd shrank away out of the line of fire. Pete slid along the bar. The three riders and the two deputies were like hounds straining at the leash, waiting for release. The first moved up to the sheriff and Hardin.

Leighton's muzzle tip was still leathered in the holster when Hardin's was in the open, the barrel swinging up, halting for the tiniest moment. Now it was coming down to the level, aimed at the sheriff's heart, Hardin's fingers squeezing grip and trigger, the hammer lifting.

Brang! A shot rang through the room and Hardin's Colt jarred out of his hand, landed on the floor with the cylinder jammed, out of commission.

The Kid was on his feet, his hogleg produced from the holster as if it had been materialized from the air. One of Hardin's riders had sensed rather than seen the blur of the draw, the pale spit of flame that disarmed Hardin, and he pulled trigger on the Kid.

Brang! Brang! The Kid's six-gun swung with a turn of his supple wrist. The puncher went reeling backward, shot just under the collar bone. His slug went wide. He had been beaten by a watch tick.

Now the sheriff's gun was clear,

his deputies closed in, covering Hardin's two other men.

II.

The Kid stood smiling, whistling softly his favorite tune, the melancholy "Cowboy's Lament." His hogleg was back in leather, and a wisp of smoke trailed from the open end of the holster.

The fight was over before it had started.

The Kid stooped, picked up Hardin's gun. He sniffed at the long barrel.

"Smells sort of sour to me," he said as he handed it to the sheriff. "Of course, he might have been shootin' at a jack rabbit."

"We all of us scared up a coyote an' took a shot at it on the way over," said Hardin sullenly. He glared at the Kid, who grinned at him.

Leighton offered Hardin his ruined gun, and the owner angrily refused it. He turned on Hale.

"You'd like to have me sent up fer stealin' your steers, Jim Hale. You'd like to see me hanged fer killin' Sam Benton, an' there's plenty in Rodada County know why. Jest because your lies helped you steal my girl don't prove I'd steal your primes."

"If you was a real man you'd leave a woman's name out of it. I'm not makin' any charges. Benton got killed, Slim's like to die, an' I aim to see somebody swing fer thet if it takes my last cent. If I lay hold of him before the sheriff does, I'll see him strung up to the first cottonwood I find big enough to hold him."

"You talk big, you an' the sheriff. He started to draw on me. He had no right to ask me fer my gun. What's your play now, Leighton?

Lay down your hole card an' see how much it'll git you."

Hardin seemed sure of himself. It was not all bravado, the Kid decided. Tucson was back of him.

Tucson shoved forward in a temper, real or assumed.

"I'm runnin' this place fer business," he said. "Settle your scraps outside, gents. If you want to look at everybody's guns, Leighton, git through with it an' turn 'em loose. An' you git thet plugged cowpoke of yours out of here, Hardin, 'fore he spoils my floor."

Hardin turned his baleful eyes on the Kid.

"If you'd looked at *his* artillery," he said to Leighton, "you might have found thet dirty. Mebbe thet's why he was in sech a hurry to shoot it. Who is he? He ain't ridin' fer none of the outfits. He drifts in here mebbe lookin' fer an alibi after murder. He's sure mighty handy with his gun."

The sheriff turned to the Kid. So did the rest. The Kid grinned at them all in friendly fashion, even at Hardin and Tucson. He gave Leighton a swift wink.

"You might be surprised if I told you," he said. "I might be Billy the Kid, but he's dead. I might have done a trifle killin' in my time, but none of it was murder. I might haze steers, but I don't steal 'em. I kin give you an account of myself, sheriff, any time you want it."

There was a quality in his dark, shining eyes, in his attitude, his ease, in the wink he had tipped the sheriff, that made Leighton tug thoughtfully at his goatee.

"You might drop in to the jail," he said. "I sleep there, but I won't be sleepin' none ter-night. We'll let the guns go, Tucson," he added slowly. "Hardin, you're slick an' smart. I'm givin' you plenty rope.

Don't let it drag too fur. Come on, boys!"

Hardin and two of his riders helped out the third one. The sheriff left with his two deputies and Hale.

"Start the music," cried Tucson. "The house buys a round."

It was the way to start the ball rolling once again. Men trooped to the bar with their partners for the next dance, or from the last one.

The saloon keeper saw the girl who had outfaced Hardin, refusing to make the play he expected of her. Tucson's face was savage.

"You're fired," he said. "Git out of here before you're kicked out."

The girl flinched for a moment. "I'll get my clothes," she said. "My street clothes."

"You'll git nothin'. Not a rag. Pete, you an' Juan give her the bum's rush right now."

The Kid was not a lady's man. He had not time for it in his busy, risky life. But he was a champion of womanhood at all times. This girl had spunk.

Juan was a Mexican swamper. He came forward with an evil grin. Pete followed less eagerly, obeying orders, leaving the other "apron" to set up the drinks till the girl was thrown out.

The Kid stood with his left elbow on the bar, supple as a puma. There was a smile on his lips, but none in his eyes.

"The lady is dancing with me," he said. "I ain't had a dance yit. Any objections?"

The pur of his words suddenly changed to a sound like the clink of steel. "I'll buy another round after the dance, jest to show my intentions are amiable—so far," he added.

The last two words carried their threat as he surveyed the roomful, seeing approval on most faces. Tuc-

son saw it, too, and although his fingers itched to use a derringer on this interfering stranger, he was afraid to try. He hesitated a moment.

"I'm agreeable," he answered with a smirk. "I never turn down a good customer. But it's jest fer this dance. She's through at the Lone Coyote."

"I hope it won't break her heart," said the Kid. He had not helped her much, he feared, save to prevent her being roughly handled. There was a look of despondency about her as she smiled wanly at the Kid and took his arm.

The kid wondered whether there was not more to her turn-down of Hardin than ordinary dislike. She must have known it would lose her her job, the way Hardin stood in with Tucson.

There was little fancy stepping in the Kid's young life, but he could dance as naturally as a duck swims. The girl was as light as thistledown, the music good, and they glided out on the floor while most were still at the bar.

"Do you speak Spanish?" she whispered in that language, and sighed with relief when the Kid answered, "Perfectly."

"There are others here who speak and understand it, señor," she said. "But they are not many. We will keep away from them, and I shall speak softly and quickly. You must look at me as if you were listening to me thanking you, which I do, señor, from my heart."

The Kid listened.

"Hardin killed my brother, Jaime. That is why I must work here. I also hope to prove it was Hardin. I am sure, but that will not hang him."

There was a world of hatred in her voice—hatred for the killer of her brother.

"How are you sure?" asked the Kid.

"Jaime, he had a small horse ranch. He knew horses—none better—how to breed, to break, to ride, to race. Hardin was always after Jaime to work for him. But Jaime would not. He told me Hardin wanted to get him drunk, to make him gamble, that he offered to loan him money—trying every way to get a hold on him.

"One night when he was a little drunk, Jaime said he believed Hardin wanted him to steal horses and rebrand them, that he was sure Hardin and his riders stole cattle and sold them through Tucson. That was where he got the money he loves to spend."

The Kid saw Tucson watching them, bent his head lower, laughed as if answering some remark of the girl.

"Jaime would talk no more after that. He broke off with Hardin. He would not even sell the horses Hardin wanted from him. So one night they were run off. Jaime heard them; he went out. There were shots. I found him dying. He could not speak. He tried to, but he choked with the hot flow from his veins in his throat. I told him I would avenge him. It was close to morning. When the day came, I found what he had scrawled in the dust as he lay."

"A name?"

"Part of one—'H A' and one downstroke—then he was too weak to add more, but it would have been 'Hardin.'"

"It's not proof. His lawyer might argue it was to have been Hale."

"I know. There is bad blood between them, but Hale is fine. I have hoped to get some evidence here, but I hate Hardin so I could not even speak to him. Yet I *know* he did it.

And now he hates you. He will try to kill you, señor. Not in the open, because you shoot too well. He will wait for you, he and his men, when you leave here to-night."

"I hope not," said the Kid. "I'm seeing you home. Where do you live? Will you be safe?"

"I live with my aunt. She is poor, but it is a place to sleep. And we have good neighbors. You must not come with me, señor. They will be watching and waiting for you to come out. My aunt's place is on the edge of town, beyond the creek."

"Somebody might follow you."

He felt her shudder.

"That Juan! He annoys me. He swore he would kill me if I did not let him be my *querido*. That was only talk. I can take care of myself."

She tapped her knee as she danced. The Kid guessed she had a dagger in her garter.

"I'm seeing you home," he said. "And then I am going to have a talk with the sheriff. We might get our heads together."

She put back her head, gazed into his eyes.

"Who are you, señor? What are you? You are young, you are brave, and you are lightning with your gun. You protect women, but you do not care for any of them. Many might care for you. You are strange."

"I don't frighten you?"

"Never, señor."

"That's good. I'll go home with you to your aunt. I've got a job to do, Pepita, and it keeps me busy all the time."

The music ended. They went to the bar, where the Kid tossed two double eagles on the counter for the next round, left the change.

"I'll wait here with Tucson," he said, "while you get your other things."

He stood close to the saloon keeper, and when Tucson would have moved away, stepped gently but firmly on the other's foot.

"Let it ride, Tucson," he said. "It never pays to haze a woman."

Tucson looked at him as a wolf looks at a hunter from the timber.

"You're ridin' high ter-night," he said. "Don't let it loosen your knees."

"It won't, Tucson. Here comes the *doncellita*. *Hasta la vista!*"

The Kid was not especially anxious to see Tucson again, but he had a hunch he would, and not through friendship.

The girl appeared with a bundle. The Kid took her out the side door, with a keen glance up and down the alley.

"We'll ride," he said. "My horse will carry two."

His buckskin, Speed, was at the rack, not hitched, but with the ends of the reins passed through a ring. Speed backed out, stood while the Kid set hand under the girl's foot, lifted her as she sprang lightly. She sat side saddle, one knee about the horn, well forward. The Kid mounted behind her, and Speed loped out of the alley.

The Kid was ready for trouble, but none showed. The moon, which had not risen when the two night herders were killed, was now like a great lamp in the sky.

They rode to where the town ended, and then started again, with the Mexican quarter of low, mean adobes, and *jacals*.

"This is where I live," she said. "Adios, señor! And be careful."

Her lips brushed his cheek, then she slid down, ran into the low house, where a light showed dimly.

The Kid took the kiss as it was meant, not a caress, but a blessing.

He was going to be careful, all right.

He watched the shadowy alleys for masked movements. He passed the Lone Coyote, still going strong, saw the lantern outside the jail, the flame behind blue glass.

He tried the heavy door, leaving Speed ground anchored in the street. It opened easily, and the Kid paused on the threshold, an inner voice whispering to him that he had walked into a trap.

It seemed impossible. The jail should be the safest place in town.

He saw the sheriff seated at his desk in the outer office.

He did not move. He was upright in his chair, but there was something wrong about his attitude. It was more that of a well-stuffed dummy than a living man.

He was not living. He was tied to his chair so that he seemed to be, but his bronzed face under the overhead lamp with its tin reflector was gray. A fleck of crimson dribbled from the corner of his mouth.

The Kid's hand shot down to his hogleg, the other holding the door open.

There was a swift scud of feet on the steps behind him.

Blows rained on his head, half stunning him, so that he stumbled forward as he tried to spring and turn.

A gun was thrust into the small of his back. His failing hearing registered the command.

"Hands high! Stick 'em up!"

A noose was about his neck, strangling him. A rope around his arms, another around his ankles, a third linking them. They had his hogleg. With the blows on his head, his wind cut off, the Kid passed out, barely conscious that he was being carried into the night, flung across a horse that was not Speed.

It was like a nightmare—the sheriff murdered and left in his own jail, then hard galloping that jolted the Kid into final oblivion.

III.

Hardin was holding a court of death. His prisoners, already doomed, were Hale, Pepita, and the Kid, bound hand and foot, propped up against the wall of the room in the adobe house to which they had been taken, well out of town.

By the time he had arrived there, the Kid had begun to revive.

He had figured the place to be the ancient ranch house of an old Mexican farm holding. It was deserted, partly ruined. There was a high, thick wall of adobe all about it, crumbling from the weather, but still a screen that hid the house from the outside world. The wall still had heavy gates of wood that could stand a siege, but the best protection of the place was its loneliness.

Hale had already been there. The girl had been brought in later, with the swamper, Juan, from the Lone Coyote acting as her jailer.

Three of Hardin's riders were on hand. Two stayed outside in the courtyard on guard against any possible surprise.

There was no question in the Kid's mind as to who had killed the sheriff, and he had more than an idea of the reason.

Sooner or later his deputies would find him, if they also had not been made away with, which the Kid doubted. And they would be likely to suspect Hardin. He was already suspected of many things. After the scene in the saloon he would be still more so.

Whether the deputies knew anything of the old adobe, or had any

idea they would find Hardin there, was too much to count on, the Kid told himself. It would be known before long that Hale was missing, and the hunt would start. Longer, perhaps, before the girl was found to be gone. As for the Kid, he was a stranger, he might never be missed at all in Rodada.

Elsewhere he would, but it would take time before inquiries started, and the Kid did not believe that he, or Hale, for that matter, had very long to live. Pepita's fate was in the balance. Hardin might decide to still her tongue forever, or he might sell her into slavery across the Mexican border.

Seated with Hardin at the table where four stout wax candles burned, one at each corner, was Tucson.

He was not there with any great willingness, the Kid imagined. Rather it was because Hardin had insisted upon it, because there was a partnership between them, established and linked by crime.

Juan stood to one side, a waddy on the other. The room was filled with wavering shadows that kept up a perpetual dance upon the walls and ceiling. Drafts of air drifted through the broken casements and through places where the adobe had cracked.

Hardin was in an evil, triumphant, boastful mood. He had been drinking and intended to keep it up. There were brandy bottles on the table. Tucson took a drink now and then; Juan and the waddy looked longingly at the bottles, but Hardin was running the show. If he had thought of it he might have offered them liquor, but now he was thinking only of his prisoners, gloating over them, intent upon torturing them before he pronounced the final sentence.

The Kid had been thoroughly searched, not altogether by the cleverness of his captors.

"If it wasn't that Juan liked your boots, Prentiss, and that you'll never have use for them again," said Hardin, "we should not have known why you were here in Rodada County."

They had the Kid's gun, his clasp knife, money, matches, everything, even the warrant of identification that proclaimed him Peter Prentiss, of the Cattlemen's Association. Hardin held up his star.

"You low-down spy," he said. "You cheap range dick, you've cut your last sign. Your trail leads straight to the noose. I suppose *you* sent fer him, Hale! Well, you can go out with him, you skunk! I'll try to console your widow. We used to get along together."

Hale's face was streaked with red, his shirt splotched with it from a gash near his temple, where he had been slugged with the sight of a gun. He made no answer to the taunts, intended to make him wince and give pleasure to Hardin.

"Git on with it an' through with it," said Tucson harshly. "I'm stayin' in Regenta, if you ain't. I can't stay away from the saloon all night."

Hardin leered at him. "You'll play this hand out with me," he said. "After that you kin stay, if you think it healthy. I don't. I haven't done so badly, but this range dick's pals will keep Rodada County combed when he turns up missin'. So after we've got through with this li'l affair, an' you pay me fer the steers we lifted from Hale's spread, why——"

"You talk too much," snarled Tucson.

"Who is there to hear? These three are the only ones who do not

know already. Dead men talk only to the worms. Dead women, also. You, Tucson, like to take the profit but not the risk. The C. A. crowd may leave you alone. Might leave me alone, too, but there's too much hard work an' too li'l pay in raisin' cows. I'll go where the other chap raises 'em an' cull his primes.

"Sam," he said to the waddy. "Go fetch in Tex an' Chico."

The waddy went out. Hardin drank from a bottle neck. Tucson, scowling, used a glass.

The girl's soft, rapid, clear whisper reached the Kid, next to her.

"They got me, señor, soon after you left. They set fire to the *jacal* next to us. We all ran out, and they seized me. Those were the riders of Hardin, so they did not search me as Juan did, later. But by then I had put my knife in my slipper. It is not long, but it is sharp. If you can get at it, señor, it will cut you free."

"They've got my gun," the Kid almost moaned. "Hardin and the waddy have got their own, Juan has a knife."

"If we can do nothing else, we must say our prayers, señor."

Pepita stopped talking. The Kid could see her lips moving as she prayed silently.

"Got to try," said the low voice of Hale as the two waddies came in from the outside, "or we'll be chewin' dirt before dawn. My wife——"

Now Hardin was offering his riders a drink. Juan also got one.

"You brought the spades," asked Hardin. "Good, then git busy an' dig three graves back of the house, nice an' deep. Hale's an' the range dick's about six foot six, the girl's kin be shorter. But deep. We don't want coyotes turnin' 'em up. Sam, you go with 'em. Juan, you kin

hold a lantern. I'm goin' to preach a funeral sermon to these three fools."

IV.

As they drank, their shadows flung by the candles helping to screen his moves, the Kid slid like a snake, outward. It looked as if he had passed out from exhaustion. He turned on his side. One of his bound hands found the girl's foot, removed her slipper, clutched the little knife. It was like the grip of rope by a drowning man. Hope surged through his veins.

He shuffled back to his place, still on his side, and whispered to Pepita to turn her back to him. It was easier to cut her wrists free than it was his own.

After a second drink, the three waddies and Juan went out to start on the three graves.

The girl was free now, then the Kid. He worked swiftly but craftily on Hale. If Hardin suspected anything, he would shoot them down in cold blood.

Hardin had been right. It was Hale who, as a member, had written the Cattlemen's Association. He had not mentioned Hardin by name, but wrote that he had suspicions which he would tell the range detective. He did write of Tucson as a man with a bad record, thought by owners to be a cattle fence for the rustlers.

The Kid had read that letter. It told of the two derringers in Tucson's pocket—a pair of deuces against Hardin's full hand of aces.

Hardin finished his bottle.

"You see, Prentiss," he said, "you, Hale, an' the girl have got to be eliminated. Hale's man, Slim Phillips, died ter-night. He's in the discard. But the fool rallied at the last, told Hale I was the one shot him.

Recognized two of my boys. We were waitin' fer you by the jail when Hale rides up, burnin' leather, to spill it to the sheriff. An' the sheriff spills thet Pepita likewise wrote to him about Jaime. Seems thet cursed greaser wrote my name in the sand before he passed out."

Pepita must have made her note strong in her desire to revenge her brother, the Kid thought. Convinced it was Hardin, she had not said that only two letters had been actually completed.

"Thet did it," Hardin went on. "Leighton said he was expectin' you, figgered you'd be useful. Hale goes outside to see was you comin', an' we nab him. Leighton hears the scuffle, starts up, an' I plugged him. There was one deputy in back, asleep. But he woke up, so we put him to sleep again fer keeps. So now you see why you three are goin' by-by in nice dirt beds as soon as my boys have made 'em up fer you."

"You talk too much, Hardin," growled Tucson warningly.

"I'll talk all I please." Hardin knocked the neck off another bottle.

"I'm goin' to try fer Tucson's derringers," the Kid said to Hale. "We've got to do it while they're alone with us."

"All right. Are you ready?"

They both crouched like sprinters on the mark. The girl leaned forward, tense.

The door opened, and the waddies stood there, grouped, Juan back of them with the lantern. The odds were packed. One of the riders spoke:

"We struck water out back, boss. Plenty. We can't dig graves in water."

"Find some other place where there ain't any."

"I didn't hire out to dig graves or post holes. It's a hot night an' we're

thirsty. How about a li'l *aguardiente*?"

"Take the bottle an' git busy," snapped Hardin. "We ain't got all night."

He slammed the door behind his men, and the Kid shot out of his stance by the wall like a rocket.

At the same moment Hale catapulted, catching Hardin about the knees as the latter went for his gun.

The Kid made a flat dive across the table, grabbing for Tucson's wrists. Tucson was fast, too. He slammed a right to the Kid's jaw, dived for the derringer in his left pocket, yanked it out, and fired as the Kid's fingers clamped down.

The pellet hit the Kid on the hip. There was not force enough in the charge to shatter the bone, but the Kid felt a hot jet start and forced the fight.

Tucson was no greenhorn. He fought like a wild cat, clawing, knowing he had wounded the Kid, waiting for him to weaken.

The Kid knew his strength was swiftly gushing out. He twisted one derringer loose, tossed it away. He held the other, but in the wild turmoil of the struggle he had no chance to use it accurately.

The small pistol was no use as a club. The Kid dropped it as Tucson grabbed his throat, thrust a knee into his stomach.

He sat on Tucson's chest, got his own knees on the other's biceps, slugged him left and right until Tucson's head wagged limp.

Then he turned to see how Hale had made out.

Pepita had grabbed one of the candles, flung it at Hardin. Hale tackled him just as Hardin fired, but the shot went wild.

They must have heard the shot outside. Hale was underneath, faint from the blow on his head.

The Kid kicked Hardin's wrist, sent the hogleg flying. He retrieved it, set the muzzle back of Hardin's neck as Hale hung on.

"Quit, you lizard," said the Kid, "or I'll spill your marrow!"

Hardin rolled over, his face smeared with tallow and dirt. Hale got to his feet. The Kid gave him the six-gun, picked up the two derringers.

"Look out fer the two of 'em, Hale," he said. "I'll tend the door; this is the show-down. I'm playin' deuces wild."

He faced the waddies as they broke in. He had three shots, and he hit the two leading riders in the throat.

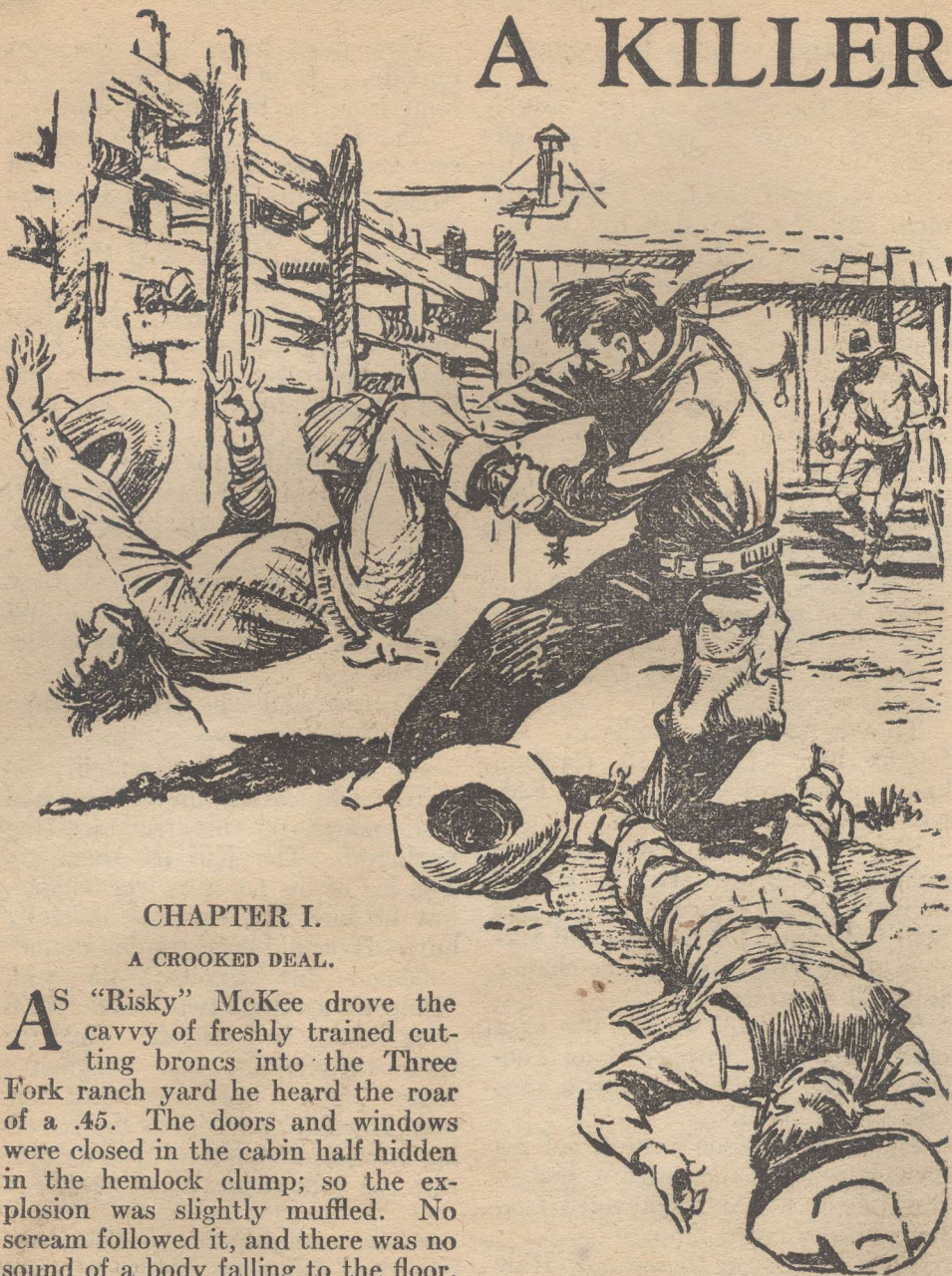
"Deuces wild!" he cried. "Come a-shootin'!"

But Juan fled into the night, the third waddy after him. They had had enough of this true-targeting buckaroo. The Kid let them go. The leg of his trousers was sodden, but he knew he was not mortally hurt. He could patch up his wound.

"Good girl, Pepita," he said. "Help tie up these two birds. We'll pack in the two outside. Heal up their throats for the hangman's rope. Tucson may not hang, but you, Hardin," he said to the scowling but defeated owner, "you'll decorate the gallows as you deserve."

It warn't long before the Kid went ridin' back tuh town, leavin' one more conquest in his wake. Little did he realize he was headin' straight fer some o' the biggest trouble he's struck yet. Watch fer him tuh come smashin' through the pages o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly right soon.

A KILLER



CHAPTER I.

A CROOKED DEAL.

AS "Risky" McKee drove the cavvy of freshly trained cutting broncs into the Three Fork ranch yard he heard the roar of a .45. The doors and windows were closed in the cabin half hidden in the hemlock clump; so the explosion was slightly muffled. No scream followed it, and there was no sound of a body falling to the floor.

Risky drew rein swiftly.

His sorrel halted, its ears pointing toward the ranch house, its nostrils sniffing the stirring breeze. The four other broncs in the cavvy scampered on down the yard like scared pups, kicking their hoofs, flipping tails, and nickering.

For a full minute Risky sat his saddle, listening intently. His right hand was ready to stab for the six-gun holstered low on his thigh.

He didn't like the frozen silence shrouding this carefully groomed little outfit on the high bench of

ON THE DODGE

By William A. Todd

Author of "Gun Notches," etc.



A "Risky McKee" Novelette

the Graystone Mountains. The absence of punchers and cook was suspicious.

Drawing a slow breath, Risky swung down from the saddle.

He had the unfailing instincts of a born gambler. Men called him the most reckless young puncher in New Mexico. But he never played a hand without first figuring his chances and carefully studying the lay of the deal.

Money was not his object. Risky gambled for excitement, not across a green baize table with pasteboards and colored chips, but over the back trails where the owl-hoot tribe knew his reputation. Men said that he'd turn down no bet against the foes of law and order, provided that he could win by the use of a six-gun

and a horse. His cards were bullets. The game was death.

Husky-shouldered, slim of waist, as tan as saddle leather, Risky looked no different from dozens of other gray-eyed, square-jawed cowboys. No one would have taken him for the prosperous owner of one of the finest horse-breeding ranches in the West. In his tan ten-gallon hat, red flannel shirt, and buckskin vest, he had passed many times for a rodeo performer looking for work after the finish of the circuit season.

Risky often traveled under assumed names, as he was doing this day. The trick saved him from gun fights with young notch-cutting dare-devils who were eager to put a slug into him just to earn a big reputation for having outdrawn him.

He had heard that there were quite a few of that kind of men in the Graystone Mountain country.

So, when the order for four new cutting brons came to Risky's spread from the Three Fork Ranch, he sent back word that his chief wrangler would deliver them. He was not stretching the truth. Risky was his own chief wrangler. His foreman at his own ranch was a bellyaching old wagon scout by the name of "Sufferin' Joe," who had warned him to watch his step in the Graystones.

Now, moving silently toward the cabin in the clump of hemlocks, Risky remembered Sufferin' Joe's warning. The shot seemed to have been timed for the cowboy's entrance to the ranch yard.

There was still no sound within the ranch house. No face appeared at the windows.

Reaching the front corner, Risky halted to pick up a stick of firewood that had been dropped on the ground. He tossed the small log to the steps before the cabin door. It made a noise similar to a man getting ready to enter the house, and the cowboy turned quickly to run along the side wall of the cabin.

Ducking under the windows so that he would not be seen from within, he reached the rear corner of the house, darted around it, and found the back door of a lean-to ajar. Suspicious, he drew his six-gun and cocked it.

A dark scowl stole across his brow. Some hombre had made a quick escape from the rear of the cabin. There was no doubt about it. The hemlock trees shaded a path to a spring, beyond which there was a deep brush, boulders, and a scrub-pine woods.

Risky crept to the kitchen doorway. He removed his ten-gallon hat

before twisting his head to peer into the lean-to. A shudder ran through him at what he saw.

A big-shouldered hombre had pitched forward onto a table loaded with articles to prepare dinner. A sack of flour had spilled, covering the left side of his gray flannel shirt with white. His face was buried in pots, dishes, and canned goods. There was an ugly hole at the base of his skull. He had been shot from behind.

One look was enough for Risky McKee. Whirling, he raced along the path through the hemlocks to the spring. There, he stopped abruptly and noted fresh footprints made in the wet earth. He tried his own boot in a track to learn the size of the fugitive's foot. He was positive that the print belonged to the murderer, because the man had left a fine dusting of white flour on the damp green leaves of the brush behind the spring.

Risky turned to the left of the killer's trail, and swung around through the brush carefully, searching for an explanation of the man's quick escape. In a few moments the puncher found a gully. At the bottom of it there were the prints of a horse. The murderer had plainly ridden down the gully to a draw or low rocky country, and was now fanning the wind to throw off pursuit.

"Slick as a coyote," Risky said. "But I don't take the bait."

Holstering his weapon, the cowboy started back to the cabin. Passing the spring, he again noticed the dusting of flour on the damp brush. His brain was alive with suspicion. When he reached the ranch house, he stood in the rear doorway, eying the dead man at the kitchen table.

Risky bit his lips. "I didn't hear that pan fall on the floor," he

growled. "If the killer shot from behind, he wasn't near enough to the table to get flour on him. The owner of the Three Fork must 'a' been knocked out before I entered the ranch yard. The sneak shot him to frame me for the murder."

Risky didn't have long to wait.

Within five minutes he heard horses coming on the gallop. He strolled out to the front of the cabin to meet them.

Three tough-looking and dirty punchers drew their broncs to trots as they passed the corral and swung into the open gate of the ranch yard. Their leader was a powerful hombre dressed in woolly chaps and bearskin vest. His right cheek bulged with a tobacco chaw. His nose was hooked and red. He waved a quirt at Risky, then glanced at the four new cutting broncs that were gathered in the shade of the big barn.

"Yo're right on schedule, wrangler," the foreman of the Three Fork called. "Them is fine-lookin' cayuses. But folks say that McKee knows how ter breed 'em."

Risky felt deadly cold. Experience told him that the foreman was talking too much on first sight. A nervous gambler always tries to cover up a bluff with gab. There was no doubt in Risky's mind that the foreman, and perhaps the cold-eyed waddies behind him, already knew about the murder. Quick to detect more evidence, Risky saw that their guns were loose in their holsters, which had been tied down to insure swift, sure draws.

He waited until they halted and swung down from their saddles. They were grinning like card sharps at a greenhorn.

"Yuh couldn't be that McKee gent hisself, could yuh?" the foreman asked, clumping forward to

hold out his handshake. "We've heard lots about——"

"I'm your huckleberry," Risky stopped him with a deadly cold tone that no one could mistake for anything but danger. "What's the game?" Risky asked, bending forward in a professional gunman's stance. "Do we shoot it out now? Or must I wait until you visit the kitchen?"

An electric tension gripped the foreman and his two henchmen. Their eyes revealed fear. They plainly didn't like the deal now. They seemed eager to separate in order to take Risky from three sides. And to help the move, the foreman faked surprise.

"Fer Pete's sakes!" he exclaimed. "What's eatin' yuh?"

"Stand where you are!" Risky cried, studying them for telltale evidences of the white flour, figuring if the boots of any of the three were the size of the prints by the spring. "You know what I'm talking about."

The big foreman blinked and shook his head, but his beady eyes gave him away.

"Have yuh had a fight with Beppy Simmonds?" he inquired. "Was it over the price o' them broncs?"

For answer, Risky's right arm whipped upward, fingers snatching for the butt of his gun. He caught the weapon with skill born of constant practice. The barrel seemed to leap into the sunlight. The hammer was drawn back. It was as quick a draw as any one of the three men had ever seen. And there was the sound of their breath catching.

"Reach!" the horse breeder snapped.

They reached for the sky.

"Yuh can't shoot us fer nothin'!" the foreman exclaimed. "Listen,

McKee, we ain't done nothin' ter yuh. It's a mistake."

"Turn around," Risky ordered. Then, as they pivoted, "Unbuckle the artillery." And when their cartridge belts fell to earth, he added, "Start hiking for yonder bull pasture. An' don't look back, unless you want to know what it feels like to be shot in the back of the skull."

They gave him no argument. They clumped down the ranch yard in a big hurry.

The horse breeder stooped to extract one weapon after another from the holsters on the ground. It was the foreman's weapon that smelled of freshly burned powder. Which was odd. Because the smallest of the Three Fork men, a runt with dirty sandy hair, had boots that would fit the print by the spring. And the last of the three, a thin, hollow-cheeked hombre, had shown traces of white flour on his blue denim pants.

All three couldn't have fled the cabin at Risky's first approach to the Three Fork Ranch. Only one hombre had left print. Who was the real killer?

Risky swung to the saddle of his sorrel bronc. Spurring it to the barn, he yipped the four cutting brones out into the yard. With a glance at the three toughs who were still crossing the bull pasture, the cowboy rode toward the trail, chasing his cavvy before him, and also their mounts.

The horse deal was certainly off.

But Risky McKee was not rejecting the gamble that those three hombres had drawn him into. He couldn't quit the game. He had to know why they had tried to frame him for murder. They would certainly never tell. The information had to be obtained by other means.

CHAPTER II.

OWL-HOOT BUILD-UP.

RISKY rode hard for several miles down from the bench land, following the rocky road by which he had come, yipping his own cavvy and the Three Fork saddle brones ahead of him. He had no fear of immediate pursuit. It would take the tobacco-chewing foreman and the two tough hands some time to find mounts. There had been nothing but draft horses in the barn. The corral had been empty. Perhaps the outfit kept its change ponies in a near-by pasture.

One by one, Risky dropped the Three Fork saddle brones, knowing that they would drift back to their corral at a lazy gait.

His immediate concern was to cover his tracks.

Crossing a stream, Risky turned along its bank, and then drove the cavvy up the shallows. It was an old trick, but a good one. He left the water on rocky footing. Then his route led through canyon, gulch, forest, and grassy draws.

The day was wearing to an end when he sighted a ranch. The thought of grub sent his spurs to the sorrel's flanks. But he also was looking for information. The ranch was not many miles north of the Three Fork, a neighborly distance. Painted in white on the bunk shack was its brand, the Flying Quirt.

Choosing the main trail in, Risky prodded his four cutting brones along the edge of the fenced calf pasture, studying the rickety old sheds, barn, and mess shack beyond. He noted that several cowboys were unsaddling at the corral. And a white-haired man was washing up at the pump.

The entire outfit dropped its chores to watch the strange waddy

dismount at the gate and send his cavvy through.

Leading his sorrel mount, Risky strode with clinking spurs toward the white-haired hombre, who dried his hands and came to meet him.

"Howdy!" the horse breeder called.

"Howdy, stranger!" the rancher replied. "Supper is a-cooking. Those are fine-looking cayuses that yuh drive."

Risky removed his hat and beat the dust out of it on his chaps. He was aware that the corral punchers were studying the RM brand on his sorrel, but the cutting broncs were unsigned. The white-haired hombre stood waiting to get Risky's number.

"You like the cavvy?" Risky asked, grinning.

The rancher chuckled. "How much?" His blue eyes danced.

"Cheap," the horse breeder said. "I want to get rid of them. Beppy Simmonds was going to buy, but the deal fell through. I'm caught off my range."

A dark scowl furrowed the cattle owner's pink forehead. "Beppy Simmonds, eh?" he growled. "What would he buy a hoss fer? He kin steal all he wants."

Risky stiffened. That was gun-fighting talk in any language, if it ever got back to the man called a horse thief. But this time it wouldn't. For "Beppy" Simmonds was dead. Murdered.

Risky flashed a glance at the corral, where the punchers moved nervously.

"I don't know anything about the Simmonds hombre," Risky said in a noncommittal tone. "I'm asking fifty each for the cutting broncs. They're trained to a whisker. The Morgan strain in their veins is more than the mustang. They're waiting

for the brand of the gent who buys them."

"Sure, I kin see it," the rancher snapped. "This ain't the first time I've called Beppy Simmonds what he is. Yuh kin tell him that. I'll meet him any time, anywhere, an' shoot it out. He's yella to the core. He's got himself surrounded by a gang o' gun-toters, while he holes up in his cabin. When I get the goods on him, nobody will stop me an' my outfit."

"What about the broncs?" Risky asked, pretending to be embarrassed by the unasked-for story about Beppy Simmonds.

The rancher glared at him. "What's yore brand?" he demanded.

Risky chuckled. "I ain't no hoss thief, partner," he said. "I ain't taking offense at your stab to see my credentials." He reached into his pocket, withdrew a card. "Here's my Cattle Association ticket. An' I've also got more paper to prove who I am."

The punchers were moving closer as their boss read the Cattle Association card.

"McKee," the rancher said aloud. "Risky McKee. Say! Are yuh that feller?"

"I breed an' train broncs," Risky replied guardedly.

The white-haired hombre's brown eyes grew wide, then narrowed swiftly. He grunted, spat at the earth.

"I reckon yuh do," he said gruffly. "Shore! That's what the card says." He turned and winked at his gaping cowboys. "I'll buy all four broncs, but I can't pay yuh now. I'll send the money at next round-up. Thar's the pump. My boys will feed yore sorrel. Spend the night. See yuh later."

And the rancher stamped off, mumbling under his breath.

"Thanks," Risky called after him. "Supper sounds good, but I've got to be riding soon." Something told him that peril lay in hiding here.

"Nonsense!" the rancher called from the door of his cabin, and then vanished. He seemed anxious to get away, in order to think.

Risky grinned at the cowboys. He could see doubt as to his identity in their faces.

"Who is the boss?" he asked.

"Pat Turner," a young waddy with curly black hair replied coldly. "Who did yuh say yuh were?"

"I didn't say," Risky replied, giving the cowboy back as good as he gave. "Yore boss read it from my C. A. card."

The punchers bristled. It was plain that they didn't like him. His name seemed to fill them with a strange alarm.

Their tall, hawk-faced foreman dropped a hand to a gun butt.

"Listen, McKee," the foreman snarled. "We don't cotton ter show-offs. We don't eat with gamblers. What's more, no friend o' Beppy Simmonds is welcome ter spend the night. Do I make myself plain enough?"

"Plenty," Risky replied tartly, his own dander rising. "I'll be right pleased to sit at table with you all. An' seeing as how much you want me, I might change my mind about spending the night."

The foreman's face purpled with rage. About to draw, he changed his mind. His hands dropped to the buckle of his cartridge belt. He glanced at the other punchers and said boastfully:

"When I lick this gun-fightin', gamblin' smart-Alec, yuh boys toss a coin ter see who scalps him fer the trophy room. Another kin enjoy the privilege o' grindin' him up like beefsteak. But one o' yuh will

have ter feed the remains of his carcass ter the coyotes."

Risky chuckled. He unbuckled his own gun belt, and let it fall to the earth.

"I'll bet that some friend of mine has been telling a tall yarn about me in these Graystones," he said, winking at the sullen cowboys. "When I get through with your foreman, you punchers toss a coin to see who writes the awful news to his Injun sweetheart. Another, can harness his remains to a jackass so he'll have a good teammate when he goes looking for another job. One of you will have the tough chore of burying his clothes down by the creek in the skunk pit, because he smells so bad now that no jackass would stand him."

A shriek of rage tore from the foreman's lips. He rushed at Risky, swinging with the viciousness of a man gone loco.

Experience told Risky that he had the foreman licked before the first blow was struck. The foreman had lost his head. His swinging fists were easy to avoid.

Before the foreman got to him, Risky darted in under the windmill charge. Risky felt one of the man's fists carry away his ten-gallon hat. The next blow didn't land on Risky.

The horse breeder was burying a hefty uppercut into the foreman's midriff. It was a jolt that lifted the hombre clear off his feet. Wind gushed from his lungs.

Risky could have finished him with a left hook to the jaw, but he jumped back, knowing that the foreman was paralyzed. He watched him stagger away, eyes bulging, lips trembling. Tripping, the foreman collapsed, rolled over, gasping in agony, trying to get breath into his lungs.

The horse breeder turned coldly to

the other punchers, who were staring at their fallen boss in amazement over his sudden defeat.

"Anybody else?" Risky asked.

Their hands plummeted for their guns. But quickly they saw that Risky was unarmed. Their rage was too great to allow him to get away unscathed. One of the cowboys cursed. The others leaped to the attack.

As quick as a cougar, Risky dodged them. He knew he could not lick them all. He saw the shadow of the corral at hand, and dived through the rails.

Like a pack of hungry hounds, the waddies came howling after him, under and over the corral.

Inside the horse pen, Risky met the first cowboy with a smash to the jaw that dropped him shuddering. A second puncher squirming through the rails tried to grab Risky's feet. Risky reached down and caught the man by the collar and the seat of the pants. He swung him upward like a sack of grain and hurled him over the top rail of the corral.

But two more cowboys tore into him with flailing fists, and Risky went down fighting.

It was the ear-shattering blast of a six-gun that stopped the scrap.

Crash! Outside the corral, old Pat Turner was coming on the run, shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Stop it! Yuh good-fer-nothin', low-down, unsociable varmints! I'll drill the next puncher ter lift a fist! Get back, I say, or I'll pump lead inter yore ornery gizzards!"

Risky felt the hands scramble away from him like coyotes from a cadaver at the approach of a lobo wolf. He was down in the mud. He spat crimson. Bruised, shaken, he climbed to his legs. He had been near defeat, and knew it.

As for the others, the foreman

was staggering around outside the corral, rubbing his belly, gulping welcome air into his lungs. Another puncher sat holding a dizzy head. Two more were feeling swollen jaws.

Risky flashed a glance at the irate, white-headed Pat Turner, who spat disgustedly at the sight. Then Risky inquired of the punchers:

"Well, do I eat, or don't I?"

"Certainly, yuh eat!" Pat Turner exclaimed angrily. "Did I ever turn a stranger from my door without grub? I don't care what kind of a story that Tote Kelly, the Three Fork foreman, spread about yuh in Bench Step. Them is good hosses what yuh raised. I don't trust no Tote Kelly who works fer Beppy Simmonds. What started this fight? I'm firin' the hand who insulted yuh."

Risky frowned. He had the reason for the fight now. According to Pat Turner's words, the Three Fork foreman had spread a wild story about Risky in Bench Step. That story must have branded Risky for a show-off, a tinhorn gambler, and a killer.

It meant that the Three Fork foreman had known that Risky was going to bring the cavvy to Beppy Simmonds. And the Three Fork foreman was anxious to see Risky done in. Why? Risky couldn't tell yet. But the foreman called "Tote" Kelly had already framed him for murder.

As for this outfit of Pat Turner's, they might have heard about the story spread by Tote Kelly; and though they didn't like the Three Fork foreman, they decided that they liked Risky even less.

Under the circumstances, the horse breeder could feel no ill toward them, nor did he wish them to get in bad with Pat Turner.

"What caused the scrap?" Risky said to the rancher. "Apple pie."
"Apple pie?" Pat Turner echoed, flabbergasted.

"Shore," Risky chuckled, noting that the Flying Quirt punchers were listening. "I said as how huckleberry pie had apple backed off the map. Your boys told me that huckleberry was tinhorn pie. I said apple was tenderfoot pie, an' the first thing you know——"

"I don't believe a word of it!" the rancher exploded. "Yuh'll eat apple pie ter-night, an' swallow it all. Now, wash that dirt off, an' hurry up."

Grinning, Risky ducked through the corral rails, picking up his gun belt and hat as he made for the pump.

He didn't get far.

The pounding of hoofs up the road to the ranch yard halted him short. Turning, he saw a dozen horsemen coming hard. Rifles were balanced across their saddle pommels. They stood in their stirrups, shading the sun from their eyes with free hands, to see him.

A shout lifted.

There was no need to tell Risky who they were. He had never mistaken a vigilante posse in his life. He recognized the husky Three Fork foreman by his woolly chaps and red face. Also the sandy-haired runt and the hollow-cheeked puncher belonging to that outfit. The remainder looked like cowboys and ranchers from other spreads.

Risky didn't hesitate. The object of that posse was as plain as the stripes on a coon's tail. They were out to hang him for the murder of Beppy Simmonds. Risky had left plain tracks in the Three Fork ranch yard. He had fled Tote Kelly. The evidence was against him.

CHAPTER III.

SOME OF THE SAME MEDICINE.

WITH a sprint, Risky was across the ranch yard. There was a chorus of war whoops down the road as he neared the barn where his sorrel bronc stood.

Risky flung himself into the saddle, cracking the animal on the rump with the palm of his hand as he went up. He heard Pat Turner shouting to the posse, demanding their business, warning the Three Fork punchers to keep back or eat lead.

Risky's sorrel was away like an arrow from a bow. It took the north way out of the ranch yard. Luck was favoring the horse breeder. Pat Turner was holding the posse up from entering the southern gate of the yard. Risky swerved around the barn none too soon.

A thunderous explosion sounded behind Risky. Too late. Posse lead struck the barn around which he fled. The old structure trembled under the impact. It sounded like hail from a cloud-burst striking the walls and roof.

Risky raced into a vegetable garden, keeping the barn behind him as a shield from the posse slugs. He heard Pat Turner's voice growing wilder. And it sounded as if the Flying Quirt punchers had begun to fire at the posse.

"I reckon that Pat's boys don't want the Three Fork outfit for supper," Risky remarked, watching the lay of the land ahead.

His sorrel was trampling carrots, cabbages, and young corn. Ahead of it a split-rail fence closed off a calf pasture. Risky ran his spurs along the animal's flanks, and tensed for the leap. If the bronc stumbled, he was a goner.

But the sorrel rose like a deer,

neck stretched out, tail flying. It went over without clicking its hoofs on the top rail. Settling gracefully, the animal raced across the calf pasture, eager to jump the next fence that would let it out to a draw and the rolling foothills of the Graystone Mountains.

"How did that Tote Kelly get wise to me so quickly?" Risky asked himself, twisting in the saddle to see if pursuit had started. "The coyote's got me on the jump."

Zing! A screaming bullet almost caught Risky in the left shoulder. It nipped his shirt.

By the explosion of the gun, he discovered the source of the shot. He saw the Three Fork foreman pounding around the eastern side of the barn, avoiding the Flying Quirt ranch yard, in a desperate attempt to head Risky off.

Risky's sorrel rose to the split-rail fence. In the air the rider drew his weapon. As the bronc settled neatly on the far side of the jump, Risky snapped two shots back at Tote Kelly. It was hard shooting from the saddle of a cayuse. He missed, but he sent the Three Fork foreman fleeing for cover.

Then Risky was racing into the draw that led to the foothills of the Graystones. He was eager to gain as much ground as possible. His sorrel was not as fresh as it had been. But the halt in the Flying Quirt ranch yard had given the animal a short rest, while the posse brones were still hot from the trail.

Halfway down the draw, the horse breeder realized that the roar of guns had stopped at Pat Turner's headquarters. It meant that the rancher had parleyed with the posse. There was no telling if the Flying Quirt would join the chase. They had fresh brones in the corral, but it would take time to saddle them.

Risky pushed his sorrel hard. Turned in his hull, he could see riders coming through the Flying Quirt yard now. Others were swinging around the outfit, and striking for the foothills, as if in the hope of cutting him off.

"They mean business," Risky told himself. "Tote Kelly must have a gift of gab to convince 'em all that I'm a killer."

As Risky ducked into the shelter of timber and brush, he realized that Tote Kelly's power of speech was not a newly acquired accomplishment. The Three Fork foreman had been at work spinning a tall yarn about Risky in Bench Step before the murder.

Kelly had convinced more than one hombre that Risky was not a very welcome stranger in the Graystones. The Three Fork foreman's story had got Risky into a fight at the Flying Quirt Ranch.

For the first time since his arrival in the Graystones, Risky felt anger kindling in his veins. The murder had aroused his interest as a mystery, and the brutality of it had given him a desire to avenge the dead man. But he had never met Beppy Simmonds. The man's death didn't touch him as deeply as the killing of a friend would have done.

Now that Risky was tangled up in the murder, and unfair tactics were being played against him by Tote Kelly, he felt wrath taking possession of him.

He could play any kind of game. If the Three Fork foreman had stacked the deck from start to finish, Risky decided to give the coyote some of his own medicine.

Risky's final direction was Bench Step. In an hour he lost all sign of the vigilante posse. And the day was dying rapidly. The western sky was a flaming pageant of color,

fighting a losing battle with the purple twilight of night. The shadows were deceptive to far-reaching eyes.

Reaching a long alkali flat, the horse breeder turned across the open at a steady lope. Far ahead of him, he watched the first yellow pin points of light appear in the ramshackle town of Bench Step.

"So Tote Kelly has a gift of gab, eh?" Risky said aloud. "Well, I can run him a close second, without stretchin' the truth. I'll give him some of the trouble that he has been giving me. Mebbe it will scare him into tipping his hand."

The rapidity of the Three Fork foreman's arrival at the Flying Quirt headquarters after Risky fled the murder scene was proof enough that Tote Kelly hadn't yet been to Bench Step. The man must have struck Risky's trail as soon as possible.

He had guessed that Risky would go to parley with Pat Turner. Kelly and his two punchers had picked up other cattlemen during their chase. The posse couldn't have come from the town.

Nearing Bench Step, Risky doubted that anybody in the trading post knew about the death of Beppy Simmonds. He took no side alleyway into the town. Trotting over the main rutted road, he sized up the shanties and adobe huts on the outskirts. He took note of the smithy, post office, and stage office. Beyond stood a saloon, stores, and a rickety log hotel, with a livery near by. The town had yet to begin the business of entertaining.

Darkness had closed down. The plank sidewalks were lighted by the reflection from windows. Booted and spurred hombres were gloomy shadows as they passed. Broncs stood tied at hitch rails. And several buckboards were awaiting their owners.

Risky tied his bronc to a post near an alley.

He was chiefly interested in grub, so he turned into the local hash house. Three seedy-looking hombres were already wolfing down beans and beef on the counter stools, while an old Chinaman stood watching them silently.

"Give me what's ready an' make it pronto," Risky called, sliding onto an end stool.

The eyes of the diners jerked in his direction. It wasn't often that a man was in a hurry in Bench Step. Their curiosity was aroused. They sized him up for a puncher who had just blown into town. His red flannel shirt and chaps were covered with dust. They didn't seem to be alarmed by him.

Risky gazed back at them, as if puzzled.

"Ain't you fellows ridin' with the posse?" he asked.

"Posse!" one of the eaters, a rat-faced hombre exclaimed. "What are yuh talkin' about?" He seemed scared that riders were after him.

"The murderer of Beppy Simmonds," Risky replied, accepting the beans from the silent Chinaman.

"Yuh mean somebody beefed the Three Fork boss?"

Risky washed down a mouthful of grub with hot coffee. "A low-down killer shot him in the back of the head," he answered.

"It wasn't Pat Turner of the Flying Quirt, was it?" a third customer inquired. "Pat has been feudin' with Beppy ever since that argument over the rustlin'."

"Not Pat Turner," Risky said, chewing on his food. "The murderer left his boot prints by the spring at Three Fork Ranch. And he got flour over himself when Beppy fell onto a table in the

kitchen. It looks like an inside job to me."

"What do yuh mean?" the rat-faced hombre asked quickly.

"Well, the Three Fork foreman was supposed to be out on the range when it happened," Risky went on, playing his cards with poker calm. "The two hands with him ain't above suspicion, from the way I look at it. One of 'em was floured up when the posse came. The other has shoes that fit the print at the spring. An' the foreman's gun had just been fired. If the posse finds that the slug in Beppy has bore marks like other bullets fired from that foreman's gun, it looks bad, don't it?"

The rat-faced diner was off his stool with a jump.

"I better get out to the Three Fork," he said. "Hey, chink, put the supper on my bill." He made for the door in a hurry.

Risky cast a glance after him. The other customers were paying their checks.

"Who is that gent?" Risky asked them.

"Wrangler for the Three Fork," one of the pair answered. "He was in town all day waitin' to meet a feller called Risky McKee, who Beppy is buying a cutting cavvy from."

Risky finished his beans as the pair walked out. He knew that they could hardly wait to spread the news about Tote Kelly and the other two punchers of the Three Fork. The story about the flour, the footprint by the spring, and the slug in the dead man's body would interest anybody. In a half hour, Bench Step would have talked itself into lynching excitement.

Risky chuckled. "I reckon that Tote Kelly loses the pot," he said to himself. "He's only a tinhorn

when it comes to spreadin' gossip."

The chink hash slinger was gazing steadily at the horse breeder.

Risky's nerves drew taut. "What is it?" he asked. "Are you afraid that I can't pay?"

"Message," the hash slinger said. "You wear red shirt. You hungly. You have bull slaps, gray eye, scar on cheek."

"By golly, I am wearing a red shirt an' bullhide chaps," Risky replied. "How did you find it out?"

"Man with bad pain wait in saloon," the Chinaman answered. "Fifty cent, please."

"Sufferin' Joe!" Risky exclaimed.

Hurriedly throwing down a half dollar, the horse breeder made for the doorway. He couldn't understand what had brought his complaining pard to Bench Step. It was not the first time that Risky had left Sufferin' Joe behind, and the old wagon scout had followed him. But that was when the bald-head suspected that his boss would get in trouble.

Jingling up the plank sidewalk, Risky avoided several groups of men who were talking excitedly.

He heard his pard's voice before he spotted him.

"The worst pain I ever fought off," Sufferin' Joe's voice said above the shuffling of the crowd drinking at the bar, "was from the bite of a two-headed rattlesnake. It got me in both legs at the same time. I had a bad case o' gout in my right big toe at that time. Waal, the snake pizen cured the gout in my right leg. But the pizen swelled the other leg so big that it burst open right from my hip down ter my ankle."

A dark scowl stole across Risky's brow as he threaded through the crowd to the bar. He spied his pard leaning on the counter with one

elbow, a glass of redeye poised in a free hand. Sufferin' Joe was holding the waiter spellbound.

"Do yuh know how I healed thet leg?" Sufferin' Joe asked the bartender. "I went out an' caught another case o' gout in my left leg. That cured the snake bite, but I was left with the gout. An' fer the last ten years I've been chasin' that gout with rattlesnake pizen, an' rattle-snake-swellin' with gout."

Risky halted behind his pard. He noted that several men at the bar were staring at Sufferin' Joe with cold disapproval.

About to jab the wagon scout in the spine with a thumb and tell him to lift his hands, Risky halted. A commotion at the swinging doors of the saloon drew his attention sharply. He wheeled, just in time to see the sandy-haired runt who worked for Tote Kelly at the Three Fork Ranch, stop short in the barroom.

"McKee murdered Beppy Simmonds!" the runt shouted. "Get rifles an' hosses. He's ridin' loose with the boast that no posse kin catch him, an' he'll shoot any hombre who crosses his trail."

Risky froze in a gun-drawing pose.

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE POINT OF A GUN.

THE sandy-haired runt saw Risky McKee. For a swift moment, the Camp Fire Saloon held silent. It was the tension before a breaking storm.

The horse breeder watched the runt's face turn deathly pale. Terror held the man in tight grip. He had seen Risky draw before and knew what to expect. He was afraid to yell that Risky stood in the barroom. But he was afraid not to

call the news, because he could not escape.

Risky waited for the runt to go for a six-gun. There was no doubt but that the man was a professional gunman. He lived by the speed of his wrist. It was the calling of his own choosing. And when he died it would be by the flick of a trigger in a foe's hand.

Risky spoke, his cold voice echoing in the barroom like the clanging of a branding iron.

"You're the hombre whose boots fit the print left by the Three Fork spring," he said, knowing that the saloon customers grasped his meaning.

A gasp tore from the runt's throat. "It ain't true!" he cried, giving himself away. "Yuh can't accuse me o' nothin'. Yo're Risky McKee!"

And the runt went for his low-hung guns with the desperation of a trapped animal.

Crash! A scream burst from the Three Fork cowboy. Risky's bullet hurled him back. The runt's own weapon exploded ceilingward. He went down, kicking.

"McKee is the real killer!" the Three Fork man shouted agonizedly. "Nail him!"

Behind him, Risky heard Sufferin' Joe bellow with the healthy lungs of a Hereford bull: "Yo're loco from bullet bite. Yuh've got sleepin' sickness! Yuh don't know what yo're talkin' about, yuh two-faced murderin' scoundrel!"

Risky didn't wait to find out if the barroom was on his side. His smoking weapon crashed twice more, driving lead through the hanging lamps. Darkness swooped into the barroom, blinding the customers. Cries of alarm lifted. Boots pounded toward the doors and windows.

Risky felt Sufferin' Joe's hand grabbing for him.

"Keep away from me, with that rattlesnake pizen and gout!" Risky snapped, tearing away from his pard. "Go talk with Pat Turner."

In the darkness, the horse breeder darted toward the rear door of the saloon. He heard Sufferin' Joe coming after him hard. Risky changed his course to a side window, avoiding him. An hombre was already getting out of the window. Risky followed him swiftly.

Outside, the hombre whirled. "Who do yuh think murdered Beppy?" the fellow asked swiftly.

"I'll lay odds of twenty to one it was Tote Kelly," Risky replied, and raced to the main street.

"Twenty to one!" the fellow he left exclaimed. "That's high odds. Say! Yo're McKee!"

Risky was at the plank sidewalk. He hurdled it and tore across the street. Men shouted at him. There was a lot of commotion at the hitch rails, where riders were mounting. Shots echoed behind the saloon. The town was seething with excitement. Men started to seek cover, not knowing what to expect.

At the place near an alley, Risky found his sorrel and tore its bridle reins loose. Casting a glance up the street at the beat of hoofs, he spied a dozen riders coming into Bench Step. In the lead was Tote Kelly, and following him was the hollow-cheeked coyote who had shown traces of flour on his blue denims. But they didn't recognize him in the darkness.

"Get McKee!" Tote Kelly began to yell. "He murdered Beppy Simmonds."

Risky swung to the saddle, threw in his spurs, and plunged down the alley. No one saw him go. The route ahead was dark. He didn't

know but that his sorrel would stumble into a pile of barrels and refuse. There was no moon. He held his breath until he came to the end of the alley and saw the dark outlines of sagebrush beyond.

As he galloped to the open flats, a hard grin stole across his lips. Behind him, Bench Step was in an uproar. The shooting began again. It meant that Tote Kelly and the posse were embroiled in an argument. They wouldn't stay long in town.

"Kelly will be on the dodge before long," Risky said to himself. "He'll know what it feels like to be accused of murder. An' if I don't miss my guess, he'll waste no time to remove all traces of the crime."

Risky turned his bronc toward the Graystone Mountains. His route was back to the Three Fork Ranch.

There, the horse breeder had a game to play with Tote Kelly and the hollow-cheeked waddy marked with flour.

Having traveled the road in daylight, Risky knew it in the dark. He rode fast. It was a cinch to beat Tote Kelly. Risky's sorrel had been trained for long running. When the animal began to wind, he slowed it to a fast trot, then struck a lope.

Stars appeared in the blue New Mexican sky as he climbed the foothills to the bench land. He recognized landmarks. Now, he halted to listen. But the world was silent, even for the coyotes, who had no moon to howl to.

The air grew colder in the higher altitude. Risky donned a checkered mackinaw and put his six-gun in the pocket.

He didn't enter the Three Fork Ranch by the trail. Cutting off from the road, he left his bronc in a patch of cedars and took to his

feet. At the bull pasture he slid through the rails and removed his spurs and mackinaw, holstering his six-gun again. His chaps swished so he took them off and left them with his coat.

Sneaking from one dark shadow to another he approached the ranch yard from the side of the barn. As he expected, no lights showed in the dead man's cabin. The chickens had gone to roost and the draft animals in the barn were snoring.

Three saddled broncs stood outside the corral, waiting for their owners to uncinch their hulls. They were the animals that Risky had taken away from the ranch with him. They were good evidence that Tote Kelly and the two hands had not been back to headquarters since the chase began. They were riding other broncs.

Drawing an easy breath, Risky slipped along the side of the cabin, about its rear corner, and found the door of the lean-to kitchen creaking in the light breeze. A cold shudder ran through him. He hated the job before him. But there was no way to avoid it.

"I've got to hide the body of Beppy Simmonds so that Tote Kelly can't get back the bullet from his gun," the horse breeder said.

Forcing himself into the lean-to, Risky closed the door. It seemed that he could almost smell the presence of death in the kitchen. Risky struck a match, glancing at the shelves for a candle. But his eye flicked past the table upon which Beppy Simmonds had been lying.

Risky's heart skipped a beat.

The body was no longer there. The pots and pans had been removed from the table and floor. All traces of the flour that had spilled from a sack was gone.

Risky's nerves crackled. His match flickered out before he could glance about the remainder of the kitchen. And as it went out, there was the scratching sound of another match. A light flickered in a dark corner behind the iron stove.

Before the horse breeder could stab for his holstered gun, he saw the twisted face of the rat-faced wrangler who had left the hash house in Bench Step so hurriedly. A cocked six-gun was in the wrangler's hand. He held a bead upon Risky's heart. To move was to die.

"Waal, I'll be consarned!" the rat-faced hombre exclaimed sarcastically. "If it ain't that gabby gent from the chink's place. What are you doin' hyar?"

Risky's eyes were on the flaming match in the gunman's hand. He saw the fellow moving it slowly toward a candle as he kept covering Risky with the gun in his right. The ratty hombre seemed to know exactly where the candle was. He didn't have to take his gaze off Risky. The match flame ignited the candle wick, and a yellow glow blossomed up, lighting the kitchen.

Risky was caught. He knew it.

CHAPTER V.

CHALLENGED TO A SHOOT-OUT.

IT was plain carelessness that had trapped the horse breeder, and he had only himself to blame. He had forgotten about the wrangler who left the hash house. Foolishly, Risky had sent the fellow high-tailing it for the Three Fork Ranch.

The wrangler had evidently missed the posse and Tote Kelly. He had found nobody at the Three Fork and had worked feverishly to destroy the clews of the murder of Beppy Simmonds.

By the fact that the body was

gone, Risky realized that his solution of the crime was right. Otherwise, why was the wrangler so eager to get rid of the spilled flour? Why had he made off with the corpse, if it wasn't to hide the killing bullet that would show the bore marks of Tote Kelly's weapon?

The wrangler was faithful to his boss. He'd certainly shoot down an hombre like Risky, who could reveal the truth of the crime to the world.

Risky drew a slow breath. Bluffing was his only chance. The game had reached its most crucial point, and Risky's cards were worthless now. He couldn't let his foe know it.

"What am I doin' here?" Risky asked the gunman, faking a deceptive innocence. "Why, I just beat the rest of the riders up the trail. What's the idea of your cocked gun?"

The wrangler studied him with cold, ruthless eyes. The man was listening for the beat of hoofs. There was no sound except the ticking of a clock on a shelf.

"Lift 'em!" the ratty hombre snarled. "Get 'em up high. I'm askin' the questions, an' yo're doin' the answerin'. Savvy?"

Hope shot through Risky. He was not to die immediately. He raised his arms, figuring his chances rapidly. If a breeze blew out the candle he could dodge, draw, and shoot. When horses thudded into the ranch yard, the wrangler might turn to find out who was coming.

"It's plenty uncomfortable stretchin' like this," Risky said, forcing a grin.

"Shore it is," the wrangler sneered. "It won't be long before yore arms get numb. Then yuh won't be so fast on the draw, McKee. We're waitin' fer Tote Kelly."

Risky's face did not change expression. The grin that he had forced remained graven on his features. But within him, his heart began to pound.

"Kelly?" he echoed, bluffing to the last. "Who said he was comin'?"

"I know yo're McKee," the ratty hombre laughed harshly. "I got ter thinkin' about yuh. I remembered the way yuh wore yore gun. I took a lantern an' studied them tracks out in the ranch yard. I saw where yuh drove off with yore cavvy an' the three broncs belongin' ter the ranch. I saw whar Tote got ponies from the pasture an' chased after yuh. Yuh don't fool nobody, McKee. If Tote Kelly is ridin' fast, it's with a posse chasin' yuh."

Risky's grin was hard now. "Pretty smart," he said. "Where did you bury Beppy Simmonds to hide Tote Kelly's slug?"

"Shut up!" the gunman cried wrathfully. "Yuh buried the body. That's what I'm tellin' the posse. Yuh did it ter hide the slug yuh put inter him."

Risky frowned. "You've shore learned a lot from Kelly," he remarked. "But you can't accuse me of that an' get away with it."

"I can't, eh?" the wrangler snarled. "I'm sayin' I caught yuh hyar after yuh hid the carcass. Yuh don't know whar it is. Yuh can't tell whar it is. The lynchin' party will think yo're tryin' ter cover up the bore marks o' yore own slug in Beppy's skull."

A flash of wisdom told Risky that the wrangler was nervous about the trick. Perhaps he had grown spooky while transporting the dead man away from the cabin. Working in the dark had not helped his temper.

He was eager to talk in order to pass the time. Silence grated on his

nerves. He was gabby, just as gabby as Tote Kelly had been, hours before, when he met Risky in the Three Fork ranch yard.

"You've forgotten one thing," Risky said, prodding for more information. "How about Pat Turner? What do you think I was doin' at the Flying Quirt Ranch? Pat Turner ain't so easy to convince. Not after all the rustlin' that you boys carried on. He's wise to you."

The wrangler got to his feet, teeth bared.

"Mebbe I ought ter shoot yuh now," he snapped. "What does Pat Turner know? Tell it quick."

Risky's lifted arms were cold. He could feel his veins draining, and the nerves growing numb. In an emergency, his gun speed would be slowed. He wanted to wriggle his fingers, but the act would give away his hopes. Time was passing. He hadn't much longer.

"Why, Pat knows all about the rustlin'," the horse breeder replied tauntingly. "What would Beppy Simmonds want to buy a cavvy from me for? He had plenty of broncs at this ranch. Pat Turner told me that. Pat ain't no fool."

The rat-faced gunman was advancing across the kitchen.

"Shore, Turner accused Beppy of stealin' his hosses a month ago," the man sneered. "That ain't news. Don't stall me off. Talk! What does Turner know?"

The echo of hoofs coming up the ranch yard reached Risky's ears. He knew that the gunman would hear it any moment. The fellow was not five feet in front of Risky, six-gun cocked and leveled, finger tense on the trigger.

Risky's eyes locked with the wrangler's.

"Beppy Simmonds was no rustler," the horse breeder growled. "If

he was, Tote Kelly wouldn't have murdered——"

Before Risky finished he saw the wrangler's eyes widen and head lift. The gunman had heard the approach of broncs. His attention was diverted for a fraction of a second from his cocked weapon.

Risky acted with the speed of a wild colt. He threw up a leg. The movement was from the floor, and the wrangler didn't take alarm until it was too late. Risky's boot toe hit the extended barrel of the gunman's cocked weapon, knocking it upward.

Crash! The weapon roared flame, driving its bullet into the ceiling, kicking itself loose from the wrangler's grasp.

Risky didn't try to draw. His right arm was too cold for speed. He leaped forward, swinging his right fist downward in a chop. His knuckles took the wrangler on the jaw and threw him back. Risky followed into him with a left round-house swing that caught the man in the nose.

"Yow-ee-ee!" the wrangler screamed, staggering back against the wall. "Tote! Hurry! I've got McKee! Tote!"

Outside, a shout echoed, and there was the sound of riders throwing themselves from saddles.

Risky had the wrangler pinned to the wall. The fellow struck back at him, kicked at him, tried to dodge around him and get to the weapon that had fallen on the floor.

Risky smashed him hard in the mouth, and then gave him an upper-cut to the cheek.

The gunman's eyes bulged. Crimson drooled from his opening mouth. He shuddered, closed his mouth, and sank to the floor, out cold.

Now there was the sound of spurs jingling along the side of the cabin.

Risky leaped to the iron stove, snuffing out the candle with a left hand as he jerked his six-gun from its holster.

"Punch!" the voice of Tote Kelly yelled outside the closed rear door of the kitchen. "What's happened to yuh?"

Rising to his toes, Risky started toward the kitchen door. His intention was to burst outside, catch Tote Kelly face to face, and shoot it out with him. But gambler's caution stopped him.

There was more than one hombre outside the kitchen. Other voices spoke in excited undertones. It seemed that Tote had brought several posse members with him. Perhaps he had talked his way out of trouble in Bench Step, and he had more hombres to help him than at Pat Turner's ranch.

Risky could hear the jingle of spurs along the sides of the cabin. The building was surrounded. He could not get out. He might kill Tote Kelly, but others would beef Risky. And with Kelly dead, Risky couldn't fasten the murder on him. Not without finding the body of Beppy Simmonds.

The horse breeder drew back, turned, and knelt on the floor beside the unconscious gunman. Quickly, Risky tied the fellow's ankles, then his wrists, using belt and whang strings from his holster. He gagged him securely.

All the while the horse breeder could hear Kelly gabbing outside the cabin.

"McKee has murdered Punch," the Three Fork foreman was telling the posse. "Shoot to kill if he comes out. We'll burn the cabin. He's tryin' ter frame me fer the murder o' Beppy Simmonds. I'll bet that he scattered flour around as evi-

dence against Slat's Kendrick. He already made footprints by the spring so he kin accuse poor Runty, who he shot in Bench Step. Now, he's up ter more tricks."

Risky stood up in the dark. He didn't doubt but that Tote Kelly would burn the cabin. It was a good way to destroy evidence. Only Kelly didn't know that the unconscious gunman had already removed Beppy's body. By burning the cabin, Kelly thought he'd bury Beppy's corpse so deeply under the ruins that no posse man would take the trouble to dig it up before hanging Risky for the crime.

There was one flaw in Tote Kelly's plan.

Risky saw it, and grasped it to save his own life.

"No, Punch ain't dead, Kelly!" the horse breeder shouted. "Burn this cabin, an' you'll murder him. Come in an' get me by yourself, you low-down, double-crossin', loud-mouthed killer! I'll be waitin' for you. I'll save the posse the trouble of hangin' you."

A roar of rage sounded outside.

"Listen to him!" Kelly shouted. "Go get him, boys. He's still tryin' ter frame me an' the outfit fer beefin' the boss. Shoot him up."

Risky slowly opened the door from the kitchen to the living room. Starlight was shining in the windows at the front of the cabin. The door was closed. Nobody was trying to sneak in on him. He held the fort in the gloom. He doubted that any bounty-hunting posse man would be fool enough to charge the cabin.

It was the job of the Three Fork men to nail the fugitive inside the ranch house.

Risky heard ranchers outside telling Tote Kelly that.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LAST KILLER.

BUT those men outside hadn't taken Tote Kelly's hollow-cheeked pard into account. Nor did Risky think that the second member of the murder party of three would act without word from Kelly.

The sudden flash of flame at the front windows of the cabin drew Risky's attention. Panic held him transfixed for a moment. He saw the fire lick up the outside of the window sills, following the streaks of wet kerosene that had been thrown on the panes.

The voice of the hollow-cheeked puncher yelled triumphantly.

"The cabin is burnin', Tote! Shoot McKee when he comes out the back."

Some rancher began to yell: "Put out the fire! Yuh'll burn Punch alive."

But Risky knew that nothing could stop the flames. No hombre would have courage enough to come within range of his bullets. Water would only chase the fire to the roof. The kerosene oil had soaked the dry timbers and leaked into the crevices of the ranch house.

He had to act quickly. He could not stay in the cabin. He had to fight his way out.

Whirling, he dodged into the kitchen and picked up the unconscious gunman. His ears registered the commotion around the cabin. Tote Kelly was bawling orders for the posse men to get back into the brush and shoot to kill.

Risky turned to the living room. It was his best bet. The smoke hung thickest at the front door. If he went out the rear he'd be seen easily by the reflection of the fire.

Jerking open the front door, he drew back to allow the wind to whip

the smoke into the room. He choked and moved to the wall. He stood a much better chance of escape without the gunman in his arms. But he couldn't bring himself to leave the man to burn to death.

The posse men had heard him outside, had seen the front door open. They called to one another to get ready.

Risky gritted his teeth. Glancing at the unconscious gun slinger in his arms, he hoisted him like a sack of grain over one shoulder, then drew his weapon.

To his ears, Kelly's voice sounded at the back of the cabin. Kelly was advising the posse against being fooled. Then the Three Fork puncher, "Slats," yelled that he had the front covered.

A trick came to Risky's mind. Stepping back into the room, he aimed at a window and fired twice. His explosions echoed above the low roar of spreading flame. He heard posse men cry out that he was trying the side window.

Risky took the opportunity. He fastened a neckerchief over his face.

"Tote!" he cried out, trying to imitate the tone of the unconscious hombre over his shoulder. "Slats! I've nailed him! I've got him. I'm comin' out with him. Look out for me!"

With a leap, Risky started across the living room. He didn't know if his plan would work. He doubted that the posse men and Slats would recognize him in the smoke and fire. Six-gun in hand, he plunged out the front door through a ring of flame. His eyes went blind in the smoke. He kept moving fast, knowing that the barn and the bunk shack stood not twenty-five feet away, across the ranch yard.

"Don't shoot!" he cried out, keep-

ing his face down under the brim of his hat.

Two guns blasted at him, missing. Cries went up not to kill him, that it was "Punch" carrying Risky McKee.

Risky was halfway across the ranch yard. He dropped the body of Punch as if it was hot. He kept on going toward the opening between the barn and bunk shack. He could see it. He was out of the smoke.

But the hombre hiding at the front corner of the barn saw Risky and recognized him. It was the hollow-cheeked Slats, with a gun in his hand. The reflection of the flames were in the eyes of the Three Fork cowboy.

"McKee!" Slats shrieked. "It ain't Punch. It's McKee."

Risky triggered hard and fast without halting. At the kick of his gun he saw the Three Fork man's weapon blaze. But Risky's bullet was already hitting the fellow. Slats fell back, his shot going wild. He floundered, fell screaming.

Risky raced over his writhing figure, aware that half a dozen posse men had taken alarm. Guns crashed. Lead struck the side of the barn and the bunk shack. But Risky was half protected by his route between the two buildings. Their yells told that they were coming fast after him.

Swerving around the rear corner of the barn, Risky darted into the darkness of the night, sprinting for the fence to the calf pasture. By the starlight he saw the top rail. He dived over it, landing hard on the other side of the fence.

Crash! A six-gun showed yellow flame back by the rear of the barn, and a bullet whistled over the fence.

On his hands and knees, Risky scuttled along the ground below the

lowest rail of the fence. The grass had grown tall there. It hid him. But his trick wouldn't help him for long. The posse would try to surround the calf pasture.

Risky reached the dark shadow of a cottonwood tree, leaped up, and ran for all he was worth southward inside the fence. He could hear men calling back by the barn, and others running with jingling spurs.

At the end of the pasture Risky saw brush. He went over the fence and plunged into the foliage.

He was safe. But it did not help his predicament. He couldn't flee for his bronc. He had to nail Tote Kelly, the last of the three men who had murdered Beppy Simmonds.

Back at the ranch yard, the burning cabin made a yellow light that painted the tops of the hemlock trees.

Turning west through the brush, Risky began to circle the ranch yard. He thumbed fresh cartridges into his gun. His mind was on Punch, whom he had left cold outside the door of the burning cabin. Punch was still unconscious.

How long would it be before the fellow could tell Tote that the corpse with the telltale bullet had been removed from the cabin?

Risky halted. His jaw went hard. "Tote will try to get that bullet," he said. "He'll try to find Beppy in the kitchen. He'll look through the ranch house. He'll think I hid the body, until Punch wakes up and tells him."

Risky started out again, recklessly, plowing through the brush without thought of detection. He circled around to the west and then came to the spring. There, the path to the ranch house showed clear in the reflection of the fire. But the path was not completely open. The dark figure of a man was down on

his hands and knees near the spring, pressing out the print of boots.

The horse breeder halted short. His approach out of the brush would have been detected except for the roar of the flaming cabin, the calls of hunting posse men, and the beat of hoofs entering the Three Fork ranch yard.

Risky stared at the figure near the spring, unable to identify it. He saw that the man had his gun holstered. Risky dropped his own weapon into its casing.

"Kelly!" the horse breeder cried. "Trying to cover up the murder!"

With a catlike spring, the dark figure was on his feet, hand streaking for a gun butt.

Risky was drawing with him, matching the move.

At that moment, the roof of the cabin fell in a shower of sparks, and flames lighted the Three Fork Ranch as if by day.

With fingers catching his six-gun by the handle, Risky was not looking at Tote Kelly. It was another hombre. A hawk-faced gent with murderous eyes. It was the Flying Quirt foreman, who had tried to lick Risky in Pat Turner's ranch yard.

The surprise of finding that hombre at the spring, removing murder traces, almost cost Risky his life. His weapon was whipping up. He didn't know whether to shoot or not. But he couldn't help it. For the Flying Quirt foreman was cursing him, stabbing his weapon into aim.

Crash! Risky's six-gun was first, by a fraction.

There was no missing. The lead was into the Flying Quirt foreman before the flame of the explosion winked out in Risky's weapon. He watched the foreman freeze, finger locked on his trigger. It seemed that the man could not pull it. He leaned forward, eyes going white.

He fell on the path, and his six-gun exploded as he landed, throwing a bullet into the brush.

The Flying Quirt foreman had been shot through the heart.

Risky drew back, cocking his gun again. He knew that the shot had been heard. Glancing at the flaming cabin, he saw horsemen circling it. They were familiar. One of them was Pat Turner, brandishing a six-gun, shouting for the posse men to keep back or he'd make trouble. Another was the bald-headed Sufferin' Joe, shrilling defiance.

But nearer Risky, at the entrance to the path to the spring, another familiar figure came running toward him. There was no mistaking the unshaven hooked-nose Tote Kelly. The Three Fork foreman was fleeing hard, looking back to see if his escape was detected.

Risky moved out to the path. "Kelly!" he cried. "I'm waiting!"

The Three Fork foreman's head whipped around. At the same time he dodged to the brush, gun whipping up.

"It's McKee! Kill him!"

Risky ducked, shooting hard. He had no target except the flame of Kelly's gun in the brush. Risky gave back shot for shot. He heard a scream. The brush quivered. Kelly was down, yowling.

Risky fell back to the spring, eyes turning to the flaming cabin at the end of the path. He saw Pat Turner and Sufferin' Joe racing toward him.

"Risky!" the bald-headed scout shouted. "Who did yuh hit?"

"The murderers of Beppy Simmonds."

Pat Turner slowed down and looked back at his ranch hands. "Hold that posse off. If they try to lynch Risky McKee, I'll lynch them."

Risky waited for his leathery pard

and the Flying Quirt owner to come up.

"Pat, I've got bad news," the horse breeder said.

"It ain't bad news that Tote Kelly is beefed," Pat Turner said. "I knowed all along that he was the boss rustler in these parts. I figured that Slat's an' Punch were his henchmen. But I couldn't figure out where Beppy Simmonds fitted in. Not until Sufferin' Joe turned up ter tell me."

Sufferin' Joe halted, puffing. "If yuh had waited fer me in Bench Step," he said, "I would have told yuh that a letter from Beppy Simmonds came after yuh left with the cavvy fer his ranch. Yuh see, yuh wrote Beppy Simmonds that yore chief wrangler would take the hosses. Beppy wrote back that he wanted yuh personal. Because he was in a bad jam."

Pat Turner wiped his bandanna. "The tight was that he'd found out that Tote Kelly had been stealin' my broncs. Beppy would take up my challenge. We was friends once. He sent for yuh, McKee, because he knew you'd never turn down no bet. He was willing ter bet yuh anythin' that yuh couldn't trap the very rustlers what was workin' fer him on his spread, without him bein' murdered. I'm plumb sorry he's dead. Tote must have got wise ter the plan, tortured the truth out o' Beppy, an' killed him."

Risky drew a deep breath.

"That's not all of the crooked work, Pat," he said. "I figure that Tote an' his two hands knocked Beppy unconscious an' left him on the kitchen table in his ranch house. That's how Slat's got flour on himself. Tote shot him. But the crook known as Runty, who I shot in Bench Step, didn't leave the track by this spring. All three of them

rode out of the ranch yard. They left another hombre near this spring."

"Who? Punch?" Pat Turner asked.

"No, the hombre at this spring fired a shot as I came into the ranch yard," Risky said. "It was to trick me. It sounded like it came from the cabin."

"Who was the skunk?" Pat Turner asked.

"I found him rubbing out the tracks that he left, not five minutes ago," Risky said. "He's laying behind me. Don't get excited."

He moved aside as Pat Turner walked up, knelt, and stared into the face of his own foreman.

Pat Turner cursed.

"Link Smith was a double-crosser!" he exclaimed. "Link, who I trusted, just like Beppy trusted Tote Kelly. Both of them were in cahoots."

Risky nudged Sufferin' Joe.

"Let's be on our way," he whispered. "My sorrel is down yonder near the road. Get yours. I'll meet you. We'll pull out quiet."

Sufferin' Joe snorted. "What was that crack yuh made ter me about rattlesnake pizen an' gout in Bench Step?" he asked. "I ain't got neither. I was jest tellin' that yarn ter pass the time."

"What have you got?" Risky asked. "Rickets?"

"No!" Sufferin' Joe cried. "I'm in the center of a nervous breakdown from arguin' with Pat Turner."

"What about?"

"You!" Sufferin' Joe said scornfully. "He claimed that yuh wouldn't touch apple pie. I know different. It's me that roots fer huckleberry, an' don't yuh go sayin' different, even if yuh have found out that apple ain't in it with good ol' juicy huckleberry."

The Brand of the Secret Seven



A "B Bar B"
Story

By
Samuel H. Nickels

Author of "Ranger Breed," etc.

THE little old cowboy in the whang-patched batwings suddenly jerked his galloping horse back on its haunches in a plunging halt and slapped a hand to a holstered Colt. As he did so, a rifle cracked from the mountainside above him, and a heavy bullet zipped wickedly past his face.

With the agility of a rock squirrel, the wiry old puncher leaped from his saddle and dived behind a gran-

ite ledge. But before he could duck out of sight, another bullet tore a hole in the top of his hat and slapped it down over his eyes.

"What the——" he snarled, his scraggly bobcat whiskers bristling with wrath. "They didn't ask me how come, whar to, nor nothin'! Just started in to exterminate me, did they? Nobody does them things to Stub Murphy an' gits away with it! I'll show 'em!"

Without a pause, "Stub" scooted to a crack in the ledge. Eyes glinting, he raised both his long-barreled .45s and tried to locate the bush-whacker who was shooting at him.

Instantly a bullet hit the ledge in front of him and stung his face with bits of rock and slivers of flying lead. Another slug clipped twigs from a bush behind him, as he dropped hastily to the ground.

"Dad-burn his ornery time!" Stub gritted. "Thet's one hombre doin'

all thet shootin'! Just wait till I kin git me a squint at him. I'll punctuate his innards with a .45 slug an' see what makes him tick. I'll——"

Bang-bang! As another vicious crack of the bushwhacker's rifle drowned the sound of Stub's voice, the thudding blast of a heavy Colt roared a split-second echo, and there came a hoarse screech of agony.

With a startled grunt, Stub jerked up his head. As he darted a quick look through the crack, he was just in time to see an hombre lurch into view from a thicket above him. The fellow took one staggering step, then his knees buckled under him, and he pitched forward upon his face among the rocks.

"Who done thet?" Stub ejaculated, staring. "Whar in tunket did thet other bullet come from?"

Just then, a sharp whistle sounded from a short distance away. Stub jerked up his head and saw a chap-clad rider spur into view from a thicket, a blue-barreled Colt poised in his right hand for another lightning shot.

It was "Buck" Bradley, the young puncher who owned the B Bar B. As Stub recognized his youthful boss, he scrambled to his feet with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Yuh got him, Buck!" he whooped.

"I meant to," Buck called back, without turning his head. "Look out! He may just be playin' dead to draw us out in the open so's he kin cut us down. Keep yore eyes peeled!"

Guns gripped ready, Stub hurried up the hill toward the place where he had seen the bushwhacker fall. In another minute, he and Buck reached an hombre who lay sprawled among the rocks.

Buck took one quick look at the fellow and swung from his saddle.

But as he and Stub stooped over him, the man suddenly opened his eyes and mumbled a savage oath.

"B-blast yuh!" he snarled weakly, his lips twitching back from his yellowed teeth. "Yuh got me, but yuh'll git yores. Yore number is up, an'—an'——"

Buck's strong-lined face hardened, and a steely glint crept into his blue eyes. He and Stub exchanged quick glances and leaned closer to the gasping killer.

The hombre was dying fast. Crimson froth trickled from the corners of his writhing lips, but his chest heaved as he fought desperately to speak.

"Yuh killed——" he choked hoarsely. "Yuh—— A member of Secret Seven. Yore n-number's up, Bradley. Y-yuh——"

With a sudden rattling gasp, the fellow heaved himself almost to a sitting posture. Eyes staring and face twisted in a hideous snarl, he sank slowly back, and his bullet-torn body went limp.

"Dead," Buck pronounced quietly. "So my number is up, is it? Then why was he shootin' at you? Yes, an' what does he mean by the Secret Seven?"

Little Stub sniffed and spat a stream of tobacco juice into the brush with a loud *phut* that made Buck's horse jump and prick up its ears. He shrugged carelessly and turned away.

But suddenly he gave a startled grunt and jerked around. Eyes glinting, he muttered something and jumped back to the dead bushwhacker.

"Look hyar!" he said to Buck. "I just happened to think of somethin' I heard long before yuh inherited the B Bar B from yore uncle. Take a squint at thet jasper's left arm an' see what it's got on it."

Buck stooped hastily and shoved up the dead hombre's left sleeve. There near the elbow, he and Stub found a pair of crossed guns that had been tattooed in black ink. Just above this was a small seven and a skull inside a circle of red.

"Just as I figured!" little Stub said. "It's the brand of the Secret Seven. It's been a long time since I heard of thet layout of polecats. I'd forgot all about 'em till now. Listen."

Rapidly, his eyes on the pair of heavily notched .45s that sagged the dead hombre's crisscrossed cartridge belts, Stub told Buck what he knew of the Secret Seven.

It was said to be composed of seven of the deadliest killers and fastest gunmen in all New Mexico. They were outlaws of the very worst type, and they worked together in all kinds of thievery. They were also sworn to avenge the death of any member who might happen to get killed.

Cowboys and range men spoke guardedly of this deadly crew of killers. No one knew the names of any of its members, and it was dangerous to even mention a suspicion as to who they might be.

"Yeah!" Stub went on, "an' I was told about them crazy tattoo marks they all wore. But the Secret Seven ain't been heard of fer several years. They was supposed to have either busted up or all been killed off."

As Stub gnawed off a fresh chew of tobacco and rose to his feet, Buck stared keenly at the dead bushwhacker. With lips clamped firmly together, he finally stood up.

"Well," he spoke grimly as he turned toward his horse, "if thet gang was composed of seven, this feller's death cuts 'em down to six."

Stub spat out another stream of tobacco juice. "Yep," he grunted,

"an' him bein' out to git yuh means thet yuh've gunned still another one of their bunch somewhar lately. Accordin' to thet, yuh've pruned 'em down to five. Let's hurry to the house an' see have any of 'em been botherin' Martha an' Billie."

Buck stiffened and leaped into his saddle as Stub mentioned Billie Dale and her widowed mother. The girl and the older woman had been left alone at the ranch house, and he knew that they would be in deadly danger until the last of the unknown killers had been run down.

II.

As the young B Bar B boss sent his big cow horse plunging down the hill, Stub rushed toward his own mount. He hit his brush-scarred saddle like a spring snapping into place, and went spurring at a dead run behind Buck toward the house.

"Yuh know somethin', Buck?" Stub yelled, as they sped along. "If one of them hombres was to jump Martha an' she seen him in time, he'd always remember thet he'd been in a fight. Thet old sawed-off shotgun she keeps in the kitchen would scatter polecat all over the place. Martha is plumb sudden on the shoot when she's properly riled. I aim to marry thet woman some day, whether she thinks I am or not."

Buck scarcely heard him. He was thinking of Billie. He knew that such murderous cutthroats as the Secret Seven would not hesitate to kill even a girl. His lips tightened grimly as he spurred to a still greater burst of speed.

Their horses were in a lather of sweat as they burst from a thicket at the mouth of the canyon and rocketed into a little bunch-grass pasture. In a grove of quaking

aspens ahead of them, they saw the corrals and ranch house of the B Bar B.

As they sped rapidly closer, Buck suddenly noticed that there was no smoke coming from the kitchen chimney. The doors of the house were closed, and there was no sign of Billie Dale or her mother about the place.

"Somethin's wrong there!" Buck barked harshly. "Look! Thet bench is turned over on the porch! The yard gate has been left open!"

Hands streaking to their holsters, Buck and Stub jerked their guns and leaped from their saddles before their plunging horses came to a full stop. They hit the ground running and raced to the porch.

"Martha!" Stub shouted. "Martha, whar aire yuh?"

Without waiting for a reply, Buck sprang to the nearest door and hurled it open. Neither Martha nor Billie was in sight, but one glance at Martha's kitchen brought a yell of fury from Stub.

Chairs had been overturned, and the coffeepot hurled from the stove. The big sawed-off shotgun that Martha usually kept in the corner behind the door now lay in the middle of the floor, and the window at the back of the room had been smashed with buckshot.

"They're gone!" Stub cried. "Martha an' Billie has been captured an' took off. They——"

"Search the house!" Buck called, his slitted blue eyes suddenly blazing. "Quick! If they're plumb gone, we've got to hit the trail of the hombres thet packed 'em off before it's too late."

With guns poised for lightning use, Buck and Stub hurled open doors and rushed from room to room. They looked hastily in every corner and beneath every bed.

They were almost to the last room at the end of the house when Buck thought he heard a sharp cry in front of them. Faint sounds of a struggle sent him and Stub leaping forward.

"Git back, Buck!" came a muffled shout. "Git——"

"It's Martha!" Stub yelled as a crash drowned the sound of her voice. "Git in thar! Bust thet door!"

Before he had finished speaking, Buck hit the door with his shoulder and almost tore it from its hinges. As he hurled it open and leaped into the room with Stub beside him, there came a sharp scream and a murderous chuckle.

"Hands up, Bradley!" came a sharp command. "You an' thet old bush-popper both! Reach! Yuh ain't got a chance!"

There on the other side of the room, two brutal-looking ruffians held Billie and her mother in front of them. Using the women's bodies as shields, the hombres had their guns pointed straight at Buck and Stub.

As little Stub caught sight of the ugly bruise on Martha's cheek, he let out a wild yelp and threw himself into a fighting crouch. But he instantly saw that it would be impossible to shoot without hitting one of the women.

Buck's slitted eyes blazed with cold, killing fury as he looked at Billie. The girl's buckskin shirt was torn, and one of her white shoulders showed through a rip in her waist. The hands of both women were tied behind them.

"Look out, Buck!" Billie screamed hastily. "Dodge! It's a trap! Look out behind you!"

Like a flash, Buck and Stub hurled themselves aside. But before they could whirl to see what was

happening, hurtling forms leaped on them through the broken door and smashed them down with clubbed guns.

As Buck's knees sagged under him, he tried feebly to turn and shoot. Instantly another Colt barrel struck him across the head, and he sank limply to the floor.

III.

When the young ranch owner began to recover consciousness, he tried weakly to roll over. Breathing heavily, he struggled for a moment, then fell back.

Suddenly he found that his wrists were lashed together behind him. When he tried to sit up, he found that his ankles were also tied. Shaking his head to clear it, he heaved himself up on one elbow and tried to look around him in the inky darkness.

Just then, there came a muffled thud of feet above him. As a low rumble of voices reached him, he jerked hastily around and tried to listen.

When a jeering laugh sounded overhead, Buck suddenly remembered what had happened. Teeth clamped together, he instantly began wrenching to break the stout cords that held him.

Heaving and twisting, he tugged with all his strength. Sweat trickled down his face as he rolled from side to side. Finally he was forced to stop to catch his breath.

"The blasted cowardly skunks!" he panted, his chest heaving. "If they've hurt Billie and her mother, I'll find some way to git 'em. I wonder if they killed Stub? If——"

"Shhh!" came a warning hiss from the darkness behind him. "No, they ain't killed Stub yit. Leastwise, I don't think I'm dead. I figger them

polecats aim to wait till we wake up 'fore bumpin' us off. We're fastened in the cellar under the house."

"Yeah?" Buck snapped. "Well, our job is to git loose an' git our hands on somethin' to fight with. We'll have to work fast."

As he once more began wrenching to break the cords that held him, there came a sudden creak of hinges and a gleam of candlelight to one side of the cellar. Buck instantly barked a low warning to Stub and dropped back as if still unconscious.

In scarcely a moment, there came a thud of feet on the dusty steps, and two big Colt-armed ruffians clumped noisily into view. With his eyes partly closed, Buck watched them as they came toward Stub.

"Still out, huh?" one of them grunted, holding the stump of candle above his head. "Waal, we'll have us a look at thet other one."

Buck closed his eyes as the two killers stopped beside him. He heard a growled oath, then one of them grabbed him by an arm and rolled him roughly over.

"Huh!" came an impatient snarl. "Waal, we'll fix 'em when they do come to. Nobody kin kill a member of the Secret Seven an' git away with it. Buck Bradley shot Spade, an' he'll pay aplenty fer it when we git through with him an' his outfit. We'll slaughter 'em all off."

Buck stiffened and clenched his teeth as the hombres clumped away toward the old stairway. He now knew what had put the crew of killers on his trail.

A murderous range hog named "Spade" Bolton had bushwhacked Buck's uncle and tried to grab the B Bar B. Buck had killed Bolton and had driven his crew of outlaws and gun fighters away from Carrizo Range. He now knew that Bolton

had been a member of the Secret Seven.

"Did yuh hyar thet?" Stub called softly as the door was closed at the stair head. "Did yuh——"

"I heard it," Buck cut in sharply. "Stop talkin' an' start workin' to git loose. We got to reach Billie an' Martha in time to save 'em. Those skunks mean to murder them as well as us."

Stub was struggling before Buck finished speaking, and the thought of any danger to Martha added strength to the wiry little bush-popper's arms. Buck could hear him grunt as he strained to break the cords that held him.

Buck worked for a few moments. Suddenly he stopped and glanced toward a corner where he had left an old pair of rusty horseshoe pincers that he had once used to clip some wire from the ceiling. Without a word to Stub, he went rolling swiftly across the cellar floor.

As he reached the rough wall, he scooted awkwardly along until he bumped his shoulder against an old box. If some one had not moved them, those old pincers should be lying on top of that box.

Without a pause, Buck sat up. Working swiftly, he got one elbow on the edge of the box and pulled his feet under him. By a sudden quick heave, he rose to his knees and sat down on the box.

Groping carefully behind him with his bound hands, Buck soon located the old pincers. He gave a grunt of satisfaction as he picked them up in his numbed fingers and slid back to the floor.

The joints of the old pincers were stiff from rust and lack of oil, but he quickly opened the gapped jaws. By bending his body backward and reaching down, he clipped the cords from his ankles.

"All right, Stub," he whispered sharply. "Where are yuh? Roll over on yore side an' hold out yore hands. Quick!"

Buck soon managed to clip the cords from Stub's wrists. He then gave Stub the pincers and held out his own hands.

As they sprang to their feet, they could again hear muffled sounds from above them. A chair scraped on the floor, then came a whoop of coarse laughter.

Teeth clenched, Buck began hunting hastily for something he could use for a weapon. He thought of other B Bar B cowboys who were out at line cabins along the edge of his range. If any of them were to come riding in for supplies, they would be picked off by the killers and shot down before they could reach the yard.

As another guffaw of jeering laughter reached them, Buck and Stub hurriedly jerked off their boots and rushed toward the flimsy stairway. Stub was close behind Buck when he reached the door that led to the kitchen.

Buck caught a gleam of candlelight through the keyhole and around the cracks. He instantly knew that it was night. He and Stub had been lying in the old cellar longer than he thought.

With a whispered warning to Stub, he took hold of the doorknob. He was just starting to turn it, when a crash and a bellowed oath came from the room beyond.

"There's yore coffee, yuh mangy polecat!" came a shout from Martha. "I hope it took the hide off yuh! If it didn't, maybe this will!"

Instantly there came a mad scramble and an uproar of shouted oaths. As Buck stooped for a hasty look through the keyhole, he was just in time to see Martha hurl a

big skillet of sizzling bacon at some hombres near the stove.

As the hot grease showered on them, the ruffians almost upset the table, dodging out of the way. The pot of scalding coffee had already hit one of the hombres, and he was clawing frantically to tear off his soaked shirt.

"Yuh'll make me cook supper fer yuh, will yuh?" Martha shouted. "I hope yuh liked it, yuh treacherous skunks!"

"Blast yuh!" came a wicked howl from a bearded ruffian. "Yuh'll git yores fer thet! We'll fix all of yuh just like we aim to fix Buck Bradley! Tie her up again, men, then we'll see if Bradley or thet cowhand of his has woke up yit. Hurry!"

Just then, Buck saw Billie. The girl was roped securely in a hide-bottomed chair near the wall. Her face was pale, but her eyes were blazing as she watched the ruffians tie her mother.

A surge of deadly fury shot through Buck, and he started to hurl open the door. But he as quickly realized that he and Stub would be shot down before they could get their hands on a weapon.

Stub gave an angry snarl and tried to shove past him. Buck instantly gripped his arm and pulled him back.

"Steady!" Buck hissed softly. "Keep yore head. If we git ourselves shot, Billie an' Martha will be left at the mercy of them hombres. Wait! We got to think of a way to turn the tables on thet bunch."

Buck darted another swift look through the keyhole. There were five of the Secret Seven in the kitchen, and all were heavily armed.

Long-barreled Colts sagged every hombre's crisscrossed cartridge belts, and Buck saw three big-calibered

rifles leaning against the wall across the room. Two of the ruffians had bone-handled bowies thrust in the legs of their boots.

As the hombres stepped back away from Martha, Buck saw that they had roped her in a chair near the door that led to the porch. Martha was panting from her struggles, but she glared up at them gamely.

"Waal," a black-bearded ruffian snarled, "some of yuh go see if Bradley an' his amigo has woke up. We'll git rid of Bradley first. When we've settled with him, we'll finish the rest of 'em an' burn the house. Hurry!"

As one of the hombres grabbed a stump of candle from a shelf and lighted it at the table, Buck gripped Stub's arm. When the outlaw started toward the door, he jerked hastily around.

"Git back to the cellar," he snapped softly. "Quick, an' no noise! Thet hombre's got a pair of guns, an' I've got to git my hands on 'em!"

Buck and Stub had barely reached the cellar when the door was jerked open above them. As the outlaw stepped through and pulled the door shut behind him, Buck leaned closer to Stub.

"Git over there an' lay down like yuh was tied," he whispered hastily. "Quick! Here he comes!"

Stub instantly jumped over near the foot of the steps and dropped to the floor. As he rolled over on his side and held his hands behind him, Buck crouched hastily out of sight against the wall.

IV.

Holding the candle in front of him and shielding its flame with one hand, the outlaw came clumping

down the stairway. Buck darted a quick look at the pair of ivory-handled Colts which swung at his hips and at the handle of the big bowie which stuck up from the leg of his right boot.

Teeth clenched, Buck crouched lower. As the hombre reached the bottom of the steps, he leaned forward and braced himself, his slitted eyes riveted on those white-handled guns.

Just then the outlaw saw Stub. "Huh!" he grunted sourly. "Still out, is he? Waal, maybe a couple of good kicks in his blasted ribs will wake him up."

As the hulking ruffian moved closer to Stub, Buck rose and leaped noiselessly toward him. As the fellow lowered his candle and drew back his foot for a brutal kick, Buck suddenly jabbed a finger against the back of his neck.

"Hands up, you!" Buck ordered harshly. "No noise! One yell an' I'll blow a tunnel through yuh! Hoist!"

With a startled grunt, the fellow stiffened. He almost dropped the candle as he hastily lifted his hands.

"Blast yuh!" he snarled, trembling. "D-don't shoot!—Don't shoot me! I give up!"

Like a flash, Buck grabbed both guns from the fellow's holsters and flipped back their hammers. As Stub bounded up, the outlaw turned his head and glared around.

"What!" he gasped. "Yuh didn't have no gun! Yuh made me think yuh had one!"

"Yeah?" Buck said grimly. "Well, I've got guns now, an' yuh'd better button yore lip before I rip a bullet through yuh!"

The hombre licked his unshaven lips and glared like a trapped coyote. Muttering oaths, he flinched

back from the muzzles of the leveled guns.

As Stub stooped to take the big bowie knife from his boot, a gleam of ratlike fury flashed into the ruffian's close-set eyes. With a sudden wild yell, he hurled the candle at Buck's face and threw himself aside.

Bang-bang! Buck's blazing guns jarred the cellar with an ear-splitting roar, but his whizzing bullets merely split the fellow's shirt and grazed his side.

Instantly there came a chorus of startled yells from above. A muffled thud of feet sounded from the direction of the kitchen, and the door at the head of the stairs was hurled open.

"Look out, fellers!" came a whoop from the darkness. "He's got my guns an'——"

Bang! The red blaze of Buck's right-hand Colt lighted the cellar as he fired a hasty shot at the sound of the ruffian's voice.

The hombre's thrown bowie split the air beside Buck's face and hit the wall behind him. Buck and Stub both leaped backward and crouched down as a pair of hastily fired guns roared from above them.

"Look out!" came another yell from the hombre in the cellar. "Yuh might hit me by mistake! Wait!"

"Thar he goes!" Stub whispered sharply. "I kin hyar him slipping up the stairs. He's tryin' to git out on us. Watch out, or he'll——"

The thundering blast of Buck's left-hand Colt instantly drowned the sound of his voice, and there came a hoarse screech of agony. The hombre's body crashed back down the stairway and rolled almost at Stub's feet.

"Yuh got him!" Stub whooped. "Thet's one more of the Secret

Seven yuh've wiped out! See kin yuh scramble another un!"

Bang-bang! Bang! Bra-a-m! A bellowing crash of swiftly fired guns roared from the head of the stairway, and a hail of bullets hit the floor all around Buck and Stub.

Shooting with both hands, Buck drove the remaining killers back to the kitchen with a few hasty shots. The door was slammed, and there came a rumble of excited yells.

"Thet's the time yuh made 'em back up!" Stub whooped. "Billy the Kid couldn't have done a better job!"

Without replying, Buck swiftly punched the exploded shells from his hot guns and reloaded with cartridges from his crisscrossed belts. As he worked, he could hear Stub fumbling around in the darkness behind him.

Buck's first thought was to charge up the stairway and try shooting it out with the remaining four killers. But he as quickly realized that Billie or Martha might be hit by flying bullets.

Gripping his guns, he took a step toward the stairway. Almost as he did so, he heard the door being stealthily opened above him.

"Hold on down thar, Bradley!" came a growling voice. "Try firin' another shot up hyar if yuh want these two women killed!"

Buck jerked up his guns, but he quickly lowered them. Breathing heavily, Stub moved over beside him.

"Listen, Bradley," came the voice again, "we want them guns yuh took off Jake. Throw 'em up hyar, then both of yuh come up an' surrender. If yuh don't, we'll shoot both these women right hyar before yore eyes. Savvy?"

As the man finished speaking, the door was jerked wide open, and

Buck and Stub saw Billie and Martha framed in the candlelight. A surge of deadly fury shot through Buck at sight of the scowling ruffians who held the women in front of them.

"Aire yuh givin' up them guns, Bradley?" came a rasping voice. "Give 'em up an' surrender an' we'll let the women live."

"Don't give up your guns, Buck!" Billie called gamely. "They mean to kill us all anyhow. Shoot!"

As one of the ruffians grabbed her and slapped a hand over her mouth, Buck clenched his teeth and leaped on the stairway. Just then, a pair of guns was held against Martha's and Billie's heads.

"Cut down on 'em, Buck!" Martha yelled. "Don't mind us!"

Buck froze to a halt. One shot from him would mean the instant death of both women, and he knew it. Face set, he shook his head and slowly lowered his guns.

"We'll surrender," he said. "Yuh promised to let the women live. We'll have to take a chance on yuh keepin' yore word."

Stub said nothing, but the wiry little bush-popper's slitted eyes were snapping as he watched Buck toss his guns through the door. He and Buck then raised their hands and climbed the steps into the kitchen.

While two of the ruffians kept them covered with drawn guns, the others shoved Billie and Martha back into chairs and roped them securely.

"Waal!" the black-bearded killer snarled viciously. "So we did git yuh, Bradley! An' yuh figgered we'd be fools enough to let these hyar women live to put a sheriff on our trail, did yuh? Tie 'em up, men! I'll keep 'em covered! We'll soon show 'em what we aim to do!"

As the black-bearded hombre lev-

eled his own smoke-blackened guns, his three amigos holstered their weapons and started toward Buck and Stub.

Buck and Stub instantly began backing away from them around the corner of the table. Buck's slitted eyes were blazing as he tried warily to get the three scowling killers between him and the bearded hombre who held the guns.

"Yuh cowardly skunks!" little Stub snarled, still keeping his hands on a level with his shoulders. "Yuh ain't got the nerve it takes to fight us fair. Yuh women killers, I——"

"Look out, Stub!" Martha shouted. "Thet hombre's goin' to shoot yuh!"

As the black-bearded ruffian's gun roared, the wiry little cowboy hurled himself aside with his right hand clawing inside his boot. Instantly a thrown bowie split a glittering streak through the air and was buried to the hilt in the black-bearded hombre's throat before he could fire a second shot.

As the hidden knife flew from Stub's practiced hand, Buck dived headlong at the nearest ruffian and wrenched a gun from his holster before the fellow hardly knew what was happening. Stub had followed his knife in a flying leap, and he grabbed one of the black-bearded hombre's guns as he toppled to the floor.

Bang! Buck's first shot caught a ruffian in the stomach and hurled him against the wall as if a mule had kicked him.

Bang-bang-bang! Bra-am! The thundering bellow of swiftly fired guns made the windows rattle, as the two remaining killers hurled themselves backward with Colts blazing.

A whizzing bullet burned Buck across the shoulder. A second

plowed a groove across the top of the table, and stung Martha's face with flying splinters. Another ball went through Stub's straggly whiskers and cut a stinging gash along his leathery cheek.

Buck had gone to his knees. As he lunged to his feet, a bullet struck his thigh and almost knocked his leg from under him.

"Look out, Buck!" Billie screamed. "Behind you!"

Buck pivoted around and ducked, as a .45 blazed almost in his face. He and Stub fired at the same instant, and the last of the Secret Seven sagged to the floor like a bundle of old clothes, almost against Billie's chair.

"Whooe!" Stub whooped, as Buck began swiftly untying Billie. "I reckon we shore took them jaspers to a cleanin'! Martha, aire yuh all right?"

Martha sniffed impatiently. "Why wouldn't I be all right?" she asked briskly. "Whar did yuh git the knife yuh throwed through thet polecat's neck?"

Old Stub looked at Buck and winked. He scratched his bald head, then fished a battered plug of strong tobacco from his hip pocket.

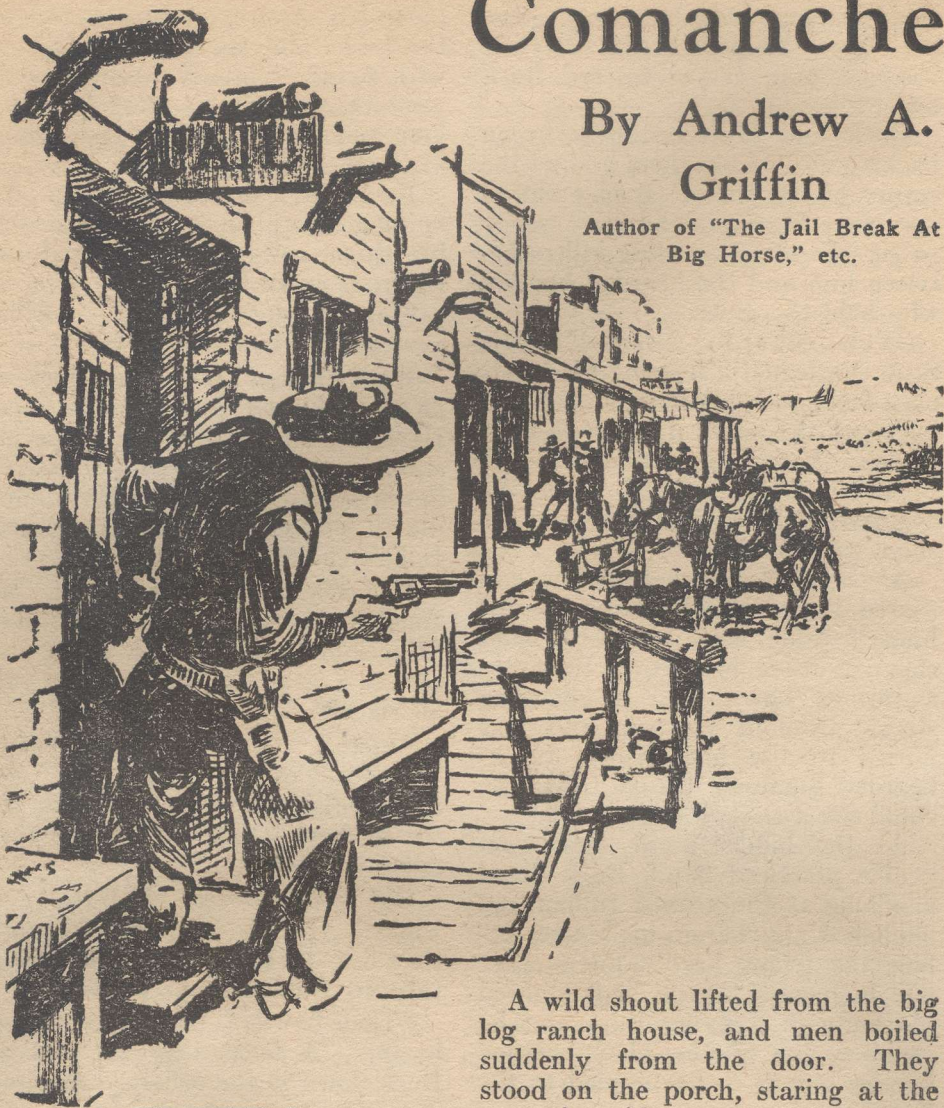
"Thet bowie?" he grunted carelessly. "A feller throwed thet at Buck down in the cellar. I figgered it might come in handy, so I hid it in my boot. Wait till I pull it out of thet jasper's neck an' I'll cut yuh loose with it. Then you an' Billie kin rustle us some fresh coffee while me an' Buck drags them hombres out in the yard."

It shore looked bad fer Buck an' Stub in thet cellar, didn't it? But thet warn't the half of it, as yuh'll see pretty soon in *Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly*. Watch fer 'em if yuh want tuh see plenty of excitement.

Comanche

By Andrew A.
Griffin

Author of "The Jail Break At
Big Horse," etc.



CHAPTER I.

ALARMING DISCOVERY.

THE cowboy seemed to roar straight out of the huge red sun that was just peeping down into the broad, fertile valley where the Box Z ranch house and other buildings stood on a grassy flat. The horse under the short, freckle-faced waddy was lathered, rubbery-kneed, and so exhausted it could barely keep its feet.

A wild shout lifted from the big log ranch house, and men boiled suddenly from the door. They stood on the porch, staring at the oncoming rider.

"Somethin' has happened to Speck Holden, Comanche!" exclaimed lanky, grizzled old "Tonk" Hayden, newly appointed Box Z foreman.

The young hombre addressed as "Comanche" nodded, his eyes changing from a deep blue to a smoky color. He was tall and lithe and sinewy of build. His face, a little pale and wan-looking, was as still and cold as if carved from

Springs A Trap



stone. Known only as "Comanche," he was the famous gun *segundo* of all the ranches owned by Harry Bradley, Texas cattle king.

Bradley's ranches were scattered from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian line, and the slim, hawk-eyed, grim-faced Comanche was Bradley's trouble buster. Wherever rustling or crookedness of any sort appeared on a Bradley ranch, there Comanche came, and by the use of wits and guns straightened said trouble out.

Comanche had no other name, for he had been found as a boy with a band of thieving Comanche Indians by Harry Bradley and a bunch of Bradley's punchers down in Texas.

Only the day before, Comanche had come to the Box Z to find out why the big spread was losing stock steadily and going deeper and deeper in the red. What Comanche had discovered was enough to shake the nerve of the toughest hombre.

A mysterious hombre known as

the "Chief" was causing friction among the ranchers, stripping their ranges of stock and making it appear as if they were stealing from each other. But Comanche had come, and the Chief and the Chief's murderous crew had felt the weight of his coming.

In the Box Z ranch house now lay four men who had belonged to the Chief's organization. Two of them were dead, a third had both arms broken by slugs from Comanche's guns, and the fourth, now bound and gagged had a lump on his head where Comanche had slugged him.

Comanche and Tonk Hayden had started little "Speck" Holden to Paso Verde town, with instructions to fetch the doctor and Sheriff Joe Logan as fast as possible. For the hombre with the broken arms was Gid Wilson, former manager of the Box Z and the only member of the gang who knew the Chief's identity.

Wilson, knowing that the penalty

would be death for failing to kill Comanche as the Chief had ordered him to do, had promised to reveal all he knew to Sheriff Joe Logan.

But here was Speck Holden, roaring back to the ranch on an exhausted horse at about the time he should have been arriving in Paso Verde.

"Look!" Tonk Hayden's voice again broke the silence. "Speck is hurt, fellers!"

Speck certainly was hurt. He was scrambling down from the saddle now, racing in weavy, jerky strides toward the ranch house. His freckled face was as white as paper, his tow-colored head was hatless, and the left sleeve of his shirt was scarlet from shoulder to elbow.

Comanche moved now, wincing a little as he jumped from the porch and trotted out into the yard to catch the weaving, panting Speck. For Comanche had not come through the powder-smoke argument he had had with Gid Wilson and those others unscathed.

He had a flesh wound in his thigh, a deep cut across his ribs, and a split scalp. The white bandages which circled his head showed crimson stains, for that scalp wound had been severely jolted several times during the night that had just passed. But his movements were as quick as the movements of a huge cat despite those throbbing wounds.

He caught Speck, lifted the little waddy in his arms, and carried him to the porch. Tonk Hayden and the other Box Z hands swarmed around, shouting questions, staring at Speck's pale face and crimson-soaked sleeve. But Comanche waved the men to silence, ordered them to fetch water.

Woe Him, fat little Chinese cook, had already thought of water, however, and was beside Comanche in-

stantly, a huge tin dipper in one pudgy hand. Comanche held the dipper to Speck's pallid lips, watched the puncher swallow thirstily. Then Speck sat up, dragging the sleeve of his good right arm wearily across his face.

"We've got to do somethin', fellers!" he choked. "This whole blamed country around hyar is swarmin' with gun-totin' riders. They jumped me jist at daylight, an' danged if I could bust through their lines an' hit fer Paso Verde."

"Know any of them?" Comanche asked grimly.

Speck gulped, rolled his eyes uneasily, then nodded. "I know the three that nigh got me," the little towhead said harshly. "They was Gyp Blalock, Heck Norton, an' Buck Ownby."

"Are yuh shore, Speck?" Hayden asked hoarsely.

The other seven grim-lipped Box Z hands were muttering ominously, hands fondling gun butts as they looked down upon their wounded companion.

"Gyp Blalock is foreman o' Fred Morgan's Spade outfit, Comanche," Tonk Hayden explained grimly. "An' them other two Speck mentioned—Heck Norton an' Buck Ownby—are Spade riders."

"An' Fred Morgan was there himself," Speck growled. "The cuss was wounded, fer I seen that he was carryin' his left arm in a sling. I spotted him about ten minutes after I give Blalock an' them other two the slip. Fred never sighted me, fer I took to the timber."

"Where'd they jump yuh?" asked Hayden.

"At the ford on Sycamore Crick," Speck answered promptly. "I stopped to let my hoss drink an' would 'a' been reamed plumb center by the slug that gashed this arm

if I hadn't leaned over jist when I did to give my hoss more rein."

"They jumped yuh without warnin'?" Comanche asked sharply.

"They did!" Speck snorted. "Fust thing I knowed, a gun was bellerin' at me from the bresh, my arm felt like it was bein' jerked off, an' my hoss was leavin' thar in a run."

Comanche shook his head in bewilderment, eyes half closed, mind racing at top speed. "Yesterday," he said slowly, "when Gid Wilson an' them other three thought I was just a range tramp who'd blundered into their game, they talked to me quite a lot. An' one of the things they told me was that the Spade an' Box Z was bein' set onto each other by the Chief's schemes."

"But it looks like the Spade might know somethin' about the Chief an' his business, Comanche," a lean, red-headed waddy named Jack Roan growled. "Fred Morgan has been shootin' off his mouth a lot lately, callin' us thieves an' swearin' that he had trailed missin' stock from his range to ours more than once."

"Yeah, but Morgan is just a hot-headed young galoot, I figger," short, grizzled little Alf Kirk said slowly. "Shorely, Fred wouldn't be mixed up with the Chief."

"The whole mess is shore tangled up," Comanche said grimly. "An' I can say this much: Last night, when I busted up that meetin' in the cave where Wilson took me to see what the Chief was gonna do about my case, I got a couple shots at that blasted Chief. I heard him grunt, which means I hit him or come mighty close to it."

"An' this mornin', Fred Morgan's got his left arm in a sling!" cried Don Welch, a slim, sharp-eyed hombre somewhere in his early thirties.

"By thunder, this is beginnin' to

look bad fer Fred," muttered Tonk Hayden. "Even if Sycamore Crick is on his range, he had no business settin' his men onto Speck."

"There's one way to get the answer to this riddle," said Comanche. "Gid Wilson will talk once we get him to Paso Verde. Saddle up, men. I reckon the bunch of us can shoot our way through to town with our two prisoners."

"I doubt it, Comanche," Speck Holden gulped. "Morgan an' his riders ain't the only ones around. I sighted four more bunches o' fellers, right hyar on the Box Z range an' not over two miles from the house."

"We've got to get through!" Comanche snapped. "Wilson might die unless a sawbones gets hold of him. Saddle yore broncs an' git yore guns. We're goin' to Paso Verde."

"It'll take somethin' more than a passell o' skulkin' bushwhackers to stop us," cackled dumpy little Bob Gorman. "I'll start saddlin' the fastest hosses on the place while the rest o' yuh hunt up guns an' patch Speck's arm."

Gorman jumped from the porch and went trotting away as he finished. Tonk Hayden and Comanche helped Speck Holden to his feet, led him out toward the long bunk house. But they were only halfway there when Bob Gorman's voice lifted in a wail from out at the corrals.

"The hosses!" Gorman screeched, running back toward the ranch house. "Somebody left the corral gates open, an' every hoss is gone!"

Comanche spun around and started racing toward the corrals. Three corral gates left open at the same time was no accident, and suddenly a gnawing fear was hammering at Comanche as he shot along the path to the ranch house.

He lunged through the back door

and went racing through the house to the bedroom where Gid Wilson and Ab Tinker, the two prisoners, had been left.

He flung open the bedroom door, and his face was a still, white mask as he stared for a long moment at the crimson-stained bed where Gid Wilson and Ab Tinker should have been lying. But there was no one on that bed now; only the crimson spots where Gid Wilson's bullet-torn arms had rested and the ropes that had held lanky, slab-sided Ab Tinker.

CHAPTER II.

A BUSHWHACKER DIES.

COMANCHE had left his big sorrel bronc, Pablo, tethered in a clump of brush far beyond the Box Z corrals, the night before. He had done so, because he had sneaked up to the ranch house silently, wanting to capture Gid Wilson and Wilson's three cronies without a fight if possible.

The Texan got his sorrel now, rode out across the broad, green valley, and rounded up a dozen of the Box Z saddle horses which had been turned out of the corrals. Tonk Hayden and the others were waiting with hungry loops when the horses were shunted into a corral by Comanche.

Hayden's voice bawled orders, and ropes began hissing out to snare horses from the milling, snorting bunch.

"We'll be with yuh in a minute, Comanche!" old Tonk called grimly. "Wilson an' Tinker can't have much of a start. If we move fast, we can run 'em down afore they've gone ten miles."

"We'd be wastin' time to hunt 'em." Comanche's voice was hard and bitter.

He saw dusty-hatted heads jerk

sharply about as the Box Z punchers stared at him blankly.

"Say, did I hear yuh right?" shrilled Speck Holden.

Speck's wounded arm was bandaged and in a sling, but the little waddy was inside the corral, waiting for one of his pards to rope and saddle a mount for him.

"I reckon yuh heard me right," said Comanche. "The hosses that was turned out of these corrals have been scattered to the four winds. They were all shod, too."

"What's that got to do with ketchin' Ab Tinker an' Wilson?" a big, sharp-eyed puncher by the name of Hal Chilton asked sharply.

"Tinker an' Wilson will be ridin' shod hosses," Comanche answered. "So if we started out to follow sign, we'd be chasin' down bunches of our own stock."

"Comanche is right, men," groaned Tonk Hayden. "The range shore will be cluttered with sign, an' we wouldn't know which to foller which way."

"I've got to go into town an' report what happened out here last night," Comanche said grimly. "The sheriff has to know, since we've got a couple of bodies on our hands that we don't want."

The bodies Comanche referred to were those of Harve Garrett and "Tip" Lacey, two of the Chief's men who had fallen under Comanche's guns before daylight.

Hayden's grizzled head nodded. "Yeah, I reckon yuh'll have to report to the sheriff. An' yuh can bet Joe Logan's eyes are gonna bulge when he hears about the Chief an' what thet hombre's up to."

"Logan ain't to know a thing about that yet," Comanche said sharply. "Boys, we've got to have at least a little proof before we spring a story like that on anybody."

Yuh hombres remember, now, that regardless of how many questions Logan asks, yuh don't know a thing outside of the fact that yuh heard shootin' at the main house, come runnin' up, an' found me in that room with Wilson crippled, Tinker tied up, an' Harve Garrett an' Tip Lacey dead."

"Joe Logan will have big fits an' little ones if yuh try to dodge any issues with him, Comanche," Tonk Hayden protested. "He'll want to know why yuh tangled with them four."

"Leave that end of it to me," said Comanche. "I'm not ready to tell the sheriff anything yet."

"Don't worry about us lettin' anything slip," said Hayden grimly. "I see yore point, son. With this whole country ready to blow up at any minute, a lot o' crazy galoots would start accusin' each other o' bein' the Chief or belongin' to his gang if that story got out."

"Yo're plumb correct, Tonk." Comanche nodded. "Lettin' the story about the Chief out now would do a sight more harm than good. So yuh fellers keep yore lips buttoned, yore eyes peeled, an' yore guns handy. I'm ridin' to Paso Verde alone to report this oversupply of dead skunks on the Box Z."

Comanche swung down at the corral gate, stripped gear from his mount, and put the horse inside where there was feed and water. A few moments later, he was jogging away on a big, rawboned bay bronc that had, Tonk Hayden declared, more endurance than any two ordinary horses.

Comanche knew the mount under him was good, and knew that the big, tough-looking critter could run, if speed should be needed. But the Texan was hoping that no running

would be necessary, for his wounds were throbbing, his head ached horribly, and he knew that a hard, fast ride would about finish him.

He sat slumped in the saddle, letting the bay take the town trail at an easy, running walk. Comanche looked half asleep, but he was as alert as an eagle. He was not forgetting what little Speck Holden had said about sighting bunches of riders well within the bounds of the Box Z.

Comanche felt a savage anger whenever he thought of that. Those roving bands of riders were unquestionably members of the Chief's gang, either scouting for marketable stock to steal or on the hunt for Comanche, because he had upset their meeting the night before.

"If Ab Tinker hadn't worked out of them ropes an' high-tailed it with Gid Wilson, I'd have the Chief across a barrel by now," Comanche growled angrily. "Dang the luck, I should have had sense enough to leave one of the punchers on guard in that room."

Comanche was in a black mood when he rode into Paso Verde, for his mind had worked doggedly for two solid hours with the problem of finding some way of identifying the mysterious Chief.

Heads turned sharply as Comanche rode along the street, and he heard his name spoken hoarsely by staring townsmen he passed.

"Thar he is," one burly hombre growled. "Yonder is Comanche, rich ol' Harry Bradley's gun *segundo*. Yuh kin look fer trouble wherever that jasper lands."

Rage stabbed at Comanche causing him to whirl the big bay sharply and ride toward the burly hombre who had spoken. But the man wheeled with a hoarse squawk of fright and almost ripped a set of

saloon doors from their hinges in his haste to enter the building. Other men, who had been standing near the loud-mouthed fellow, darted away, cursing in alarm.

Comanche groaned, teeth gritting in helpless rage. All he had meant to do was ask that burly jasper why he had talked as he had. But, as usual, people were fleeing as if from a mad dog, and a deep-rooted loneliness welled up within the Texas fighter, bringing a hard set to his lips and a glint to his eyes. He turned the bay back along the street, realizing with a pang that he was branded as a cold killer, an out-cast among men.

His black mood grew blacker, and there was a white ring about his hard-lipped mouth when he dismounted wearily before the combination sheriff's office and jail. At such times as this, he wished that he had never been rescued from the Comanches.

Stepping toward the door of the sheriff's office, his lean right hand reaching for the latch, Comanche lurched as his boots found a loose board in the sidewalk—and something left a blazing sensation along one side of his lean neck. That same something hit the door of the sheriff's office a solid thump, leaving a round, black hole through the panel.

But Comanche was already whirling sidewise and around. His hands executed the draw which had made him one of the West's most famous gunmen. The braying voice of a rifle was hammering along the street, and Comanche's eyes, slitted, smoky crescents that were dangerously alive, stabbed across to the mouth of an alley between two buildings. His guns roared.

Sunlight touched metal, and the barely discernible tip of a rifle bar-

rel in the alley across the street snapped sharply upward, spitting smoke and flame toward the sky. Then the rifle came smashing out to the sidewalk, and after it came a tall, hump-shouldered man. He fell sprawled across the wooden sidewalk, long arms flung limply forward.

CHAPTER III.

FRIENDLY WITNESSES.

COMANCHE was the first to cross the street and kneel beside the sprawling man. Voices were lifting in a roar, and the rumble of booted feet pounding along the wooden sidewalks made a sullen sort of thunder.

Turning the fallen man over, Comanche stared down into a long, narrow face from which two small, close-set eyes stared glassily. The back-shooter's gash lips had dropped back, to show huge, crooked teeth which seemed to stick almost straight out from sore-looking gums. Across the fellow's chest ran a line of four black dots, and the faded blue shirt was swiftly turning red.

Comanche came swiftly to his feet, stepped back until a solid log wall was behind him, and watched the crowd roar to a halt before him. Shouts died swiftly, and suddenly the crowd was silent under Comanche's stony-faced gaze.

"Anybody know that back-shootin' thing there?" the Texan asked.

A low muttering began running through the crowd, and eyes shifted uneasily under Comanche's steady gaze. Then a voice lifted jarringly, and men were flung roughly aside as two hombres charged to the front.

One of them, Comanche saw instantly, was the big, husky hombre who had run into the saloon, only a few moments ago. The other fellow was a blocky, heavily built

young hombre, who had rock-hard features, two glinting, cold, black eyes, and a wide, thin mouth that was twisted into a snarl of rage. The black-eyed man's left arm was in a sling, and suddenly a tense, electric something was shooting through Comanche.

"Shore, yuh paid gun slammer, I know that man you just mowed down," the black-eyed hombre was roaring. "He happens to be one of my Spade hands, you blasted——"

"Are you Fred Morgan?" Comanche's voice, cold and chill, cut through the angry words of the other man.

"You're blamed right I'm Fred Morgan," the hard-eyed hombre roared. "An' I'm here to tell you that no hired killer is gonna fog up my riders without payin' for it."

"Yore riders are right handy at bushwhackin' folks, Morgan," Comanche drawled. "This mornin', just at daylight, yore foreman an' two others of yore crew tried to dry-gulch Speck Holden. They winged him, but he got away from 'em. An' just now, this hombre here on the sidewalk tried to shoot me between the shoulder blades. Want to take up matters where yore bunglin' crew left off, Morgan?"

Men scattered hurriedly. Morgan's face went purple, then almost white. His blocky right hand splayed above gun butt, and his head poked forward above hunched shoulders. But something seemed to run through him suddenly, something which shook him and wrenched a snarling oath from his lips.

Beside Morgan the big, shaggy-looking jasper was whispering something, trying to attract Morgan's attention.

"Yuh—yuh've got yore loop tangled, feller," the big jasper gulped.

"I'm Gyp Blalock, Spade foreman, an' I wasn't nowheres close to—er—I never had nothin' to do with what happened to Speck Holden."

"Yuh almost slipped that time, Blalock," Comanche said thinly. "Yuh almost said yuh wasn't any place close to the ford on Sycamore Creek at daylight this mornin' with Heck Norton an' Buck Ownby."

Comanche saw Fred Morgan jerk, saw surprise spread swiftly over his hard face.

"Yo're a liar, Blalock, when yuh say yuh don't know what happened to Speck," Comanche went on coldly. "Speck rode out into the ford, halted his hoss, an' leaned over, givin' the bronc rein enough to lower its head an' drink. Yuh an' yore two pards opened up on Speck from the brush, crippled him, an' lost him when he turned into thick brush."

Gyp Blalock's face was pale, and his huge, powerful hands were reaching down, trembling above gun butts. There was a wild, trapped look in his chill eyes, and the Spade foreman would have gone for his guns within a mighty few more seconds. But a harsh, authoritative voice ripped the tense silence, and gaunt, grizzled old Sheriff Joe Logan strode up, a scattergun clutched in gnarled hands.

"Fred, yuh an' Gyp Blalock watch yoreselves!" the sheriff snapped.

"It might save a heap of trouble for a lot of people if yuh let them two start somethin' now, sheriff," Comanche grated.

"It might save a heap of trouble if Logan tossed you an' the rest of them wide-loopin' Box Z coyotes into his jail," Fred Morgan came back. "My range was raided again last night. Me an' one of my riders was wounded when we tried to head

the rustlers off. The cattle went up through Blue Pass, which put 'em on Box Z range."

"Quick thinkin', feller," Comanche snapped. "But maybe I won't step over a canyon rim next time. Think that over a spell."

"Quit talkin' riddles, yuh two!" the sheriff thundered. "What happened here? Who killed Navajo Hume an' why?"

"Navajo Hume, eh?" Comanche gritted, looking down at the man he had been forced to shoot. "I was hopin' his name would be Heck Norton or Buck Ownby or Gyp Blalock. Them three bushwhackers need shootin' just as bad as this Hume jigger needed it."

Fred Morgan squalled an oath, lurched sidewise, and stabbed down for the gun at his right thigh. "Yuh can't lie about my men an' get by with it!" he roared. "Draw, blast you!"

Comanche did not attempt to draw, however. He saw what was coming, knew that Fred Morgan would never get his gun free. And Morgan did not. Sheriff Joe Logan lunged forward, jammed the barrels of his big scattergun against Morgan's body, and snarled an oath that halted the Spade owner's draw.

"I'll jail yuh, Fred, if yuh make any other fool play like that," the sheriff warned. "Now yuh calm down, an' start tellin' me what happened here."

"Comanche jest killed Navajo Hume," Morgan panted hoarsely. "He had no call to do it, that I can think of. That is, unless he aims to gun all us other ranchers out of the country so that Harry Bradley can gobble this whole range."

Comanche's mouth hardened. Fred Morgan would have had a scrap on his hands had the two of them been free to tangle. But Sher-

iff Joe Logan was alert for any such move, and his scattergun pressed harder against Morgan's middle.

"Fred, yo're actin' loco," a sharp voice called from the doorway of the building against which Comanche stood.

"What business have you got buttin' in here, White?" Morgan bawled angrily.

Comanche glanced sidewise and saw a little, bald-headed man step from the doorway of the log building which housed a grocery store.

"Yuh'll wind up in trouble onless somebody comes to yore rescue, Fred," the bald merchant said quietly. "Comanche, here, had to kill Navajo Hume."

"Had to kill him?" Morgan echoed. "What in thunder you gettin' at?"

"I was standin' in my doorway, here, watchin' Comanche start into the sheriff's office across the street yonder," White said steadily. "All of a sudden a rifle bellered right in that alley between my store an' the restaurant. I seen Comanche whirl round, an' the next thing I knowed he was shootin'. Navajo Hume come topplin' out o' the alley an' fell acrost the sidewalk."

"That's right, sheriff," a voice called from the crowd. "I seen the whole thing, an' so did a couple dozen others. Hume tried to bushwhack Comanche."

The speaker strode forward as he talked. He was Rufe Doyle—a tall, hawk-faced hombre with piercing, keen gray eyes. Doyle was a trader—an hombre who would buy anything under the sun, if he could resell his purchase at a profit. Comanche knew the trader, having met him the day before.

"I don't believe such stuff!" Fred Morgan snarled. "Rufe Doyle,

you'll sweat for this trick. So will you, White. I'll——"

"How about us others that seen the whole thing?" a voice interrupted. "Rufe an' White are both tellin' the truth."

A regular bellow of voices affirmed that statement, and Fred Morgan looked uneasily about.

"Well, are yuh satisfied now, Fred?" the sheriff snapped.

The Spade owner gulped, then glowered at Comanche. But before he could answer hoofs pounded along the street, and a small, bat-eared hombre on a lathered dun pony came skidding to a halt beyond the edge of the crowd.

"Sheriff, come a-runnin'!" the little hombre yelled wildly. "I rode down to the mouth of Silver Canyon, a while ago, lookin' fer stray hosses an' found Gid Wilson an' Ab Tinker hangin' from a sycamore tree. They've both been hung, then shot to doll rags!"

CHAPTER IV.

COMANCHE HAS A HUNCH.

FOR three weeks, Comanche was forced to stay out of the saddle because of the thigh wound he had received the night he fought it out with Gid Wilson, Harve Garrett, and Tip Lacey. The bullet gash in his scalp and the one across his left ribs healed quickly enough and would not have kept him out of the saddle at any time. But that hip wound was a different proposition. The bullet had plowed through thick, tough muscles, and those muscles healed slowly.

To make matters worse, Sheriff Joe Logan was at the Box Z every day of the first week, pounding at Comanche hour after hour, openly accusing the Texas fighter of holding back information.

"Yore story of havin' found out that Wilson an' them other three was rustlin' Box Z beef an' callin' a show-down with 'em don't jibe with other happenin's of that same night," the sheriff would argue over and over. "Three strangers went to Doc Osborn with leg wounds—one had a busted leg—the mornin' after yore ruckus here at the ranch. Fred Morgan's range was raided that same night. Fred an' one of his men was wounded. Speck Holden got winged. I want to know what happened."

The sheriff was openly hostile when Comanche refused to change the story he had told. Comanche had not lied in the least, for Gid Wilson and those two others had been guilty of helping to rustle Box Z cattle. But Comanche had given no hint that a mysterious hombre known as the "Chief" was directing a big gang of hard-case killers against every decent outfit in the whole county.

Comanche's nerves were raw by the end of that first week, and he was seriously considering sneaking away into the mountains to escape the pestering sheriff. Then rustling broke out in the southern end of the county, and the sheriff left for the scene of trouble.

Comanche drew a sigh of relief at the news and reckoned he would get some rest at last. But he got only one day's rest, for Rufe Doyle began dropping in daily to wheedle and question in a sly, roundabout manner.

There were times when Comanche could barely keep from sending Doyle off the place. But he knew that such a move would only feed fuel to the sheriff's suspicions. Comanche knew well enough that Logan had set Doyle onto him.

"Shore, Logan set that long-

geared penny squeezer onto yuh," Tonk Hayden growled, when Comanche voiced his belief. "An' yuh can bet that Doyle ain't wastin' all this time fer nothin'. Logan wants to know what yo're keepin' back bad enough to pay Doyle good money to find out."

"The sheriff figures the Box Z knows who hung an' bullet-riddled Wilson an' Tinker," Comanche grated. "He kept harpin' on that, an' Rufe Doyle has mentioned it every day."

"That Chief jasper had Gid an' Ab strung up," Tonk snorted.

"Sure," Comanche agreed. "I learned enough about the Chief an' his methods, the night I tangled with him, to know that he has blunders hung an' shot. But we're gettin' blamed for Wilson's an' Tinker's deaths."

Comanche was grim-lipped and sunken-eyed from long hours of suffering and from the strain of sitting idly around the house while the thigh wound healed. Rufe Doyle's daily presence helped matters not at all, and by the time his wound had healed, Comanche could barely stand the sight of the hawk-faced, wheedling trader. But he did manage to keep in touch with what was going on in the county through the gabby Doyle.

Rustling had stopped on the Box Z, since Tonk Hayden and the other punchers rode in a bunch and rode heavily armed. But other ranches were not so fortunate, and Rufe Doyle told almost daily of ranchmen complaining of missing cattle. And Comanche learned through Doyle that Fred Morgan was doing a lot of talking in Paso Verde against the whole Box Z crew.

Morgan had gone so far as to start the story that the Box Z was

responsible for the whole county's troubles, and admitted openly that he had given his men orders to shoot any Box Z man they sighted on the Spade range.

On hearing that, Comanche immediately sent grizzled little Bob Gorman and two other Box Z men to Paso Verde, with instructions to learn whether or not Doyle had stretched facts in the telling. What the three punchers reported deepened the lines of worry in Comanche's lean face and brought a cold glint of anger to his eyes.

"Doyle didn't tell it strong enough, much less stretch things," Gorman said angrily. "Comanche, us three was glared at like we was mad coyotes wherever we went. One barkeep refused to sell us beer, an' fellers that we've knowed fer years refused to speak to us."

Comanche sent for Tonk Hayden, who looked grimly worried when he heard how the three Box Z men had been shunned in town.

"There's gonna be trouble, looks like," the old hombre growled. "But I still can't see Fred's point."

"Who in blazes is Fred Morgan?" Comanche grated. "What I mean is, how long has he been in this country? What does anybody know about him?"

"Fred was raised here," Hayden answered quickly. "His dad, old Seth Morgan, was as fine a man as ever lived. But Seth spoiled Fred somethin' turrible."

"A plumb petted colt, eh?" Comanche prompted.

"An' then some!" snorted Tonk. "Even as a kid, Fred had no friends to speak of, because he was so swell-headed an' uppity that other kids couldn't stand him. After he growed up, men left him alone, too, because he was overbearin' an' hard-headed."

"Was Morgan ever into any scrapes of any sort?" Comanche asked.

"Nary a one." Old Tonk shrugged. "Fred don't use booze, an' the only trouble he ever had was ordinary scraps an' squabbles, because some feller wouldn't see things his way. All I can figure, Comanche, is that Fred is soured an' on his ear. He's a prideful young buck an' made his brags three years ago—right after his ol' man passed on—that he'd be cattle king o' this hyar country. Since then— Say, what's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" Comanche yelped. "Tonk, for Pete's sakes, let me get this straight. Yuh mean Fred Morgan set out to become king of this country?"

"Why, yes, he did." The Box Z manager was staring in amazement at the badly excited Comanche.

"But what's wrong with that, son?" the old fellow went on. "Fred bullied a couple o' small owners into sellin' out to him, but he paid top prices fer their spreads an' shore didn't use no rough stuff."

"Why in thunder didn't I know this before?" Comanche grated. "Tonk, the whole case is as plain as the nose on yore face. Morgan wants to be king of this county. He's a hard-headed jasper who has always had his way an' aims to keep on havin' it. Dagnation, man, Fred Morgan is the Chief!"

Tonk Hayden looked utterly flabbergasted. But slowly a look of grim understanding replaced the surprise in his keen old eyes. His face was somewhat drawn and pale as he nodded jerkily.

"I—I'm afraid Fred has finally overstepped hisself," the old fellow gulped. "Kip Zane, who owned this place afore Harry Bradley bought it, allus said that unless Fred Morgan

got some sense knocked into him the boy would do somethin' plumb mean, sooner or later. But I still can't hardly believe it. Ol' Seth Morgan was a fine, honest man. It don't seem reasonable that his son would turn killer an' thief."

"It wouldn't be the first time a pampered, swelled-headed jasper who had never learned to respect the rights of others got the notion that he could rule the roost," Comanche snorted. "But I feel like I'm gettin' some place now, Tonk. Have the boys fetch Pablo in to-night an' grain him good. I'm ridin' to-morrow mornin'."

CHAPTER V.

TRAPPED.

THE sun was just edging over the eastern horizon when Comanche led Pablo, saddled and bridled, from the Box Z corral. But early as it was, Rufe Doyle was already there, hawkish features showing excitement as he eyed Comanche.

Comanche was grim-lipped and inwardly raging, for he had wanted to get away without Doyle's seeing him. Old Tonk Hayden and the other Box Z hands were also angry, for Doyle was becoming worse than a pest these days.

"So yuh feel like ridin'?" Doyle asked, as Comanche came through the gate.

"Who, me?" The Texan seemed vastly surprised. "I wouldn't ride a hoss, Doyle. I'm just goin' for a little stroll an' thought Pablo would like to come along."

Doyle's features turned crimson as the Box Z hands guffawed. "Feelin' right pert, too, ain't you?" he grumbled. "Dang it, I only asked a civil question, Comanche."

"Yuh've been askin' so many questions lately that I'm plumb

dizzy tryin' to think up answers," the Texas puncher snorted. "Yuh may as well call it a bad job, Rufe, an' go tell Sheriff Logan yuh couldn't do the chore he set yuh out to do."

Doyle's face went redder than ever, and for a minute his keen, hard eyes flashed angrily. Then he grinned sheepishly, shrugged bony shoulders, and laughed a short, choppy laugh.

"So yuh fellers savvied my game all the time, huh?" he asked mildly. "No wonder yuh've all been about as talkative as clams. But you better make up your mind to do some talkin', because Sheriff Joe Logan got back last night, an' he's shore proddy."

"What's bitin' that badge-toter now?" Comanche asked gruffly.

"Well, I ain't no walkin' newspaper," the trader grunted, "but I reckon Logan wouldn't mind me sayin' what's wrong, since the whole town of Paso Verde knows it by now."

"What are yuh drivin' at?" Tonk Hayden asked sharply.

"Why, the sheriff collared some of them fellers that was about to war each other down in the south end of the county," Doyle said dryly, "and under some mighty stiff questionin', danged if them fellers didn't admit that Comanche had hired 'em to stir up runctions among the peaceable ranches down there."

"What?" Comanche and most of the Box Z hands chorused in the same breath.

Rufe Doyle grinned tightly, evidently enjoying the rôle of one who brought important news. "Way yuh fellers have acted about talkin' to me, I hadn't ought to tell you a thing," he grumbled. "But, dang it, Comanche, I sort o' like you. And I wish you'd forget—you and the

others, too—that I rode out here this mornin' an' said anything. Joe Logan is likely on his way here right now—with handcuffs."

"Handcuffs?" Comanche barked. "Doyle, are yuh tryin' to tell me that the sheriff aims to arrest me?"

"If I was the feller Joe Logan figgers has stirred up a batch of trouble between ranchers in this county, I'd get some place where I wouldn't be too easy found until that sheriff cooled off," Doyle said slowly, and with a wise wink of one sharp eye he turned to stride hastily toward his waiting mount.

Doyle went up into the saddle and spurred away before Comanche or any of the others could think of a question. The lanky trader avoided the trail which led to town, and spurred his bronc into a swift pace, heading for a fringe of timber along a creek which cut through the broad valley.

"By thunder, Comanche, was Doyle talkin' straight or jist runnin' a sandy?" Tonk Hayden gasped finally.

"Doyle would be afraid to tell a tall tale like that, unless there was some truth to it," Comanche answered grimly. "But the whole thing is plain to me, amigos. The Chief is framin' me, aimin' to get me jailed or run out of the country before I can nose any deeper into his business."

"What are yuh gonna do?" Speck Holden asked uneasily. "Logan is a stubborn ol' walloper. If he gits yuh behind bars, yuh'll have a job ever convincin' him of anything."

"Especially since we ain't told the sheriff what's what, before this." Comanche nodded. "Well, it looks like I'll have to ride the owl-hoot trail for a spell, boys. An' for Pete's sakes don't let on that yuh know anything, when the sheriff does

show up. It was pretty decent of Doyle to give me a tip."

Comanche gazed uneasily down the trail which led to Paso Verde, listening only absently to the quick promises of the Box Z hands that they would not say anything to give Rufe Doyle away. Snatching Pablo's reins, Comanche swung quickly up into the saddle and spurred down the path to the ranch-house kitchen door. He dismounted, darted inside, where Woe Him was elbow-deep in a sudsy tub of break-fast dishes.

"Sling me a pack of grub together, Woe Him," Comanche called. "Bacon, flour, salt, fryin' pan, coffeepot, an' tin cup. Hurry it up, fella, for I've got to get out of here in a hurry."

"I fixe!" The little Chinaman nodded, and reached for a towel.

Comanche hurried on into the other part of the house, going to the room he had used for three weeks. The Texan's mind was racing, and a burning rage at the mysterious Chief's latest move was taking hold of him.

He moved speedily about, gathering clothing and blankets, rolling them into a compact bundle and lashing it with a piece of cotton rope. By the time he returned to the kitchen, Woe Him had a flour sack bundle ready for him. Comanche snatched the sack, nodded his thanks, and shoved through the back door to find Tonk Hayden and the others waiting for him.

"We'll try to stall the sheriff off when he gits here, Comanche," Tonk growled. "Joe's hard to fool, but maybe we——"

"Don't try foolin' him," Comanche cut in. "When he shows up an' asks for me, tell him I left. Show him the direction I took, an' let him follow my sign."

"He might snag yuh, Comanche!" Bob Gorman objected.

"I'll look out fer that," Comanche said grimly. "You hombres keep yoreselves plumb in the clear by answerin' the sheriff's questions prompt an' truthful. Tell him I took a bed roll an' grub with me an' didn't say when I'd be back."

"That's too blamed much like lettin' yuh down in a pinch," big Hal Chilton growled. "Comanche, us fellers will back yuh to the last ditch. We'll fool that sheriff somehow."

"Don't try any foolin'!" Comanche warned. "If yuh do, yuh might get tripped up. Then yuh'd all land in jail an' the Chief would have a fine chance to strip this range. Do as I say. I'll drop in some evenin' before long to find out how things are goin'."

Before the uneasy punchers could argue, Comanche was in the saddle, sending Pablo away from the place at a long gallop. He had tied his bed roll and food supplies behind the saddle as he talked, and now his keen eyes swung out along the town trail once more. There was no sign of any one approaching, and the Texan nodded in grim satisfaction as he headed Pablo for a great, frowning ridge across the valley.

"The Chief is smart, I've got to admit," he muttered. "But we'll try a few tricks ourselves, Pablo. If Fred Morgan ain't the Chief, then I'll eat this saddle I'm ridin'."

Pablo struck the pine-covered slope and started up through the cool green timber at a swinging walk. Comanche was careful to keep on ground that would leave plenty of plain sign for the next two hours. Then he began watching for just the right sort of country, and when he found it his course became an erratic weaving, doubling, twist-

ing course which left a jumbled sign that few men could have figured out. But Comanche was an expert at sign-reading himself, and knew that so far he had not left a completely hopeless trail.

He saw twisting gray rim rocks along a deep, somber-looking canyon off to his left, and worked his way to the barren rim over the roughest, brushiest ground he could find. Once on the rim rock he rode along slowly a faint, mirthless grin touching his lips as he realized that the keenest of eyes could never trace his bronc's passage along that granite path.

Comanche held to the rim for a half mile and was about to turn off into a thick clump of low-growing cedars when the faint, uneasy bawling of cattle came lifting up from the dark, timbered canyon below.

The Texan stopped, head tilted as he listened to that plaintive bawling. This was Box Z range, and he knew well enough that the bawling cattle somewhere below him were penned. Yet there was no reason for Box Z stuff to be penned in this wild, lonely canyon, and Comanche was suddenly alert as he sent Pablo on along the rim.

The bawling grew steadily louder, and Comanche eased back from the rim, so that he could not be seen from below. When he was directly above the sound of uneasy cattle he dismounted, left his sorrel in a clump of cedars, and stole cautiously forward on foot. He removed his hat, flattened out along the barren rim rock, and peered cautiously over.

Comanche found himself looking straight down a dizzy slant of granite bluff into a circular brush-and-pole corral which had been recently constructed. Inside the corral,

gaunt steers milled and bawled piteously.

There were two hayracks there, but they were empty. A small stream, evidently coming from a spring at the base of the cliff, ran through one corner of the corral. But the starving steers had milled over the little stream until it was only a series of ugly mudholes.

Then Comanche saw the brand on several of the milling, starving brutes, and a snarl hissed through his locked teeth. The brand was Fred Morgan's Spade.

"Spade cattle penned here on the Box Z means another frame-up," Comanche growled, coming to his feet. "Morgan aims to tip the sheriff off about these cattle bein' here, I'll bet. But the skunk might have the decency to feed the critters."

Having seen no sign of men about the brush corral or the rugged, twisting canyon in which it was located, Comanche did not mask his movements as he mounted Pablo and hunted until he found a game trail slanting down a steep, brush-grown slope.

He struck the canyon about a quarter mile below the hidden corral, galloped back to the inclosure, and sat for a moment looking at the gaunt and weary steers. The cattle milled and bawled restlessly, and Comanche felt a pang of pity as he realized that they were starving within sight of lush green grass which grew along the canyon floor.

"I still don't savvy why them steers ain't been fed," the Texan grated, and kned his bronc toward the wire gate.

Without dismounting he leaned over, hand reaching for the wire loop which held the gatepost in place. But suddenly he froze in that position, for a snarling oath ripped at him from behind, and he

heard the dull, ominous sound of gun hammers being drawn to full cock.

"Freeze, Comanche!" a snarling voice ordered. "The Chief figgered to ketch a Box Z man or two with this bawlin'-cattle trap, but he didn't reckon on ketchin' big game like yuh. Elevate, or I'll blow yore backbone apart."

Comanche snarled under his breath, mentally kicking himself for his own stupidity. Since the unseen gunman had referred to this corral as a "bawlin'-cattle trap," Comanche understood perfectly how he had been fooled into riding into it.

The cattle had been starved purposely, so that their bawling would attract any Box Z hand who happened to ride this end of the range. That the trap had been set for days there was no doubt, for Comanche saw now where the animals had eaten the withered brush which covered the poles of the corral fence.

"There's two of us keepin' guns trained on yuh, Comanche, so jist make a fool play if yuh feel lucky," that same deep, snarling tone came sharply. "The Chief has said fetch yuh in alive, in case we got the chance. But if yuh was to git ringy, we'd kill yuh in a jiffy."

"If the Chief wasn't comin' to the new meetin' place at noon, Buck, I'd say drill this skunk right now," another, thinner voice snarled. "But it's jest noon now, an' I reckon we kin handle the buzzard till we git him to the shack. The Chief ought to give us a bonus fer this piece o' work."

"Dismount, Comanche, then lay face down on the ground, with yore arms stretched out ahead of yuh as far as they will go," came the thick voice of the jasper who had been called "Buck."

Comanche felt hope run out of

him as water would run from an upset pail. If he ever let these two get his guns——

Wham! A Colt blared, and a slug whistled dangerously close to Comanche's ear.

"Do what yo're told, yuh Texas whelp, or the next slug will cut some meat off yore bones," Buck ordered hoarsely.

White with rage, Comanche swung a leg cautiously over the saddle pommel, dismounting to lower himself to the ground as he had been ordered to do. But some slight sound, or perhaps his keen ability to sense danger, warned him that some one was just behind him.

Comanche tried instinctively to jerk around, hands starting a swift, sure descent toward his holstered guns. He did manage to lurch far enough around to glimpse a lathlike, hump-shouldered figure rushing at him.

Then Comanche saw the glittering arc of a descending gun barrel, and tried desperately to dodge. But the gun barrel caught him solidly along the temple, and he crashed forward, limp and senseless.

CHAPTER VI.

GUNS TALK.

COMANCHE felt as if the whole right of his skull had been caved in. His nerves shuddered under the terrific pain, and his brain swam crazily. Yet he had wits enough to lie perfectly still when he first became aware of the throbbing in his head.

Through barely slitted lids he stared up at a steeply pitched roof, which had not been sealed. Then his eyes rolled sidewise, and he saw a rough log wall, through which a window had been cut. Beyond the

window was a door, which was closed and barred.

"What if I did wallop him hard?" a harsh voice lashed out suddenly. "The blasted snake is tricky as can be, an' yuh know it. He ain't hurt much, I tell yuh."

"I kept him busy by talkin' while yuh snuck up behind him," Buck's thick, rumbling tones answered. "But I didn't tell yuh ter bust his skull in. If he was to die, the Chief would give us fits, for the Chief has got a special way he wants to handle Comanche."

Comanche cautiously turned his head and saw his two captors for the first time. He felt his nerves tighten and forgot the pain in his bruised temple as he stared through barely open lids at a squat, apish cutthroat who sat hunkered at an old table in the center of the room. Across from this hombre was a tall, hump-shouldered man with a beak nose and ratty little green eyes.

Comanche recognized the evil pair instantly, although he had never actually seen them before. Tonk Hayden and the other Box Z hands had described Buck Ownby and "Heck" Norton often enough in the past three weeks, for Comanche to have a clear mental picture of what the pair looked like.

He knew now that the apelike jasper with the broad, brutal face and muddy-looking eyes was Buck Ownby, and the hairless, hump-shouldered fellow with the beak nose and green eyes was Heck Norton. Then Comanche forgot the pair momentarily as he looked past them at a partition which ran across the room.

The partition reached only part way up to the rafters, yet it was high enough to have reached the ceiling had the log house ever been

finished inside. But what brought a sudden tense feeling to Comanche was sight of the door which had been cut into the partition. In the center panel of that door a small square hole had been recently sawed.

He had seen one other such square hole cut in a partition, and his nerves tightened at the memory. The night, three weeks ago now, when he had been mistaken for a nosey, thieving range bum and taken to a meeting where the mysterious Chief was to decide just what to do with him, Comanche had stood in a great, vaulted cavern with a bunch of hard-case men who took orders from the Chief they did not even know. And across the cavern had run a partition, with a small square hole cut into it. The Chief had spoken through that small opening, keeping himself completely hidden.

Comanche would remember the Chief's flat, toneless voice to his dying day. There had been something sinister and threatening in it. No word lifted or fell above or below another as the bandit leader had spoken. It was a trick, of course, a perfect job of disguising the Chief's natural voice.

Comanche found himself wondering suddenly how long it would be until that sinister voice came through the little square hole yonder in the partition door. The thought jerked the Texan back to his immediate problems, and his hooded eyes turned on Norton and Ownby once more.

He saw his Stetson, shell-studded belts, and holstered guns lying on the table between the two men who had captured him. He saw, too, that Norton and Ownby were looking in his direction, and wondered if they had seen him moving, or had

noticed that his eyes were not entirely closed.

But he soon discovered that the pair were not uneasy, for they turned their attention to a pile of greasy-looking cooked meat and skillet bread which had no doubt come from a saddlebag not long ago.

"D'yuh reckon we ought to tie that buzzard up afore he wakes up?" Heck Norton asked.

Ownby shrugged. "There's two of us, we've got his fangs pulled, an' we're between him an' the door. What's the sense in tyin' him? When the Chief gits hyar, he kin decide what to do with the blasted gun-slammer."

"Ol' Harry Bradley will be huntin' a new gun *segundo* fer all them ranches he owns," the hairless, beady-eyed Norton snickered. "Yuh kin bet yore boots that this is trail's end fer Comanche."

"An' the purty part is, we've still got our bawlin'-cattle trap to ketch Tonk Hayden or some o' them other Box Z fools with," Buck Ownby chuckled. "When we git some o' them fellers up to that corral, drill 'em, an' then ride to town an' fetch the sheriff out, the hull country will think the Box Z is on the rustle."

"On top o' that, Comanche will be out o' the way," Heck Norton growled. "That cuss is pizen with guns, an' I hope the Chief finishes him off plenty pronto."

Comanche knew that he would never live to see the sunset, if he fell into the hands of the Chief.

"I've got to get my guns, settle accounts with them two snakes, an' then try to snag the Chief when he shows up here," Comanche thought grimly. "But how am I gonna get to my guns without stoppin' a peck of lead?"

That was indeed a problem. Ownby and Norton would shoot him down, if he leaped to his feet and tried to charge them. They were busy eating, but no man could reach that table before those two quick-trigger jaspers would start shooting.

But Comanche had to reach his guns if he expected to keep on living, and his churning brain formed and rejected plans in rapid succession.

Suddenly a faint hint of a smile touched the Texan's hard lips, and his hooded eyes changed from blue to a roily, smoky gray. His lips began moving, and from them poured a string of growled-out words which brought Heck Norton and Buck Ownby leaping to their feet.

The words had a singsong sort of sound, for he was actually repeating a Comanche Indian war chant. Having been raised by the Indians, Comanche had spoken their tongue a good many years before he knew a single English word.

"Wh-what's got into that coyote?" Ownby gulped. "What's he sayin'?"

"He's singin' a Injun song, that's what he's doin'," snarled Norton. "The blasted fool is loco!"

"An' yo're to blame fer hittin' him too hard," Ownby rasped. "The Chief will make yuh sweat fer this. He wanted the pleasure o' makin' this Comanche cuss squirm afore he finished him off."

"Take that bucket over yonder, go down to the crick, an' fetch some water," Norton snorted. "I'll show yuh whether that cuss is hurt or not. He's jist daft, that's all."

Buck Ownby cursed thickly, crossed the room in slogging strides, and snatched a battered zinc bucket from a little bench. He walked to the door, flung the bar up and back,

then yanked the door open and disappeared outside. Comanche's chant lifted to a wild shouting, and Heck Norton came charging down the room, snarling oaths at every stride.

"Shet up that caterwaulin', yuh coyote!" Norton yelled. "I'll kick — Hey, what the — Help!"

The last word came in a wild yell, for Comanche's lean hands had flashed out, grasped Heck Norton by the bony shins. Comanche shot up from the floor in a single, powerful lunge. Heck Norton crashed over backward, screaming oaths and clawing frantically at holstered guns. Comanche darted down the room, snatched his own blued-steel guns from their holsters on the table, and spun sidewise just as red death speared at him from the corner where he had lain not long ago.

Comanche heard Buck Ownby's wild shouting outside, and glimpsed the big killer streaking toward the shack at top speed. Comanche felt the wind of two more slugs passing his lowered head, and then he thumb-flicked the knurled hammers of his own weapons for the first time. The big guns bucked in his hands, and from down the room came a choked, bubbly moan. Heck Norton had killed his last man.

And then Buck Ownby hurtled through the door, a spitting Colt in each huge fist.

"This is for what yuh tried to do to Speck Holden!" Comanche yelled, and fired right and left.

But a slug had burned skin from Comanche's left cheek just as he triggered, causing him to miss.

He saw Buck Ownby scuttle sidewise, and felt two slugs tear past his face as he, too, shifted. Then Comanche fired again, and watched Buck Ownby lean out slowly from

the wall, a dazed, frightened look crossing his brutal face.

Comanche watched lynx-eyed, suspecting a trick. But Ownby was past all treachery now. The apish killer sobbed one bitter oath, then struck the floor face down, booted feet twitching briefly.

Straightening, Comanche rammed the spent shells from his guns and moved back to the table where his belts and holsters lay. He strapped the belts about his waist, settled the holsters, reloaded his guns, and slid them back into soft, hand-fitted sheaths.

Then the Texas waddy walked across the room, grasped Buck Ownby, and turned the squat body over. Ownby's eyes were open and sightless, and two red spots just above his heart told the story.

Comanche walked on to where Heck Norton lay sprawled face up. One slug had caught him in the throat, and another had struck into his cheek. Comanche shrugged, walked over to the door, closing and barring it.

"Now, if the Chief wasn't close enough to hear that shootin', maybe I'll make him sorry he caught me in his trap." Comanche's voice was low-toned, touched with a guttural accent which came from his life with the Indians who had taken him when he was too small to remember his own parents.

He crossed the room now in quick, lithe strides, flung the partition door open, and stepped out into a little lean-to kitchen. He nodded when he saw a back door which opened out on a brushy stretch of canyon.

"So yuh can sneak right in the back way, can yuh, Mr. Chief, without yore men seein' yuh?" Comanche growled. "Well, this is once

yuh'll get somethin' yuh didn't bargain for when yuh set a trap."

Comanche moved back a few paces, closed the partition door, then walked over to an old, long unused kitchen stove and hunkered down beside it. He had been sitting there perhaps twenty minutes when his keen ears caught the sound of a cautious step outside the lean-to.

A moment later the back door shuddered, and Comanche saw a strip of daylight span the rough flooring. Then a man stepped into the room, closed the door softly, and stole forward on tiptoe.

Comanche's breath caught and held as he stared at the hombre who had entered, although he had expected to see him. Fred Morgan was there in the little kitchen, husky shoulders crouched over, hands resting on gun butts as he approached the partition door.

Comanche's eyes changed again from blue to smoky gray, and he was suddenly lifting himself, to stand poised and ready to strike down at those deadly guns.

Fred Morgan peered through the square hole in the partition's door, and from his throat came a wild shout at what he saw. "Buck! Heck!" he yelped. "What——"

"They're not likely to hear yuh, Morgan." Comanche's voice, again guttural, dangerously calm, ripped through the Spade owner's words.

Fred Morgan spun jerkily, and gasping oaths as his bulging eyes stabbed across the kitchen and fastened on Comanche's lean, masklike face.

"You!" Morgan choked. "So that's it, eh? The boys caught you an'——"

"They caught me, Morgan, sure," Comanche said flatly. "But the same trap yuh had 'em catch me in

has caught you. Yo're through givin' murder orders to yore hand-picked killers an' playin' the mysterious Chief. This time, Morgan, yore gang isn't here to do yore fight-in' for yuh."

Comanche felt a fierce, wild something play along his finely tuned nerves. Fred Morgan was crouching, face a twitching, bleak mask of rage. The Spade owner meant to draw, meant to fight it out! Comanche knew that as he watched the flashing hot eyes, saw the Spade owner's hands poise, fingers splayed and twitching, above gun butts.

It was an old, grim story to the gaunt, smoky-eyed Texan. He had seen desperate men cornered before, knew that to warn Morgan, tell him to leave those guns alone, would simply be a waste of breath.

Comanche shifted in a lithe, silent tread, stepping clear of the stove, putting himself completely out in the open. But as his weight came down upon the old flooring a rotted board snapped with a dull, brittle sound.

He felt himself lurching forward, and saw that Fred Morgan was taking advantage of that moment to draw. Morgan's hands went down in a flashing, practiced draw that was almost unbelievably fast.

The Texas fighter ripped at his own guns, but could not use them, since he was falling, lurching wildly to free his foot from the broken floor. Red streamers of blazing death stabbed at Comanche as his lean body twisted down and sideways.

He felt the wind of a bullet on his face, heard another rip across the boards as he struck the floor on one side. He felt sharp pain as his ankle twisted in the hole through which his foot had dropped.

Morgan's voice lifted in a profane

shout of triumph. The Spade owner's guns were roaring again. But Comanche, knowing what to expect, had flung himself sidewise, wrenching his trapped foot free. He felt the searing bite of a bullet skimming across his left thigh, and felt the burn of a second bullet that brushed across the top of his right shoulder.

He jerked his lean legs up, levered to his feet in a single, catlike movement. Through the dimness of the room he saw Morgan's squat figure moving swiftly along a far wall.

Comanche's guns swiveled, black muzzles following that shifting, tricky target. The Texan was letting the gun hammers slip from beneath his thumbs when a slug caught him in the right thigh, knocking him off balance, almost upsetting him.

"Got you!" Morgan yelled, and came charging down the room, his guns stabbing forward for a sure shot.

Comanche knew that his life hung by the thinnest of threads. He knew that he must fire without waiting to get his balance if he was to escape death.

Desperately he twisted his lurching body, slapped at a knurled gun hammer in a swift, sure stroke. The big gun in his hand thundered, kicked back against his lean palm. Fred Morgan, almost upon him, suddenly reeled backward, triggering two slugs toward the ceiling before the heavy guns slid from his limp fingers.

Comanche stood for an instant, breathing heavily, realizing that he had escaped by the narrowest margin. Fred Morgan had struck the creaky old flooring, and was lying there in a limp, still huddle.

The Texas fighter moved now, stepping swiftly across the lean-to. He shoved the partition door open. Light from the other room streamed in upon Fred Morgan, who lay just as he had fallen. A crimson stream ran in a slow trickle from the Spade owner's thick brown hair, to form a glistening pool upon the warped floor.

Holstering his guns, Comanche stooped and turned Morgan over. The Spade owner was not dead. A bullet had split his scalp along the left side, stunning him.

Comanche snarled angrily at his discovery, then shrugged. "Maybe it's best that I only creased yuh," he growled down at the senseless man. "This way, yuh can tell yore own story to Sheriff Joe Logan when he puts the pressure on yuh."

Comanche lifted the blocky, heavy man, carried him outside, and found Pablo tied with the two horses that Heck Norton and Buck Ownby had used. Humming a range tune, he took a lariat rope from Heck Norton's saddle, cut it into convenient lengths, then lifted Morgan and began lashing him to the hull.

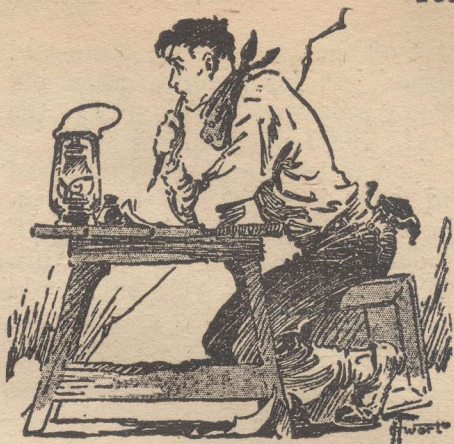
"Well, this winds up our little ball of yarn here in New Mexico, Pablo," Comanche said, as he mounted the sorrel a few moments later. "We'll go turn them hungry steers loose, then take this two-legged Morgan skunk in an' turn him over to the sheriff. After that, feller, we'll be driftin' back to Texas, to see if Harry Bradley has got any more work cut out for us."

It shore was a lucky thing that Comanche stumbled into that cattle trap. If he hadn't, the Chief would still be ridin' the range. As it is—waal, don't miss the next story about the young Texas gun fighter in next week's issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

Quite A Button

By Phil Squires

Author of "Old Stump," etc.



More letters from
ELWORTHY "HINGES" HOLLISTER,
tenderfoot cowboy.

Magpie, N. M.
Miss Elizabeth Tomison,
Midridge, Mo.

DEAR LIZ: Tell mom not to worry about me riding any brones or gitting shot at for a while anyways because we are staying in town a few days, jest kinder resting up, tell her.

How come me in jail here with old Spike, I will explane from the beginning. Old Spike is my favrit frend of the cowboys, but seems like he run with a wild bunch for a whiles some years ago, but seen the arrow of his ways and turned honist. So ever sense, them yoodlums has been after him, and about two months ago three of them tried to kill him because he would not join up with them robbing banks and so on, and he had to shoot the red face one and I throwed an ax at the other two but missed and they got away.

So then they burnt brands on some of Old Man Teal's yearlin's aiming to lay it onto old Spike, and Old Man Teal brung the sheriff to arrest him, but old Spike did not hanker to be arrested for what he

never done, so I grabbed a shotgun and kinder run a whizzer on them, telling them it was loaded with buck-shot when not even loaded at all, and run them off. Then I told old Spike and old Frosty the boss how I had saw these two yoodlums branding Teal's yearlin's theirownselfs over on Jackass Mesa, and they went to town to kinder explane to the sheriff.

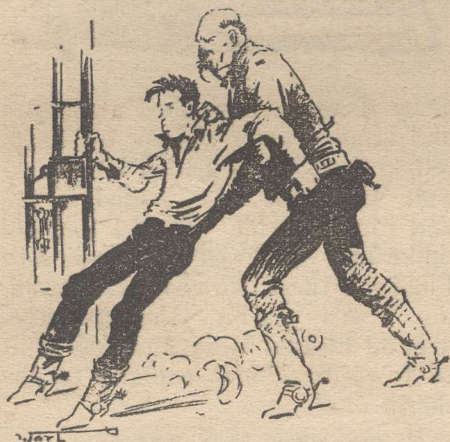
It was while they was gone that them two yoodlums kinder waylade me and tried to shoot me, but the bullets lodged in your box of taffy instid, spoiling the taffy but no meat. How come them shooting at me, it was to keep me from telling off on them about seeing them branding the yearlin's.

So when Spike and Frosty did not come back for a week and the other hands off some place with the cattle and me not doing much good snapping out brones without old Spike to help me ketch and saddle, I lit out for town myownself to see what has happen to old Spike and Frosty. If I told old Ben where I was going he would try to stop me, so I saddled old Jewlip and snuck out, not even telling him I was going, much less where.

It is your fault for pestering me about burros, because I had kinder

bent off the road chasing some wild burros jest for practice when old Frosty rode apast on his way to the ranch, and I plum missed him.

I got to town and heard they had old Spike in soke, so I hunted up the sheriff to git him out, and Sheriff Radcliff says no, he could not turn old Spike out jest yet, but would do the next best thing and put me in there to keep him company.



The sheriff says he would put me in there to keep Spike company.

Now, Liz, it is no use your r'aring about it, because it is no disgrace when you are not guilty of anything much. What I say is that if a man like Spike Upchurch, which is fair and square with ever'body, is worth putting in jail it's a honor to git put in there with him. But kinder unhandy, because old Spike says old Frosty left town jest a-faunchin' to yamp them two yoodlums hisownself and Spike is afraid he'll git his dang fool self killed.

That's what he told the sheriff this morning, but Sheriff Radcliff says no, Old Man Teal has promised to bring them two yoodlums in peaceable, which is why he ain't out after 'em hisownself.

"When Teal brings 'em in," he

says, "we'll have a hearing before Judge Willis and git to the bottom of all this."

"Like blazes!" says old Spike. "I know them two skunks. They ain't goin' to appear before no judge unless somebody drags 'em there with a rope. They'll dry-gulch Old Man Teal, old Frosty, or anybody else that goes after 'em. Give me three days freedom, Rad, an' I'll run 'em in for you."

"Yeah? Supposin' they dry-gulch you?"

"That'll be my lookout," says old Spike.

"I'd like to do it, Spike," says Sheriff Radcliff, "but I promised old Frosty I'd keep you locked up till we git them two fellers in custody. He's afraid they're layin' out to murder you."

"They'll murder old Frosty, if somebody don't corral 'em! I'd hate to have to tear down your calaboose, Rad!"

Sheriff Radcliff ain't a bad feller, Liz.

"Trouble is," he grins, "my wife's got vittles all fixed an' she's got to have prizners to feed 'em to!"

"Well," says old Spike, giving a wink, "let her feed Hinges double!"

"But, shucks," I says. "I got to go with old Spike after these yoodlums! Shucks!"

So the sheriff scratches his head and finely he says:

"Well, if you was to bust out of here to-night, I don't know how I could help it, because old Sucker-Rod Jones claims somebody's been stealin' the wind offn his windmill an' I'll be out there to-night watchin' for 'em with an extry horse, an' I gen'rally carry an extry gun, too, when I'm out after a wind thief. But if you feel like you got to bust jail, Spike, don't go tearin' down the

walls, for it costs money to rebuild 'em."

I don't know what he was winking about, Liz. Probably a sty in his eye or something.

Hoping you are the same,

Your frend,

HINGES.

P. S. Miz. Radcliff is sure a good cook. Fried chicken for supper and about a gallon of milk which she left here for me special. And a couple



Fried chicken for supper and about a gallon of milk for me special.

buckits of water, soap and towel for me to take a wash, because she is a very nice lady and mighty dirty from riding in the dust—me I mean, not Miz. Radcliff. So now I am going to take me a wash.

Hoping you are the same,

HINGES

Magpie, N. M.

DEAR MOM: Jest visiting in town awhile with old Spike, a special room all to ourselves, they bring us our meals and everything, jest taking it easy.

Hoping you are the same,

Your lovving son,

HINGES

P. S. If Liz tries to tell you anything I write her don't pay no attention, her probally jest immagining it.

HINGES

Midridge, Mo.

DEAR ELLIE: Liz Tomison walked home with me from church to-day and when I ask her if she heard from you lately, she begun to cry, so don't you blame her for telling me about you being in jail. I declare, after the good Christian raising I give you and you in jail! What you need is a good spanking and I am a-notion to write Mrs. Radcliff to give you one. Ain't you ashamed of yourself! I declare, I don't know what's got into you since you went out there to Mexico. I'm a-notion to send you money to come straight home. All this riding wild horses and shooting and getting in jail and such, I declare I won't have it.

Your Mom.

Magpie, N. M.

DEAR MOM: Gosh, mom, no use to rare and fight your head about a man being in jail. Anyways this ain't Mexico, it's New Mexico, jest another part of the U. S. of A. the same as Mizzoura only they do not spank a full-growed man of sixteen out here.

Well, mom, I guess Liz must of showed you my letter, after all, so will kinder explane. That night after supper old Spike run a whizzer on me. I had not noticed old Rad left the door unlocked, probably a-purpose. So old Spike waited till I got mostly my clothes off for a wash, practikly nakid you might say, then he jest taken his hat and walked out.

"Hey, wait!" I hollered at him. "Where you think you're going?"

"Ever'wheres," he says, "till I yamp them two yoodlums and drag

'em in here to settle this rustlin' business!"

"Hey, wait!" I hollered. "I got jest as much right to go with you as you have! Hey, wait!"

But Spike did not wait. He locked me in instid. Also taking the most of my clothes except jest underwear and sox.

"Jest in case you take a notion to bust out, sonny," he says. "For I aim for you to stay safe here in jail where you can't take no part in this trouble."

After he went it dorned on me what the sheriff had wunk at him about. All that talk about old Sucker-Rod Jones's windmill, it was jest a way of hinting old Spike where to meet him and they would take out to hunt them two yoodlums their-ownelves. Leaving me plum out of it.

I guess you know how easy to leave me out of the excitement when r'aring to go. About as easy as tolling a stray hog out of the corn with a piece of turnip.

Now, mom, I would not steal a horse, but there was about six ponies ankered to the hitch rail in front of Jake's Place when I snuck down through the alley, and I would of went in and ask some of the cowboys to borry one of them, but no clothes on to speak of and kinder bashful. So when I run to the hitch rack to grab me a horse, I guess them ponies was not used to anybody in jest their underwear. They spooked and begun busting loose and running ever which a way. But I man-ided to grab the reins of one of them and clumb on him and a wonder he did not throw me, the stirrups too long, no boots on, not even shoes.

If ever you want a big icrosoft, mom, jest you try riding an old spooky cow pony out of town in your

underwears. The cowboys come tumbling out of Jake's place like coons out of a holler log, trying to



I guess them ponies was not used to anybody in jest their underwear.

ketch their horses, hollering me to stop, a few of them even shooting. Them thinking it was a horse thief.

Anyways, I laid the rope end acrost this pony's tale all my might and he lit into a run and I guess them cowboys could not ketch their ponies, and first thing you know it was wind whisseling through my union suit out acrost the flats and got away from them.

But it had took me longer than expected to git out of jail, and could not find old Spike and the sheriff nowheres.

Well, mom, seem like I must of been riding purty near all night thinking if I jest kep' on riding around maybe I would run onto them two yoodlums some place and run them in, but no sign of them anywheres until I didn't even know where I was myownself. Not lost or anything, because in the cow country as long as you got a horse between your knees you are not lost

no matter what, and lucky I had one between mine or would of knocked the skin off bumping together. From being cold, mom, not skeered or anything, though it is a purty lonesome sound kiotes howling in the dark.

Finely I come up on a hill where it was some purty tall trees, and figgered if I clumb one of them maybe I could see the light of a ranch or a camp fire or something where I could go git warm or freeze to death first if I didn't. And sure nuff yonder was a camp fire way down in a sorter sink hole.

I guess I better learn to tie up my horse better, mom. He quit me while up in the tree. But maybe lucky he did, because if I had rode him down to this camp fire it would of made right smart of noise and no telling what happened if they heard me coming. But jest in my sockfeet I come up on them quiet, and believe it or go suck eggs, mom, it was them two yoodlums, them arguing. So I stayed hid out behind some junipers and listened what they said, one of them in his bed roll, the long-nose one standish by the fire like he jest now come.

"I tell you we got to git out this



I stayed hid out behind some junipers and listened to what they said.

country while the gittin's good," he says. "Spike's outta jail, an' come daylight he'll have the whole dang Lazy R outfit out gunnin' for us! Crawl out, Butch, we got to ride!"

"Not till we pay off Spike and that blank of a button, with lead in their guts! Nobody ain't goin' to find us here! They could pass right by an' never even spot our fire unless they clumb a tree. Come on to bed, Pidge, an' don't ack so nervous!"

So the one called Pidge crawled into his bed roll.

Well, mom, I sure had them if I could jest figger out how to take them in, me no gun or anything else to speak of but my underwears. So I snuck off a piece, took off my underwears, fixed some sticks in the arms and legs to make it shape like a man. Then I hung it on a long willow stick.

Their beds was right under a little ledge of rock, so I snuck up purty near right over them, and I poke this dummy out in the air. You recollect how me and Bainy yoosta kinder press against our Adem's apple so it sounded like we was talking from some place else? That's what I done then, mom, and let out a very spooky squawl coming right out of my union suit like a ghost dangling right over them in the firelight.

If you ever want to scare anybody and nothing but underwears to do it with, you jest try that, mom. Only just part of a success, because whilst the one called Pidge spooked plenty and lit out of there bleatin' like a sheep with the wolves after him, Butch grabbed his gun and begun shooting holes in that underwear as fast as he could yank the trigger.

The way the cowboys carries their six-guns, mom, it is with jest five cattridges in the wheel, leaving the hammer on a empty. So quick as I counted five shots I knowed his gun

was empty, and jump't off the ledge right onto him, squawling like a cat-



Butch begun shooting holes in that underwear as fast as he could yank the trigger.

tymount defending her nest. Well, mom, I am purty strong for my strength, but kinder cold and shaky, and first thing I knowed it was him on top of me instid of me on him.

"Oho!" he says. "So it's you, is it, you blankety-blank little runt? Well, by the blankies, I'll fix you!"

What he done, mom, he set a-straddle of me and reached into the fire and got a burning stick and in another minute he would of branded me with it, but his fingers choking on my Adem's apple give me an idea.

"Put 'em up, Butch!" I says, making my voice sound like it come from somewhere else. "I got you covered!"

So when he turned to look, he loosened the knee that helt down my right arm and I jerk it loose with a handful of gravel and throwed it all my might, right in his face. It blinded him to where I got loose and whamped him over the head with a club.

So I was jest rustling a rope to tie him up with before he come to

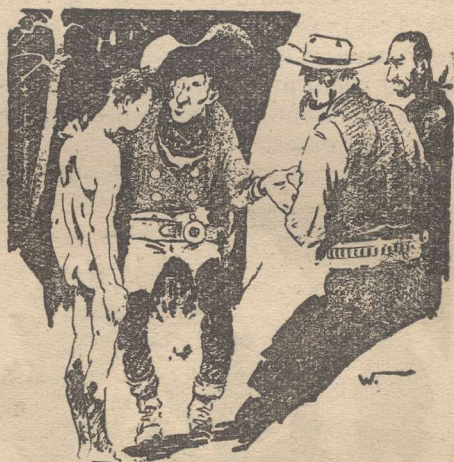
when the one called Pidge come back. Seems like he had run off without his gun and he run to his bed roll to git it, and before I could help it he had it pointing right at me.

"Shucks," I says, "you can't shoot me because I am jest a ghost anyways!" But I guess he did not believe me, mom.

"Can't I?" he says.

When I heard the bang, mom, I thought I was kilt sure, but it was him topple't over instid of me, and old Spike and Sheriff Radcliff step out into the firelight. Seem like they was passing by not suspecting anybody down in the sink hole, but heard the shots and come a-runnin', jest in time for old Spike to shoot the gun out of this Pidge's hand before he pult the trigger.

"Huh," snorts old Spike, "I thought I left you in jail! What you doin' kiotin' around way out here stork nakid this a way?"



"What you doin' kiotin' around stork nakid this a way?"

I guess it was the way my teeth chattered, mom, for it seems like I bit my tongue and could not say anything, but jest let in to blubber like a baby. But I felt better when old Spike wropped me in a blanket

and boiled up some coffee for me, and whilst I was drinking it he looked over at the two prizners, and then wunk at Sheriff Radcliff.

"Quite a button, ain't he, sheriff?" he says.

It ain't what the cowboys say, mom, it's the way they say it.

So that's how them two yoodlums got yamped, mom, and I reckon no more trouble them trying to dry-gulch old Spike any more, or me either, but bound for the pen.

Hoping you are the same,

Your lovving son,
HINGES.

P. S. You better not show this to Liz, me running around in my underwears, it might imbaruss her.

PP. S. How come I got out of jail, mom, well the walls was mud bricks called dobey, so instid of taking a wash in them buckits of water and milk or drinking it, I poured it slow all one place aginst the wall till it soaked up to soft mud and dug a hole with my hands and come crawling out like a one of old man Moss's hawgs crawling out from under the porch.

Hoping you are the same,
HINGES.

BLOCK



DIAMOND

BRAVE RANCHER'S FIGHT WITH ROBBER

AN old rancher, Thomas Elliott, lived alone in a small house in Santa Rosa, California. He had been a very active cowman in his day, but retired some time ago, and was popular with his neighbors, especially the young boys, who loved to hear his stories of the days when neighbors were few and far between in the West.

One night recently, a loud knock came on the ranchman's door. When he opened it, a man, whose head was completely covered by a black hood, pushed past him and entered the room, flourishing a large butcher knife.

"This is a robbery," he announced gruffly. "Old man, I want your money. Hand it over, and make no trouble, or I'll sink this knife into your heart."

Elliott turned quickly and pulled a rusty old sword from its scabbard on the wall. Then he wheeled around to give battle to the intruder. With a sudden swipe of the old sword he cut off the left hand of the robber, which fell to the floor. The man stooped, picked up the

hand, and coolly stuffed it into his pocket. He then stuck the butcher knife between his teeth and seized the old rancher's arm, holding him in a viselike grip.

The robber was big, strong, and young, while Thomas Elliott was old. But he was active and courageous. It was an unequal battle, however, and he soon realized that he could not hold out much longer against such odds.

"All right, let me go, and I'll get the money," he gasped.

He stumbled toward a cupboard, opened it, put up his hand as if to take the money from a shelf. But instead of cash, he picked up a gun that he always kept there. He turned and fired, and the robber dropped dead with a bullet in his heart.

Elliott sent a messenger to Sheriff Harry Patteson, who rushed him to a hospital. There the story of the attack was pieced together between the survivor's gasps. The presence of the robber's body, minus the left hand, confirmed everything that the rancher said.

Slim Harkness



1. Slim, his father, and Wyoming, the Circle R foreman, had wounded and captured Two-shot Howard, alias Caldwell, who had long posed as Slim's father. Now, however, the tricky bandit was in the hands of the law, and the sheriff shoved him into a cell.



2. Slim's father told his story. Years ago, he had been forced to kill a man in this same town. Howard and one other man were the only witnesses who could prove it self-defense. Every one else thought it murder.



3. Howard had kept Caldwell in his power by threat of exposure. He had taken his name, committed crimes that were blamed on Caldwell. The other witness had disappeared. Suddenly, as Dave Caldwell talked, the sheriff and two deputies entered.



4. Two-shot Howard had talked, accused Caldwell of the long-ago murder. He was still "wanted." Much as he hated to do it, the sheriff led Slim's father off to jail. Slim and Wyoming went along with heavy hearts.

Stops A Lynching



5. At the jail, Two-shot greeted Caldwell with jeering laughter. The treacherous killer was in a bad jam himself, but he was getting his revenge on the men who had put him there. But no one paid any attention to Howard as Dave Caldwell was locked up in another cell.

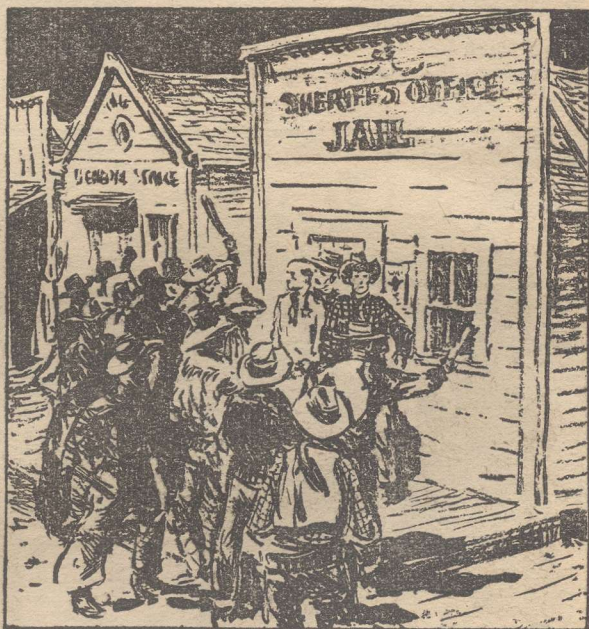


6. Later that day, Two-shot Howard had visitors at the jail. He spoke to them in whispers, telling them to start lynch talk against Caldwell. In the excitement, Two-shot could, he hoped, be "sprung."



7. It didn't take Howard's friends long to get going. They talked it up among the drunken hangers-on in the saloons. Soon the mutterings of a mob began to be heard.

WW—8F



8. As the day passed and darkness came on, that mob spirit broke loose. Armed, angry, excited men stormed down the street toward the jail. In front of the door stood Slim Harkness, the sheriff, and Wyoming. They had to prevent a lynching. But what could they do against such a mob?



9. "I got an idea," said Slim, inside the jail. "We can't stand off that mob. So why don't I change duds with dad? You kin take him out o' danger. The mob'll think he's me. They won't string me up when they find out about it."



10. There was some argument about Slim's plan, every one thinking it was too dangerous. But in the end Slim won out. The change of clothes was made. Slim took his father's place in the cell, and Caldwell left with the sheriff and Wyoming.



11. Soon the mob broke into the jail. They found keys and opened both cells. A rope was tossed over Slim's head as he was pulled through the doorway. Friends of Howard let him out, greeting him gleefully. Howard was not aware that Slim had taken his father's place. He still thought that his old enemy, Dave Caldwell, was in the hands of the lynch mob. Slim and the others had taken care not to let him know what they were doing.



12. Slim was hustled into the office. The rope was still about his neck. Then Two-shot spotted him and let out an angry oath. "Thet ain't Caldwell!" he yelled. "It's his whelp!" As all eyes turned on Howard, Slim grabbed for a gun in the holster of the man nearest him.



13. He ripped it from the hombre's holster and threw off the noose around his neck. He dropped down beside the table, knocking over the lamp as he did so.

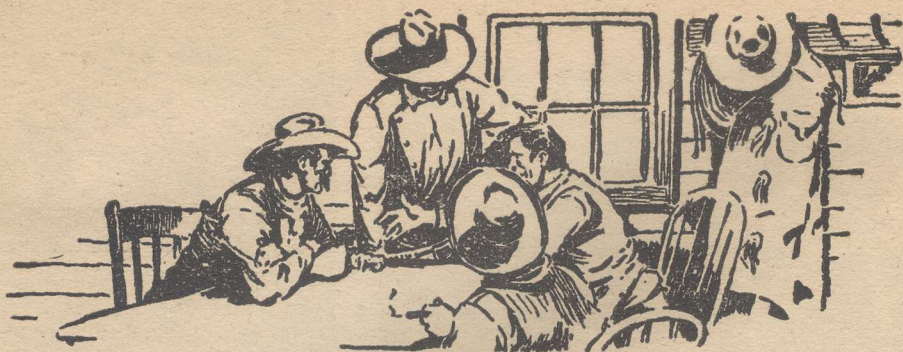


14. Wild yells lifted. Guns began to thunder and blaze. Slim crouched beside the overturned table and cut loose at the gun flashes of the mobsters. Terrified, their courage gone, they made a rush for the door. They had no stomach for a gun fight in the dark.



15. A deputy sheriff who was in on the plan came running up. His guns helped scatter the mob. Then he shook hands with Slim. The plan had worked, but Two-shot Howard had escaped again.

Next Week: "Slim Harkness Gets His Man."



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.

SEEMS like Sufferin' Joe is comin' down with some new misery when he sets in the Corner this week.

"What's ailin' yuh, Joe?" asks Tommy Rockford. "What're yuh givin' us all sech wild eyes fer?"

"Ef yuh want ter know," says Sufferin' Joe, "it's 'cause me an' a pullet in a den o' lobos has a hull lot in common ter-night. Hyar I set with the Border Eagle eyin' me from one side, an' the Whistlin' Kid givin' me the once-over from tother. When a cow dick, a railway dick, an' a mar-

shal all ketches up with a pore ol' waddy——"

"Shucks, Joe!" snorts Risky McKee. "They won't bite yuh. I'll bet yuh thar ain't one of 'em thet wouldn't make yuh a deputy ef they needed a good man ter help 'em on a ticklish job."

"They wouldn't git much help," sighs Sufferin' Joe. "With my weak heart an' dainty stummick an' the case o' walkin' pneumoniee I've had all winter——"

"Aw," speaks up Slim Harkness, "we'll never git round ter the ama-

choors ef we listen ter this ol' badger bellyache all evenin'."

"Mebbe a plumb good story would cheer him up, Boss," says the Whistlin' Kid. "Got one?"

"Hyar's the fust ter be voted on," we says, "an' we got plenty more, too. Hyar goes."

STEVE SAVES CIRCLE T

By Bill Newsom—Age 19

Donie, Texas

Cowboy Steve, top hand for Sam Taylor's Circle T Ranch in Bluegrass Valley, stepped from the office of the main ranch house with a smile on his lips. Two low-hung ivory-handled .45 Colts decorated his plain cowhide chaps. His plain cowhide outfit suggested a knowledge of ranching, and his slim fingers suggested fast six-gun work. No one would think by his smile

that he was about to start on a dangerous journey to the town of Bluegrass, fifteen miles down the valley road. Not even the money belt, with one thousand dollars in it, showed where it buckled around his waist, on its way to town and the bank.

Steve made a running leap to mount Black Shadow, his prize black cow horse. Black Shadow settled into an easy lope and the faint notes of "Home on the Range" drifted back to disturb the peace of the Circle T cowboys.

Five miles from the ranch house, Steve paused on the bank of a stream lined with thick mesquite bushes.

"Hands up!" came a low command from behind Steve.

He flashed a glance over his shoulder and saw a man standing in the road with .45s leveled at him. The man wore a cowboy hat pulled low and a red handkerchief worn as a mask.

"Hand over that money belt you got around your waist, you polecat!" he

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

SILVER JACK'S GUN SONG

Novelette

By WILLIAM F. BRAGG

It's a death chase an' a fight tuh the finish, but he does it with a song on his lips an' some mighty loud gun hummin'.

SONNY TABOR'S RUSTLER PAY-OFF

Novelette

By WARD M. STEVENS

It takes ticklish lead-slingin' when it comes tuh savin' a rich, old rancher from his outlaw son.

TRAIL'S END FOR COMANCHE

Novelette

By ANDREW A. GRIFFIN

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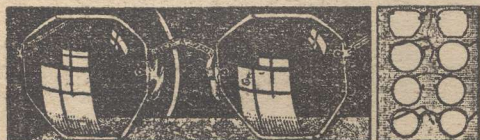
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growled with a note of triumph in his voice.

Steve slowly unbuckled the belt while his mind raced to find a chance of escape. Suddenly he thought of a chance, one in a thousand. Even as he thought, he put it into action. He turned his horse as if to hand the man the belt, but as he faced the bandit, he struck out with the belt and hit the fellow a blow across the face.

As his hand started the blow, his right spur struck Black Shadow in the side. The horse, trained to this trick, lunged away from the spur.

Bam! Wham! The outlaw's guns exploded as Steve hit the ground on his feet.

He felt one slug tug at his shirt sleeve while another clipped a lock of his long curly hair. The blow across the outlaw's face had spoiled his aim. Then Steve's gun went into action.

Wham! Bam! Bam! Steve's guns sounded, followed so close by the outlaw's guns that one could hardly tell which fired first.

Steve felt a searing pain shoot through his left shoulder, and he began to feel strange. Through slowly closing eyes, Steve saw a blue bullet hole in between the bandit's eyes as he slumped to the ground. Then Steve fell, trying to hide the belt under him.

Steve awoke about five hours later, to find himself in bed at the Circle T. Sam Taylor and Sheriff Potter were sitting by him.

"Well, son," said Taylor, "you saved the ranch and also killed a yellow skunk. That bandit you gunned down on sandy creek was my foreman—Buck."

"Buck! Why, boss, you trying to fool me?" gasped Steve.

"We suspicioned him since he came here six months ago, but we had no proof until you downed him on Sandy Creek," cut in Sheriff Potter.

"You saved me one thousand dollars," said Sam. "And in return, I am giving you Buck's job at eighty a month."

"I'll do my best, boss. Thanks," Steve mumbled.

"You get one thousand dollars as a reward for that bandit," and Sheriff Potter laughed.

"One thousand and the foreman's job!" whooped Steve. "Thanks to Black Shadow and dad's ivory-handled .45s."

"Thet waddy shore did save the spread," says the Border Eagle. "Ef I was choosin' a deputy, 'twould be a toss-up 'twixt him an' Sufferin' Joe."

"An' I'd take the loser o' the toss," speaks up Tommy Rockford.

"Yuh'd be the loser, all right, ef 'twas me," groans Sufferin' Joe. "My high blood pressure makes my finger plumb shaky on the trigger, an' my eyes ain't——"

"I never noticed they spoilt yore aim," busts in Risky McKee.

"Waal," we says, "let's see how good the next amachoor's aim is with his story. Looks like a bull's-eye ter me, though some o' yuh may vote diff'rent."

SHERIFF SMOKY WINS THE DAY

By Raye Ingram—Age 18

Quitman, Texas

One night, Sheriff "Smoky" Jones was enjoying a good smoke in his office, when four hombres entered with guns in their hands,

"Hoist yore paws, Jones!" the bull-necked leader snarled.

The sheriff obeyed, and he was thrown roughly to the floor. In a short time, he was securely bound and gagged. A short rope with a noose on one end was put about his neck and then tied to the heavy desk.

"That noose will keep you from crawlin' off, and you won't be botherin' us while we do a leetle job down at the bank," the leader of the gang sneered.

The hombres laughed and left the office. Smoky turned and twisted in helpless rage, but the ropes were securely tied. He could not move far in any direction because of the noose.

"If I could only attract the attention of some hombre passin' by," he groaned.

He banged his booted feet on the floor, but none of the people passing seemed to hear him.

Then Smoky's heart leaped as a plan formed in his mind. There was a straight chair in front of him. If he could only reach it with his feet! He slid forward until the noose almost shut off his breath, but he was able to reach the chair with his feet.

Smoky had only a few minutes to wait until he heard some one coming. Quickly he hooked his boots on the rounds of the chair, doubled his legs backward and then shot the chair forward. It struck the front window, and glass tinkled on the board walk outside.

The hombre who was passing stopped in surprise. Then he struck a match and

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cautiously looked in the office. He gasped when he saw the bound sheriff. The hombre ran into the office and quickly released him.

"What happened, sheriff?" he asked.

"I haven't got time to explain," Smoky said. "I've got to gun some rats before they git away."

He grabbed his twin cartridge belts and guns from a peg on the wall. He quickly buckled them around his waist and ran down the street toward the bank.

The four hombres were just emerging from the bank with their loot.

"All right, skunks, either surrender or turn yore cutters this a way," Smoky snarled.

But the bandits had no intention of surrendering. They whirled, their guns spitting flame.

Smoky's guns leaped into his hands, and soon the air was charged with gun smoke.

One of the hombres went down with a bullet between his eyes; another slumped to the ground badly wounded.

Smoky felt a bullet burn his neck, and another crashed into the flesh of his thigh.

He shot it out with the leader of the gang at close range. The bull-necked hombre dropped with two bullets in his chest. Smoky then turned his guns on the remaining outlaw, but this hombre had seen enough. He threw down his guns and surrendered.

A crowd had gathered by this time, and they hurried the prisoner to jail for the sheriff.

Smoky sheathed his smoking six-guns and walked slowly up the street to get his wounds dressed. He had lived up to the nickname of Smoky.

"Reckon both o' them stories is bull's-eyes," says the Whistlin' Kid. "Sheriff Smoky shore did live up ter his name."

"An' them writers from Texas shore are livin' up ter their names as Westerners," says Slim Harkness. "Yuh notice both them stories blowed in from the Lone Star State."

"But don't fergit," Risky McKee reminds him, "some of our best stories has been wrote by waddies thet's strayed East from Maine ter Florida. It's plumb surprisin' how straight their notions o' the West runs, too."

"Speakin' o' strays ofn Western range," we says, "hyar's a story from North Carolina."

THREE-SHOT RANCH

By Robert Parker—Age 14

Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Old Jed Hayes, of Rockwell, had died a week before, and in his will he left his big ranch to the first person who could get honestly one thousand dollars with which to fix it up.

Among the ones trying for it was, a youth called Don Jones. He was sitting on the porch of the general store, thinking.

While he was sitting there, two masked men slipped into the bank and drew their guns. The first he knew was when they came running out of the bank, got on their horses and rode away. The next moment, Mr. Mayson came out, yelling: "Robbery! I've been robbed! Help!"

Don got up, hurried over to the banker and said: "Could you recognize any of them?"

"The only thing I saw was one's spurs weren't matched," replied the banker.

"Well," said Don, thoughtfully, "that's somethin' to go on."

"I'll give one thousand dollars reward for the capture of the robbers," the banker said. "They got away with twenty-two thousand dollars belonging to the Bar Z Bar, and the bank'll have to make it good."

Don said, "Thanks," and went over and sat down where he was before the robbery, and tried to think. Finally he got up and went into the bank.

When he saw the banker, he said: "Mistah Mayson, will it be all right if I hang around a while? I have an idea."

So he went on and explained to the banker all about his idea.

"Well," said the banker, "it's worth trying."

"I thank you for givin' me this chance," said Don, and sat down where he could watch the door.

After about two hours, Don got up and went into the banker's office.

"Mistah Mayson," he said, "it shore looks like I done lost that one thousand dollars. I've watched everybody that's come into the bank, but I haven't seen them yet."

Here they were disturbed by two men coming in the door.

"Trouble," said the banker, with a sinking heart, for he had recognized the two men as "Dude" Bradley, owner of the Bar Z Bar and his foreman, "Bull" Conway.

"What's this I hear about my money being stolen?" asked Bradley.

"You'll get your money," said the banker. "But you'll have to wait."

"They'll get something worse than money if they don't raise their hands," said Don sternly. "There's your robbers, Mistah

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Mayson! Bull's the one with the unmatched spurs."

"Why'd they do it?" asked the banker.

"They get forty-four thousand dollars instead of twenty-two thousand because the bank would have to make it good."

"Down 'em!" screamed Bradley, going for his guns.

But as Dude was thumbing back the hammer of his gun, Don fired from the hip twice, and killed Dude Bradley instantly.

Meanwhile, Bull got his gun out and fired one shot before Don shot him in the arm.

"He's not hurt bad," said the banker. "He can still talk."

"That's what I call 'Three-shot Ranch,'" remarked Don.

"Looks like we all says 'yes' on thet un, too," says Risky McKee. "But seems ter me thet waddy's been in the Corner afore, Boss."

"Waal," we says, "ef he has, 'twas a plumb long spell ago, an' we won't stop ter look it up. Now he's shore j'ined them as has broke the ice."

"Thar ain't no ice in the Corner," corrects Tommy Rockford. "Thar's a plumb warm welcome fer all."

"Well spoke, Tommy," we agrees. "An' a warm welcome fer artists an' potes, too. Hyar's a pome ter top off with."

WESTERN MOON MAGIC

By Elsie McDonald—Age 17

Vernonia, Oregon

When the sun is low on the Western hills,
The cowboy's heart with its beauty thrills.
The purple mists rise to the sky,
And soon in this the day will die.

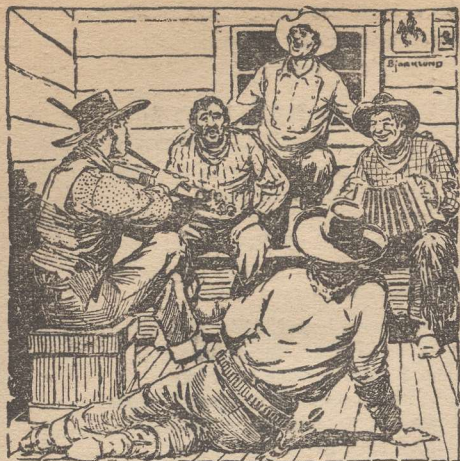
Dark shadows creep up from below,
Painting the scene with a misty glow.
Trees stand silent; the herd is still.
A wild bird cries from some distant hill.

Across the silent, peaceful plain,
The Western moonlight spreads again,
A sheen so bright, so warm in glow,
Life springs up on the earth below.

The herd's low, and the cowboy's shout
Resounds from distant hills about.
The breezes whisper a merry tune
And life moves on 'neath the Western moon.

An' with them sweet notes ter finish the evenin', we puts out the light till next week.

THE RANGE BOSS.



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.

WAAL, folks, how's yore search fer songs comin' along? Don't fergit yore's truly, who's always glad tuh hear about ol' songs from you. I come across a book o' songs recently,

FALSE TEETH



60 DAYS TRIAL

I have thousands of satisfied customers all over the country who could not afford to pay big prices. I have been making dental plates

for many years, by mail. I guarantee you satisfaction or they do not cost you one cent, and I take your word. Teeth made especially for you personally can be tried for sixty days. In one Pennsylvania town alone, 91 people are wearing teeth made by me. They are satisfied and have saved money.

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My plates are very beautiful to look at and are constructed to give life-long service and satisfaction. You can look younger at once. They are made with pearly white genuine porcelain teeth. Well fitting and guaranteed unbreakable. Remember you do not send

FREE one cent—just your name and address, and we send free impression material and full detailed directions. Be sure to write today for my low prices and complete information. Don't put this off. Do it today.

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WANTED COUNTY DISTRIBUTORS. Excellent opportunity for earnings. Nationally advertised product. Large company. Dept. 253 **Fyr-Fyter Company**, Dayton, Ohio.

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POEM WRITERS, SONGWRITERS—Send for Free Rhyming Dictionary, Writers Guide. Submit best poems, melodies today for bonafide, superior offer. **MMM Publishers**, Dept. 3A, Portland, Ore.

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MOTHERS—Does it pay to sacrifice for our children? Send 35c for booklet. **Esther MacGillivray**, 73 Cottage St., Jersey City, N. J.

Writers

WANTED: Manuscripts for sale to N. Y. publishers, producers. Client received \$5,000.00 first prize. Write for particulars! **U. S. School of Writing**, 20-24 W. 60 St., N. Y. C.

an', bein' as how thar's some mighty good ones in it, I copied 'em out for yuh. Hyar's one now:

HER WAY*

By Paul Morgan

There lies a ranch out in the West
Beyond the Pecos Fork,
Whose rolling hills and running creeks
Belonged to ol' Bill York.
A finer field for grazing stock
I wouldn't give a cork.

Now these broad hills and grassy plains
Were fattenin' fer a hoss,
And I was straddle of a bay
With a mane like Spanish moss.
I was fit to ride along beside
The daughter of the boss.

An' I was thinking of a girl
That brands a Double Rail
Who lives across the Pecos Gulch,
Close to the Chisholm Trail,
An' wonderin' how in three short years
She'd lassoed all her kale.

Ol' Bill rides up jest then an' says:
"You're feelin' mighty gay!
But when you get to Double Tanks,
A-ridin' on the bay,
Them thousand three-year-olds'll keep
You workin' fer your pay."

So off we went in boots and chaps,
An' little did I care,
Fer we wuz goin' to Double Tanks
An' meet the buyers there;
An' see the herders count 'em out
An' hear the bosses swear.

Now I rode out an' cast my eyes
Right on them dogies' hides,
To see myself if they wuz there
Before the herder rides;
An' there they wuz, one thousand with
An extra one besides.

But when we got well on the way
An' night began to fall,
We penned the steers down in a draw,
Nor heeded to their call;
An' darkness came an' closed around
Our steers an' camp an' all.

Now this nice boss beyond the Gulch
Who brands a Double Rail,
Had many bold vaqueros strong
Her dogies fer to trail;
An' they could throw 'em by the feet
Or swing 'em by the tail.

But ol' Bill York wuz mighty close
An' careful as could be,
That no man touched a cow of his
Without the proper fee;
So he got up an' walked around,
To see what he could see.

* Reprinted by permission of the Tardy Publishing Company, Dallas, Texas, from the book entitled: "Texas Ballads" by Paul Morgan.

VACU-MATIC

SCORES AGAIN!

BOB MCKENZIE
TRANSCONTINENTAL AUTOMOBILE CHAMPION
COAST TO COAST

WESTERN UNION TIMED

NEW YORK
TO
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54 HRS-40 MIN.

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10,000 MILES
10 DAYS

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1,607 MI. IN 1 DAY

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TO
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Vacu-matic Carburetor Co.
7617 W. State St.
Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

Dear Sirs:

Having just completed a new speed record between Los Angeles and Chicago, driving a 1936 Chevrolet equipped with a Vacu-matic carburetor control, I thought you might be interested in knowing some of the facts and the important part Vacu-matic played in the success of the run.

The distance covered was 2322 miles in thirty nine hours and forty-two minutes, officially timed by Western Union, which gave me an average speed of 59.7 M.P.H. based on elapsed time and with the Vacu-matic averaged 18 1/2 miles per gallon on gas-line.

Before leaving Los Angeles, we made several test runs both with and without the Vacu-matic, and the tests proved that Vacu-matic increased my gas mileage 3 1/2 miles per gallon at the driving speed of 60 M.P.H. and also very noticeable increase in both acceleration and power.

After this experience with Vacu-matic, you can depend that on my future speed runs across country that I will be depending on Vacu-matic to give me the same added performance it has proven on this last record breaking drive.

Yours very truly,

Bob McKenzie



**Sets New
Coast-to-Chicago
Record**

**New Supercharge
Principle
SAVES GAS**

**MORE POWER - MORE SPEED
FASTER PICK-UP -- NEW LIFE**

ESTABLISHING new mileage records on cars in all sections of the country, the Vacu-matic again scores in a new speed record established by Bob McKenzie transcontinental automobile champion. Los Angeles to Chicago—2,322 miles in 39 hours and 42 minutes—driving 75 and 80 to maintain a speed average of 59.7 miles per hour!

Here is speed—a gruelling grind—where quick acceleration, greater top speed—and less stops for gasoline mean those precious moments saved that make new speed records possible.

The same Vacu-matic that helped Bob McKenzie establish this speed record and gave him such fine gas savings is now available for all car owners. It is positively automatic—simple to install—inexpensive—and pays for itself many times over in gas savings.

Automatic •• Nothing Like It!

Vacu-matic is *entirely different!* It operates on the super-charge principle by automatically adding a charge of extra oxygen, drawn free from the outer air, into the heart of the gas mixture. It is entirely AUTOMATIC and allows the motor to "breathe" at the correct time, opening and closing automatically as required. No idling troubles—no carburetor adjustments necessary. It is so simple it will amaze you—so practical it will save you many dollars on gas costs.

Fits All Cars

VACU-MATIC is constructed of six parts, assembled and fused into one unit, correctly adjusted and sealed at the factory. Nothing to regulate. Easily attached in ten minutes.

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VACU-MATIC offers a splendid opportunity for unusual sales and profits. Valuable territories now being assigned. Check and mail coupon.

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VACU-MATIC must prove itself on every car. It is guaranteed to give worthwhile gas savings, quicker pick-up and more power, or it costs you nothing. "On my V-8 Ford it works miracles", says Ralph Fields. James Seeley—"On an International Truck on a round trip to Cleveland, 385 miles, it saved 19 gallons of gas." A. V. Grove—"On the Buick it showed 5 miles more per gallon." F. S. Peck—"I average 22 miles per gal. on my Plymouth, an increase of 7 miles, for a saving of \$15.00 a month, or \$180.00 a year." Wm. Lyons—"Averaged 25 miles on a gal. with a Model A Ford at 40 miles per hour."

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Gentlemen: Please send me full particulars concerning the Vacu-matic and details of your Free Offer. This of course does not obligate me in any way.

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The VACU-MATIC Co.

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MAN HUNT!

Death stalks the countryside—

Men with guns block the
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Fear rides the night in the
most—thrilling
—fascinating
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MAN STALKS MAN

and at the end of the hunt is a
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Don't miss the thrill of the
grim chase.

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Join the Manhunt
this month in the exciting
pages of

STREET & SMITH'S
DETECTIVE STORY
MAGAZINE

As soon as he come to the draw,
He thought he heard a noise.
When stepping up, he saw right near
The leader of her boys,
Lookin' kind o' sheepish like
To hold a steady poise.

Says he: "Now why you ramblin' here
On such a fearful night?
My cattle's bedded in the draw
Which leads back to the right.
Be you a-huntin' fer a steer,
Or lookin' fer a fight?"

He kind o' grins and says: "Well, Bill,
It's you camped here fer shore.
Now I got side-tracked from the bunch,
So I'll just rest before
I hit the trail fer Double Tanks
To show you I ain't sore."

So him an' York jes' drifts along
Until they gets to camp.
He rolls a smoke an' says real kind:
"These nights are awful damp
Fer you to sleep out on the ground."
But York was in a cramp.

He thought he heard the cattle move
And told the rustler so;
But this young gent jest smiles an' says,
"Maybe, that I don't know,
But 'pears to me jest like a dog,
I'll whistle him right low."

The dog came running up to him
An' lay down by the fire,
So York an' him discussed the chance
Of cattle's goin' higher,
An' why the deuce ol' Pete got sore
When Jack called him a liar.

But all the time he chattered so
I thought it was a sight
That he should sit an' talk so late
Far up into the night,
An' then get up an' pull his freight
Without a single bite.

Next day, ol' York sides close to me
An' sort o' eyes me like,
An' says: "Now fore we left the ranch
I'd like to ask you, Mike,
You sure you counted out in full
An' never let 'em pike?"

"Why shore," says I, "beyond a doubt
I counted one by one—
Around the shoot below the trap
Went every mother's son.
Though now there's less than half that bunch,
Or this bay hoss is dun."

We carried them to Double Tanks
An' sold 'em fer the pay,
Then saddled up our hosses fer
We planned to ride away;
But where Bill York had got misplaced
No man of us could say.

Next week we found on the Divide
Which heads the Pecos Draw,
Two saddled hosses grazing by,
An' something else we saw—
The buzzards told us where and how—
'Twas not without the law.

An' I wuz thinkin' of a girl
That brands a Double Rail
Who lives across the Pecos Gulch
Jes' past the Chisholm Trail,
An' figgerin' how in three short years
She lassoed all her kale.

Now let's have an ol'-time song thet
Archie Murchie, o' Montana, sends in:

THE GRASS OF UNCLE SAM

Now, people of the Eastern towns,
It's little that you know
About the Western prairies
Where the beef you eat does grow;
Where the hosses they run wild,
Where the mountain sheep and ram
And the cowboys sleep contented
On the grass of Uncle Sam.

We start out on the round-up
To brand the sucking calves.
The stranger gets the bucking hoss;
You bet that we all laugh
When he throws his arms up toward the sky,
And his legs get in a jam,
And he turns a flying somersault
On the grass of Uncle Sam.

The angry bulls take after us
With red blood in their eyes;
But just as soon as their back is turned
They get a big surprise,
For our ropes drag out their legs behind,
And down them come ker-slam,
And we drag the fighting out of them
On the grass of Uncle Sam.

The hoss thief comes at dead of night
To steal our ponies true.
We're always on the watch for him,
And sometimes get him, too.
Then we ask him if he's ready,
And when he says, "I am,"
The bottom of his feet they itch
For the grass of Uncle Sam.

And when the round-up's over,
We go to town for fun,
And the dollars that we've hoarded up
Are blown in, every one.
When broke, we strike the trail for camp
And we don't give a damn.
Waged are good when the grass is good,
The grass of Uncle Sam.

Waal, folks, I reckon we ain't got
room fer another one this week. But
I'll be seein' yuh ag'in next week, as per
usual—an' good luck to yuh all in the
meantime!

WANTED WIDE AWAKE MEN FOR HIGH GRADE BUSINESS

FOUR \$15
SALES DAILY
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Installing New Business
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Ferrell, Georgia, makes over 1,000 sales netting him \$5 to \$60 profit each sale. E. Foyer, Calif., makes \$4,920 in 3 months. Pegram makes \$315 his first 5 days. J. C. Baker, \$151.71 in 3 days. Write for others—enormous profits for high grade men installing new business specialty on free trial. Now bringing big cash returns for thousands of U. S. firms. \$4,707 returns in 3 months for one Kansas firm on \$88.60 investment. Install without a dollar down. Produces the cash to pay for itself before payment due. Many of world's leading firms among our customers. Smallest business or office buys. Customer guaranteed cash return 10 times price paid. We furnish you portfolio of reference letters from foremost concerns. Closes the deal. **Exclusive. Representatives wanted—try this business without risking a cent of your own money. We train you.**

Write now for full information.

F. E. ARMSTRONG, Dept. 4066-B, MOBILE, ALA.

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Behind Your Back--

WHAT IS SHE CALLING YOU--

HE-MAN

or Weakling?



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Atlas**

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of "The
World's Most
Perfectly De-
veloped Man."

BELIEVE it or not—the girls are sizing you up *all day long!* Whether they look at you **TWICE** is up to **YOU!** They *will* if you have a rugged, healthy, big-muscled **HE-MAN** body, glowing with strength and vigor, but they'll just snicker at you behind your back if you're a skinny, no-muscle **WEAKLING!** If **YOU**, too, want to feel those admiring glances right through your back then listen to this:

Let Me Prove I Can Make

YOU a NEW MAN—*Charles Atlas*

Will you give me just 15 minutes a day of your spare time? That's all I need to **PROVE**—regardless of how old or young you are, or how ashamed you may be of your present physique—that I can give you a body men envy and women admire. Biceps that can dish it out, and a muscle-ridged stomach that can take it. A full, deep barrel-chest. Legs that never tire. A tough, sinewy back. An all-around physique that can laugh at **ANY** kind of rough going.

We're **ALL** in the Army today! The heavy war-time demands on strength and endurance are no longer limited to front-line trenches. It's only a matter of time until **EVERY** citizen is called to shoulder his full share of the load. **AL-READY** the Army has enrolled men from 18 to 64. And whether you do your part in Uncle Sam's Services or as a home-front civilian, you've **GOT** to be in **100% SHAPE**. Every man, young or old, owes it to himself to get a body with the bulldog staying power that double shifts of working call for. **HOW DO YOU STACK UP?**

**Would You Believe I Was
Once a 97-lb. Weakling?**

Yes, I was—a miserable 97-pound bag of skin and bones. But you'd never believe it to look at me now, would you? Through my discovery of "**Dynamic Tension**" I changed myself into "**The World's Most Perfectly-Developed Man**." I'm **LIVING PROOF** of the miracles

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FREE BOOK

**"Everlasting Health
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Just a postage stamp will bring you your copy of my famous book, "**Everlasting Health and Strength**," absolutely free. No wonder nearly 2,000,000 men have sent for this big 48-page story of "**Dynamic Tension**"—illustrated with action photos of myself and some of my pupils. You'll not only read about my secret of "**Dynamic Tension**"—but you **SEE PROOF** of it! **CHARLES ATLAS**, Dept. 621, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.



CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 621,
115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of "**Dynamic Tension**" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "**Everlasting Health and Strength**."

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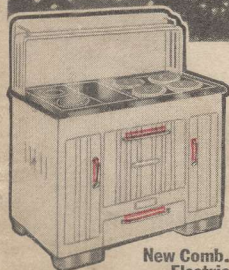
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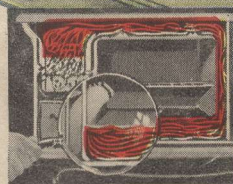
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